

THE KID'S LONE HAND!

The Kid's not hitting the trail for Texas until he's rounded up the darina rustlers of the Rio Bajo, and that's a job fraught with much peril and high spirited adventure!

The RUSTLERS of the RIO BAJO!



By

RALPH REDWAY

Here's a roaring tale of the Wild West, introducing the Rio Kid, boy outlaw.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Prisoner of the Ranch!

A ROUGH shake awakened the Rio Kid, and he opened his eyes and sat up in the bunk, in the bunk-house at the Carson ranch.

The morning sun was streaming in at doors and windows. Outside, there was a trampling of horses, and a buzz of voices. Five or six punchers were at the trestle table in the bunk-house finishing their breakfast before they saddled up for the day's work.

The Rio Kid had slept as soundly as he had ever slept in the old bunk-house at the Double-Bar ranch, in the days when he had been a puncher and had never dreamed of becoming an outlaw. But he awakened at the rough shake, and sat up and looked with a cheery smile at Buck Wilson, the foreman of the ranch.

"I reckon you're wanted, Carfax," said the foreman.

"I guess I'm here," said the Kid, rolling out of the bunk. "Morning, you galoots." He bestowed a cheery nod on the punchers at the table. "You've called me for a feed?"

"I guess you can feed, if you want," said Buck Wilson. "But the Boss is ready to see you."

The Kid smiled.

"I'm sure too polite to keep the boss

waiting, teller," he said. "The feed can wait. Beat it to the boss."

The punchers looked at the Kid and nodded in a friendly way as he left the bunk-house with the foreman. The Rio Kid was, more or less, a prisoner at the Carson ranch, but it did not seem to disturb him any. And though the outfit had taken care that the Kid did not escape during the night, they had no hostile feelings towards the handsome boy puncher from Texas. True, in that lonely ranching country in New Mexico, they had never heard of the Rio Kid, or of his reputation along the Rio Grande. And the Kid, who believed, or, at least hoped, that his days of outlawry were over, had kept a still tongue. To the Carson outfit he was what he looked, a cow-puncher.

The Kid followed the foreman across from the bunk-house to the ranch-house. The low-slung holsters at his belt hung empty; his guns were in the keeping of the foreman of the ranch. The Kid disliked being without his guns, but he took the situation cheerfully. Buck Wilson led the way through the big doorway into the patio of the ranch-house—an old building, dating from the days when New Mexico was part of Old Mexico, before those wide, rich lands had been added to the neighbouring United States.

The doby buildings surrounded a central courtyard, in the Spanish-American style, and round the patio ran a wooden gallery, shaded from the sun. The Kid crossed the patio, blooming with sub-tropical flowers and shrubs, his spurs ringing on the stone path, at the heels of the ranch foreman. Under the slanting roof of the gallery, on the opposite side, sat the boss of the ranch—Colonel Carson.

The rancher was smoking his after-breakfast cigar, and his keen eyes looked from a tanned face, searchingly, at the Kid as he came up. The Kid looked at him with equal interest. He had heard often enough of Colonel Carson, owner of the biggest ranch in New Mexico, master of almost countless flocks and herds. In that wide, wild country, where the law was not so strong as a six-gun in a determined hand, Gilbert Carson was "big medicine"—wielding the power almost of life and death; master of a numerous outfit, devoted to him, ready to carry out his lightest order, but reputed a just though severe man. Under his thick, grey brows, his keen eyes watched the Kid; and the boy puncher unimpressed and most assuredly undaunted, swept off his Stetson hat in cheery salute.

"Morning, boss!" said the Rio Kid easily.

Gilbert Carson looked at him, long and hard, and did not return the salute. He turned to Buck Wilson.

"Is this the man, Buck?"

"This hyer is the galoot, boss!" answered the foreman.

"He looks a mere boy."

The Kid grinned. If he was young in years, and looked it, he was old in experience, cool as ice, and hard as

nails. But on his looks, no man would ever have guessed that the boy puncher was the outlaw of the Rio Grande, wanted by half the sheriffs in Texas.

"I guess he's tougher'n he looks, boss," said Buck. "He was quick as lightning when young Steve pulled on him last night. We all reckoned he was a gone coon, but he handed out a sockdolager that fairly lifted Steve, and got his gun-away-slick."

The colonel frowned.

"Why did my nephew draw on him?" he asked.

"He reckoned he was sure one of the rustlers that shot up Tommy Tucker on his range yesterday, and drove his cows," said Buck. "We roped him in on 'spicion, like I've told you, but Steve Carson reckoned it was a cinch, and allowed he would send him where he had sent Tommy."

"Steve should not have drawn a gun on an unarmed man," said the colonel, biting his lip. "But let that pass now! You give your name as Carfax?" he asked, addressing the Kid.

"Yep."

"Is that your real name?"

"It's the call-by I use, boss, and it's sure as good as any other," answered the Kid cheerily.

"I've asked you a question," said the rancher, knitting his brows. "I want a plain answer."

"I guess you've got all the answer you're getting, feller," said the Kid coolly. "This hyer ain't a court of law, I reckon."

"Courts of law don't go for much in this section," said Colonel Carson. "If we rope in a rustler, we don't worry any about courts of law. We string him up to a branch, and let it go at that."

"Muy bien!" assented the Kid. "But I sure ain't a rustler, boss, and I sure hate to be called one."

"What were you doing on my land when my foreman roped you in yesterday?"

"Hitting the trail," answered the Kid. "I reckon I was bound for Texas, and if you-uns are tired of my company, I'm sure ready to beat it. But if you've got room for a good man, I'm open to join your bunch for a spell. I'd sure like to help trail down them rustlers."

"You were found on the cattle-trail, where my cows had been driven," said the rancher. "One of my outfit was shot yesterday by the rustlers who drove his cows. You're under suspicion."

"I guess I'm ready to ride, if my company ain't admired," said the Kid carelessly. "I was hitting the trail for Bunch Grass when I came on that cattle-trail, and I was sure interested in it. It got my goat to see a cow-trail that petered out in the prairie, and left no sign for a galoot to follow."

"That's happened a good many times on this ranch," said Carson. "The trail of stolen steers always peters out in the same way when it gets near the hills. It's a thing we've never been able to get to the bottom of. I reckon if you're in cahoots with the rustlers you could explain it."

"But I sure ain't," grinned the Kid.

"They've laid a few things against me at times, but I never was a rustler of cows. But I guess you ain't taking my word about that, when your man has been shot up, and you're mighty suspicious of any stranger who comes moseying in on the range. Give me my guns and my cayuse, and let me ride."

"That's all you've got to say?" asked the rancher.

"Yep."

"You've worked on a ranch back in Texas?"

"Sure."

"Give me the name of any rancher who will speak a word for you."

"I guess I ain't worrying my old boss any," said the Kid, with a laugh. "We didn't part on the best of terms, feller."

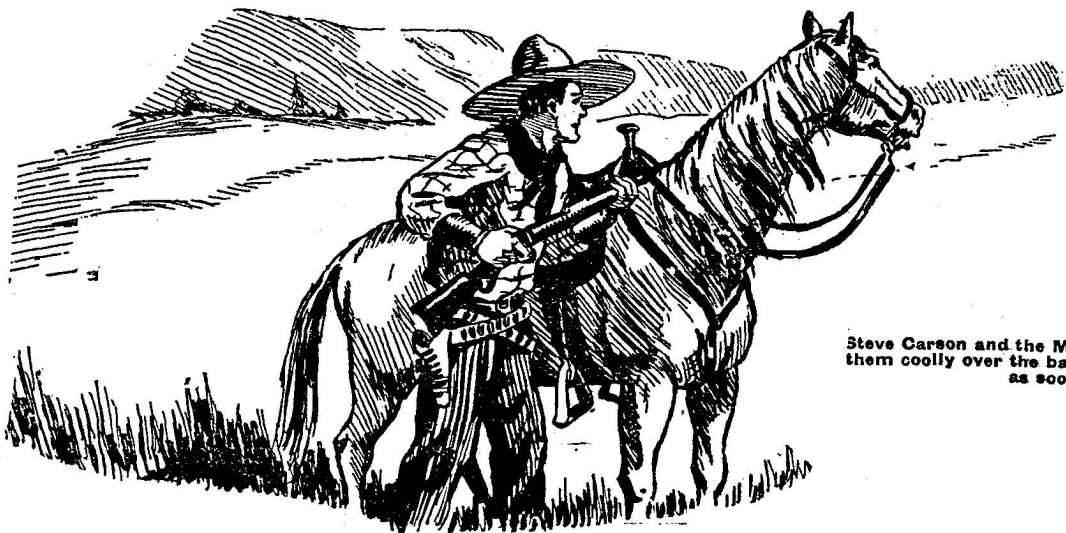
The rancher rose to his feet.

"You'll be held on suspicion," he said coldly. "If you're white it's your ill-luck. But we ain't taking chances when one of my outfit has been shot up and the killer is loose on the ranges—if you ain't him. You're a prisoner, Carfax—if that's your name!"

"Say, feller," ejaculated the Kid. "You don't happen to be the Governor of half-a-dozen States, I suppose? What

retained a powerful odour of kerosene. The Kid did not mind that; but it got his goat to be shut up, a prisoner, at the behest of the New Mexico rancher. There was a window to the shack, with a shutter that was barred outside, but through many wide cracks in the shutter the Kid could see his surroundings. He could see the long horse-coral, in which, among many other animals, his own mustang was confined; he could see the cookhouse, where the ranch cook, perspiring in shirt-sleeves, cooked for the outfit, and the bunkhouse, where punchers continually came and went. Twice or thrice a cheery puncher would pass the shuttered window and call in a cheery word to the prisoner, from sheer kindly feeling for a galoot down on his luck—a word that the Kid would answer with equal cheeriness.

He was a reasonable pilgrim, was the Rio Kid, and on cool reflection he did not blame the rancher for taking no chances with him. The whole ranch was excited and enraged by the shooting of Tommy Tucker, and on all sides bunches of men had ridden out, with rifles and revolvers, to hunt for traces of the rustlers. Horseman after horseman came and went; the clatter of hoofs



Steve Carson and the Me; them coolly over the back as soon:

sort of right have you got to hold a galoot prisoner on your ranch?"

The rancher shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess I'm not worrying about that any," he replied. "Until the man who killed Tommy Tucker is roped in I guess I'm taking no chances. My outfit will ride herd over you till I know more about you. Put him in a safe place, Buck."

"Sure!" said the foreman.

The rancher made a gesture of dismissal. For a moment the Kid hesitated, his eyes glinting at the high-handed lord of the Carson ranch. Had the walnut-butted guns still been swinging in the Kid's holsters there would have been a sudden surprise for the rancher. But the Kid was not the man to kick against what could not be helped, and he turned and followed Puck Wilson, whistling as he went the merry tune of a Mexican fandango.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Friend or Foe?

DURING that day the Rio Kid had plenty of time for meditation. He was barred in a corrugated iron shack, that was usually used for the storage of kerosene cans, and

rang incessantly past the kerosene shack. The Kid thought it out, and did not blame the rancher. None the less, his imprisonment irked him, and he was resolved that it should not last long. Gladly the Kid would have joined the Carson bunch in trailing the rustlers—he hated rustling as he hated a rattler—but he did not expect the bunch to take on a stranger at face value. For all they knew he might be a spy of the rustler gang, as Colonel Carson only too plainly suspected. Keeping him safe on suspicion was only hoss-sense, in the circumstances, as the Kid cheerily admitted; but he did not mean to be kept safe, all the same. Long before the hot New Mexican day drew to a close the Kid had had more than enough of the kerosene shack.

Looking from the split shutter, he caught sight, more than once, of the rancher's nephew, Steve Carson. The Kid watched that handsomely-dressed young man very curiously. From the punchers' talk he had learned how Steve had had his left leg crushed in a stampede a few months before, leaving him with a limp. Looking at him, the Kid had to remember the tracks of the man with a limp that he had picked up on the trail of the stolen cattle. That

the rancher's nephew could be in cahoots with the gang of rustlers who were stealing cows from the ranch was too wild a suspicion to have entered the Kid's mind, but for Steve Carson's action in attempting to shoot him down unarmed. To shoot down an unarmed galoot on bare suspicion was not the act of a white man, the Kid reckoned, and he figured that Steve had a yellow streak in him. And the Kid opined that the chances were that Steve Carson had drawn on him, not in vengeance for the shooting-up of Tommy Tucker; but to keep the Kid's mouth shut in the

mined assault from within, but the clang of the corrugated iron would have alarmed the whole ranch and brought a crowd to the spot. As the long hours of the day wore by the Kid realised that he was "cinched, and began to wonder how long it would be before he breathed free air again.

The ranch cook brought him ample food, and gave him a cheery grin and word along with it. But a puncher stood by the door with drawn gun to see that the prisoner did not kick.

"Oh, shucks!" murmured the Kid, as he saw the sun descending over the

If he had a knife— But he might as well have wished for his walnut-butted six-guns, and his mustang between his knees, and his feet in the stirrups. And then—miraculously, as it seemed—there came in the darkness a scraping sound at the window, a gleam of shining steel, and a knife, pushed through the crack from outside, dropped to the floor of the kerosene shack. And the Kid, in wonder, picked it up.

"Search me!" he murmured. It was a heavy, broad-bladed bowie-knife—exactly the weapon that the Kid wanted to cut his way out of his prison.

He gripped the handle with deep satisfaction. But he stared at the glimmering blade in the darkness of the shack, wondering.

What unknown friend had slipped that knife through the window, knowing, as well as the Kid did, that with such a weapon the prisoner could cut his way to freedom? All the outfit that he had met had been friendly enough—even Buck Wilson. They approved of the boss holding him a prisoner on suspicion, but they did not really doubt him or believe that he was in cahoots with the rustlers. One of them, more friendly than the rest, must have taken pity on his plight, and resolved to give him a

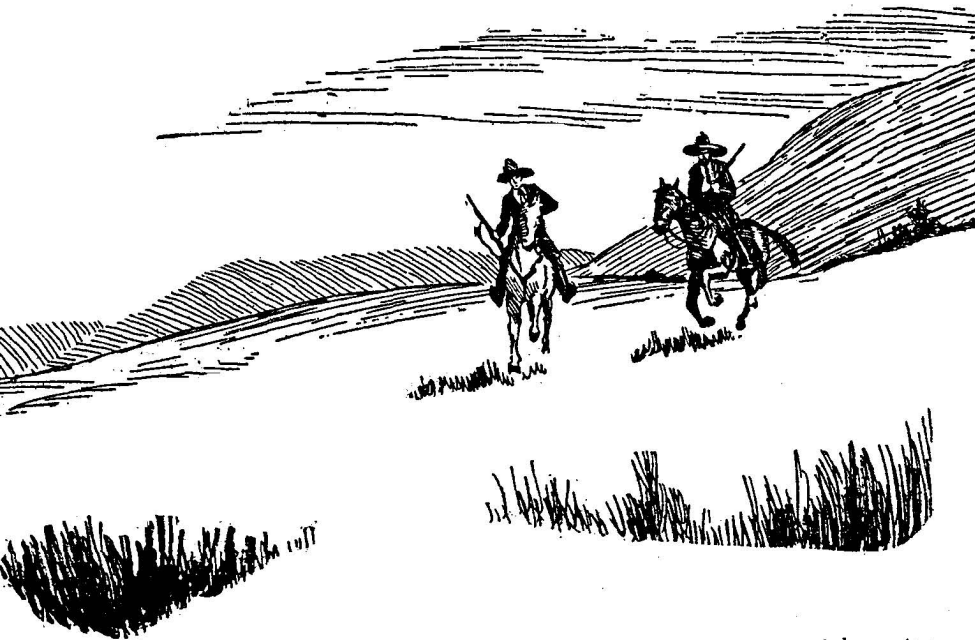
chance to vamoose the ranch. Whoever his unknown friend was the Kid blessed him. One of the bunch, at least, had hoss-sense enough to feel sure that he was no rustler, the Kid figured. But he was not surprised at the galoot acting secretly, for the rancher's orders had been strict, and it would have gone hard with any man on the Carson ranch found disregarding them.

"I reckon that hombre, whoever he is, is a galoot with solid hoss-sense," the Kid reflected, "and I'll sure prove it up to the whole bunch that I'm no rustler, when I get clear of this pesky shebang! I sure ain't hitting the trail for Texas till I've taken a hand agin them dog-goned rustlers, and I sure reckon that if I find them to home, Steve Carson won't be a whole lot far away." He gripped the knife, and stepped to the window. "Now I guess it's root, hog, or die!"

Quietly, but with a firm hand, the Kid cut at the pinewood shutter. The blade was strong and heavy, edged like a razor, and in the Kid's deft hand it sliced away the hard wood fast. A wide gash in the split shutter grew wider and wider, huge splinters falling at the Kid's feet as he worked patiently, till at last he could pass his hand through the opening, his arm following, and force the bars outside up from the iron sockets.

One bar he lifted and drew in through the opening, laying it gently on the earth. Then the other bar followed; and the Kid pushed the hinged shutter a few inches open, and stared out into the deep gloom.

At a distance, the windows of the bunkhouse shone; and from the open



de directly towards the Kid, who watched from the rancho, his rifle in his hand, ready to lift and shoot it. (See Chapter 4.)

surest way. The Kid pondered over the matter, and he had a hunch that Steve Carson was a "coyote" from the word go, for all his good looks, and his relationship to the richest rancher in New Mexico. And the Kid, at his window, noted several times that Steve glanced towards the kerosene shack with a black and bitter brow. Colonel Carson was holding the boy puncher on suspicion, but if the Kid's figuring was O.K. the rancher could have learned more by questioning his own nephew. No wonder the rustlers always knew when a trap was being laid for them if the rancher's nephew was in league with the gang.

The old rancher had sternly blamed his nephew for pulling a gun on the unarmed Kid, yet there was no doubt in the Kid's mind that Steve had influenced the colonel's opinion. Could Steve Carson have had his own way, the Kid would have been taken from the shack and strung up on the nearest tree without waiting for any proof. The Kid knew that as he caught Steve's eyes turned glinting on his prison, and saw the young man fingering his black, bruised chin, where the Kid's fist had struck like a lump of iron.

The Kid was quite determined not to remain where he was, in spite of all the ranchers and all the outfits in New Mexico. But when he gave his attention to getting out of the shack he found that he was up against a tough proposition. The door was barred, the window shuttered and barred. The walls might not have resisted a deter-

ranch, the long day drawing to a close. "I reckon I was plumb loco to horn into this hyer rookus. Dog-gone my boots, why couldn't I quit that pesky cattle trail and hit the horizon for Texas, as I was aiming to do? Shucks!"

Yet the Kid did not really regret that he had lingered on the Carson ranchlands. The mysterious trail on the prairie haunted his thoughts, and the puzzle of it got his goat. Even now, if he escaped from the kerosene shack, he knew that he would not ride for Texas, leaving that mystery behind him unsolved. The secret of the trail that was lost in the prairie was a secret that the Kid figured on discovering, if he could.

Night fell on the ranch. There was a blaze of light from the bunkhouse, where horsemen still came and went. Dusty, tired riders came in from the shadowed plains and dropped from their horses at the bunkhouse, or rode on to the 'doby rancho to report to the boss. The hunt was up for the rustlers of the Rio Bajo country; but the Kid could see easily enough that there had been no success. The cattle-lifters had vanished into the sierra without leaving a trail, and the outfit were baffled and enraged. The kerosene shack was at a little distance from the other buildings, and the Kid, after darkness tell, knew that if he could once get outside he could make his get-away in the shadows with ease. If he had had a knife he could have cut his way through the wooden bars that held the split shutter to the window. But his knife had been taken, and though he tried his luck with his hands, he could not burst the bars or wrench the shutter apart.

doorway of the chuck-house came the glow of the cook's stove. But close by the kerosene shack all was darkness, and no one was at hand. All the outfit knew that the prisoner was safely barred in and did not need watching—unless he had help from outside. And only the unknown man who had slipped the bowie-knife in the shack knew that he had had help.

The Kid pushed the shutter wider. Softly he lifted himself through the little window, and dropped to the earth outside the shack. Then he closed the shutter again. Only close at hand, in the gloom, could it have been seen that the wooden bars were missing from their place. And then—warned by an instinct that was quicker than thought—the Rio Kid threw himself face down on the earth close by the wall of the shack.

Bang! The flash and the roar of the revolver were followed by a shout from the bunk-house. A bullet crashed into the wall a couple of feet above the Kid.

Round the corner of the shack a shadow loomed—the shadow of a man who had waited and watched for the Kid. And in that bitter moment the boy puncher knew what had happened—that the knife had been dropped into the shack by the hand, not of a friend, but of an enemy—an enemy who lay in wait to shoot him down in the act of escaping.

The Rio Kid's face was white with rage as understanding flashed into his mind. Bang! came the second shot, missing him only by inches as he rolled over in the darkness; the shadowy figure was running towards him now, firing as he came, and limping as he ran. But the darkness and the Kid's cat-like swiftness, saved him; and shot after shot flew wide and wild as the boy puncher fled into the night.

It had been a close call for the Kid, and his running footsteps did not slacken until the uproar from the Carson ranch had died away in the distance.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Turning the Tables!

THE Rio Kid grinned as Buck Wilson drew rein in the shadow of the great cottonwood. High over the prairie rose the lone cottonwood, a hundred feet high, its great mass of branches a landmark for many a mile across the wide grasslands of the Carson ranch.

Hidden in thick foliage, the Kid lay along a high bough, and for a great distance he had watched the horseman who rode on the trail he had left on the plain.

Had there been more than one the Kid would have dropped from the tree and vanished into the prairie. The Kid knew well how to move, when he liked, without leaving enough trail for an Apache to follow. But the foreman of the Carson ranch was riding alone; and the Kid did not choose to beat it. Under the blazing sun of the New Mexico noontide Buck Wilson rode on to the tall cottonwood, and gladly pulled his broncho under the welcome shade.

With amused eyes the Kid watched him from above, through narrow openings in the foliage. The foreman of the Carson ranch was a hard man, and he carried a rifle at his saddle and a revolver at his belt; and he was hunting the Rio Kid, as many others of the Carson outfit were hunting him that morning; yet the Kid was glad to see him.

Buck Wilson stared down at the trail of the Kid's boots that wound round the great trunk of the cottonwood, and passed onward. He fanned himself with his Stetson hat, and grunted. He had ridden many a long mile that hot morning before he had struck the Kid's trail in the prairie.

The trail of a man afoot in a country where no man stirred except in the saddle was enough to tell the foreman that he was on the track of the puncher who had escaped from the kerosene

shack the night before. And he had followed it as far as the big cottonwood. He remained for a few minutes in the grateful shade of the wide-spreading branches, and then rode on round the great trunk, following the deep track of the boots—a track so deep that Buck might have suspected that it had been left intentionally, had he dreamed that the fugitive was not bent on escaping.

But a dozen yards beyond the cottonwood the track died out suddenly. Buck stared down at the earth, and dismounted, to examine it for sign. The trail ended in high grass, and he knew that the fugitive had gone no farther; and his plainsman's eye told him, after a brief examination, that the puncher had trodden back to the great tree in his own tracks. And the Carson foreman, with his gun in his hand now, tramped back to the cottonwood, his horse following him. And as he tramped under the thick branches something struck him suddenly on the crown of his Stetson hat, crushing in the hat and hammering with fearful force upon his head, and Buck went to the earth like a log.

It was only for two minutes that the foreman of the Carson ranch lay stunned in the grass under the spreading cottonwood. Then his eyes opened dizzily, and his hand flew to his belt.

"Forget it, feller!" came a voice with the soft Texan drawl.

And Buck Wilson dragged himself to a sitting posture, and stared blankly into the muzzle of his own gun, gripped in the hand of the Rio Kid.

The Kid smiled at him pleasantly over the gun.

"I reckon you needn't worry any about putting your hands up, feller," he drawled. "I guess I've borrowed your hardware, and you've sure come out at the little end of the horn. You want to sit still like a good little man, or else I guess this dog-goned six-gun will pop, and the boss of Carson ranch will have a vacancy for a new foreman!"

THIS WEEK'S LIST OF BIRTHDAY DATES!

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- JANUARY 17th, 1914.
- JULY 9th, 1912.
- AUGUST 28th, 1909.
- SEPTEMBER 9th, 1915.
- MARCH 6th, 1914.
- MAY 1st, 1911.
- DECEMBER 6th, 1915.
- OCTOBER 14th, 1919.
- FEBRUARY 6th, 1912.
- NOVEMBER 17th, 1909.
- JUNE 8th, 1914.
- APRIL 13th, 1911.
- SEPTEMBER 16th, 1915.
- JANUARY 28th, 1917.
- OCTOBER 26th, 1914.
- JUNE 18th, 1916.
- MAY 10th, 1914.
- DECEMBER 18th, 1920.
- NOVEMBER 21st, 1910.
- JANUARY 20th, 1913.
- AUGUST 10th, 1914.
- SEPTEMBER 26th, 1914.
- MARCH 12, 1915.
- NOVEMBER 23rd, 1911.
- APRIL 29th, 1915.
- JUNE 26th, 1915.
- DECEMBER 27th, 1910.
- AUGUST 22nd, 1913.
- FEBRUARY 29th, 1916.
- MARCH 24th, 1917.
- AUGUST 26th, 1916.
- NOVEMBER 4th, 1913.

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POPULAR.

OCTOBER 6th.

Buck Wilson stared at him, his bronzed bearded face growing purple with rage. But he made no hostile movement. The six-gun was only four feet away from his face, and the Kid's finger was on the trigger. And though the Kid was smiling, the glint in his eyes told that he was in deadly earnest. Buck's eyes wandered to his horse—tethered a dozen yards away, the rifle still in its case at the saddle. He was disarmed, and the Kid held his gun, and the game was in the boy puncher's hands.

"You durned, gol-darned rustling coyote!" muttered the Carson foreman, his voice thick with rage.

"Forget it," grinned the Kid. "I reckon you roped in my hoss and my guns, feller; but this ain't a country for a galoot to hoof it without a cayuse, nohow; and I'm sure borrowing yours till I get my own back. Savvy?"

The foreman clenched his hands. The Kid made a warning motion with the leveled six-gun.

"I should sure hate to spill your vinegar, feller," he said. "But if you don't sit like a good little man, you gets yours, so sudden you won't know what hit you. You get me?"

"You've got the drop!" growled Buck hoarsely. "You'll go up to a branch for this, you durned rustler!"

"I keep on telling you I'm to rustler," said the Kid; "but I was sure tired of the kerosene shack! I ain't blaming the ranch boss for holding me on suspicion; but I had a hunch to nit the open prairie. And I reckon you was hunting me."

"I sure was, and I'll get you yet!" said Buck grimly. "We savvy heap plenty now that you're a rustler, you dog-goned cow-thief. Some galoot put a knife into the shack to help you—we found the shutter hacked to splinters. We've been wise to it for a long time that the rustlers have got a spy in the Carson outfit; and it was that durned lobo wolf that helped you get clear."

"I reckon that's how you'd figure it out," assented the Kid. "But that ain't the how of it, by long chalks. It was the rancher's nephew that put the knife into the shack; and he was waiting with a six-gun to pot-shoot me as I vamoosed, only I was too quick for the dog-goned gink. I reckon he hated me telling the bunch that a galoot with a limp had a hand in running off the cows on Tommy Tucker's range!"

The foreman started and stared at him.

"It was Steve Carson spotted you vamoosing and opened fire on you," he said. "He allowed that he was jest taking a pasear along by the kerosene shack and saw you drop from the winder."

The Kid laughed.

"I guess he was there a whole piece, watching round the corner of the shack till I dropped out," he said. "He sure wanted to stop me from chewing the rag about a galoot with a limp. The dog-goned heck had it all out and dried; but I beat him to it, and I sure will make him sit up and howl before I hit the trail out of New Mexico. It's Colonel Carson's nephew that's helping the rustlers run off the cows—and that's a straight cinch!"

The foreman shook his head slowly. "You ain't figuring that's so?" grinned the Kid.

"Nope!"

"I guess I'll prove it up, give me time," said the Kid cheerily. "You 'uns allow that I'm a rustler, and I guess I'm going to put you wise. I guess I'm going to make that gol-darned coyote sorry for pot-shooting at a galoot,

too!" He chuckled. "You reckoned you had a soft thing when you hit my trail out on the llano, knowing I hadn't a gun. Why, you galoot, you'd never have hit my trail if I hadn't wanted you to hit it!"

The foreman stared. "I sure sighted you a long way off," the Kid chuckled; "and then I laid that trail for you to pick up, where I knew you couldn't miss it if you tried. I guess I was glad when I saw you riding it to this hyer tree. I kinder wanted a hoss and guns, and that's why I wanted you to follow on. You savvy?"

Buck Wilson gritted his teeth hard. "Why, I'd cut a lump of wood all ready with the knife that Steve Carson dropped into the shack last night," grinned the Kid. "That was what hit you on the cabeza, feller, and I reckon it surprised you some. You walked into it like a good little man, you sure did."

"I'll get you yet!" muttered the foreman huskily. "I'll see you strung up to a branch afore the sun's gone down many times on this hyer ranch!"

"Forget it!" said the Kid. "I reckon I wouldn't have worried you any if you'd left me my cayuse and my guns. But I sure ain't trailing that gang of rustlers without a gat in my grip."

"Trailing the rustlers!" "That's my game!" said the Kid, with a nod. "Why, you loosed gink, if I was a rustler, do you reckon you'd be let walk back to the ranch? You'd get yours mighty sudden from your own gun. But I should sure hate to spill your juice, liking you as I do. You've got to hoof it five miles back to the ranch."

The Kid laughed and walked across to the horse. Lightly he swung himself into the foreman's saddle.

Buck Wilson made a fierce stride towards him. The Kid lifted the six-gun and grinned over it.

"Beat it, hombre," he said laconically. "Beat it for the ranch before you get hurt!"

The foreman glared at him in helpless rage, but the six-gun enforced obedience. Slowly, savagely Buck Wilson turned away and started on the long and weary tramp back to the ranch, leaving his horse and guns in the hands of the Rio Kid.

The Kid watched him, with an amused grin, till the grass hid him at last from sight; then he wheeled the horse and rode away towards the hills.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Shot for Shot!

CRACK! The flash of a rifle even in the glare of the New Mexican sunshine caught the Rio Kid's eye before he heard the report. The bullet hummed by like a mosquito as the Kid dropped from his horse and slipped Buck's rifle from the leather sheath that held it. Looking across the back of the halted broncho, the Kid watched the tiny curl of smoke that flickered against the brown of the hills in the west.

"Search me!" he muttered. The Kid was riding for the hills—the foothills of the Rio Bajo range. That a crowd of the Carson men would be out hunting for him, sure now that he was one of the rustling gang, the Kid was aware. But he had ridden long miles since his meeting with Buck Wilson at the tall cotton-wood, and he had not expected to find foes farther to the west.

The shot had come from a draw that led into the low hills. Standing behind his horse, the Kid watched. He was ready for trouble if the unknown marksman wanted to push it further. From the hollow of the draw a horseman emerged into sight, followed by another.

"Shucks!" ejaculated the Kid. He knew the leading rider, a hand-

(Continued on page 28.)

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"The Rustlers of the Rio Bajo!"

(Continued from page 17.)

some figure in well-fitting riding-clothes. It was Steve Carson, the rancher's nephew. But the man who followed him was not one of the Carson outfit. The velvet jacket, the high sombrero, the gaudy sash told that he was a Mexican, and his face, as the Kid saw it in the westerling sunlight, was dark and bearded and grim. The Kid smiled grimly. If ever he had seen a galoot who had "rustled" and "cow-thief" written all over his swarthy face, it was the Mexican who was riding with Steve Carson.

"Oh shucks!" grinned the Kid. "I reckon that yaller coyote was seeing some of his rustler friends in the sterra, and that dog-goned Greaser is one of the gang. And they've spotted me, and the pesky coyote reckons he's got me by the short hairs, two to one."

Steve Carson and the Mexican rode directly towards the Rio Kid, galloping over the rolling prairie. The Kid watched them coolly over the back of the Broncho, his rifle in his hand ready to lift as soon as he wanted it. He was a little puzzled at the direct attack; for the two riders were galloping into easy range, and as they were in rapid motion, and the Kid was standing still, all the chances were in his favour when it came to burning powder.

But suddenly he burst into a laugh as he guessed. He had escaped unharmed from the ranch the night before; he was in a country where every hand would be against him, and Steve Carson was not wise to it, that he was now armed. The two horsemen figured that they were riding down an unarmed man.

The Kid chuckled. He was willing to leave them in their error till they came nearer; and he held Buck's rifle out of sight behind the broncho, waiting.

It was at fifty yards that the two horsemen slackened pace a little and handled their rifles. At that easy distance it was quick work to riddle the Kid and his broncho with bullets if he had been, as they reckoned, without a gun. But the Kid was watching every motion of his enemies, and at the first sign of shooting his rifle swept up over the back of the broncho and he pulled trigger.

The Mexican had his rifle at his shoulder when the Kid's shot came, but he never pressed the trigger. He rolled backwards over his horse's tail and crashed heavily into the thick grass, and the startled horse threw up its heels and dashed away across the plain.

The rifle swung in line with Steve Carson, who was taking aim. The change that came over the face of the rancher's nephew was almost ludicrous in its surprise. The rifle remained motionless in his hands and he stared at the Kid blankly, and at the muzzle that was bearing on him. Then, without firing, he drove his spurs into his horse's flanks and dashed away towards the hills, bending low in the saddle to evade the shot he expected.

"Search me!" chuckled the Kid. He did not pull trigger on the fleeing man. In a couple of minutes Steve Carson had vanished again into the draw from which the horsemen had emerged, and was gone from the Kid's sight.

The Kid watched him go, and then walked across to the spot where the Mexican had fallen, his rifle ready for use if it was needed. But it was not

needed; the swarthy rustler lay still where he had fallen. The Kid gave him one grim look and returned to his broncho.

Crack! From the distant draw came the ringing report of a rifle. Under cover in the hollow the rancher's nephew was firing. But the distance was too great for effective shooting; and the Kid only grinned as the bullet winged by a dozen feet from him.

"Shucks!" murmured the Kid. "Any man in the Carson bunch would know that Greaser for a rustler at sight; and I reckon if they saw the rancher's nevy in his company they'd be wise to it who was the rustlers' spy at the ranch. I guess he wouldn't have showed up with that Greaser if he hadn't been plumb sure of getting me. But I reckon he won't get this puncher in a dog-goned hurry!"

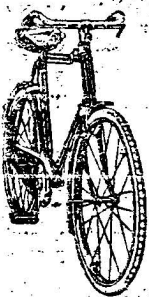
Crack, crack! came the ringing of the distant rifle. Heedless of the futile fire from the man hidden in the draw, the Kid mounted his broncho and rode away, sweeping southward to strike the hills at a point distant from the draw. The Kid was in the hills when the sun sank behind the sierra in the west, safe from pursuit by the keenest trader in the Carson bunch. Under cover of the night it would have been easy for the Kid to ride on and strike the trail for Texas, far from the Carson ranch. But the Kid did not ride on. The Kid was not hitting the trail for Texas until he had come to a show-down with the rustlers of the Rio Bajo.

THE END.

(How does the Rio Kid fare in his self-selected adventurous task? See next week's leading western story, entitled "THE RANCH RAIDERS".)

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