

PERILS—LET 'EM ALL COME!

Here's the boy to give you a thrill—the **RIO KID**, outlaw, adventurer, and Good Samaritan! Stick to his trail through the Golden West, for the Kid always hits **BIG TROUBLE** and **ADVENTURE!**

The RANCH RAIDERS!

By *Ralph Redway*



OUR ROARING WESTERN YARN, STARRING THE RIO KID!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Trailed!

THE Rio Kid lay in the sassafras on the top of the high mesa, and watched, with the patience of an Apache watching for his enemy. The Kid was not, perhaps, very patient by nature, but he could be as patient as a Redskin when he was on the warpath. And the Kid was on the warpath now. For a full hour he had lain on the summit of the mesa, in the blaze of the hot sun of New Mexico, hardly stirring to flick away the buzzing mosquitoes. From that high point, rising over the low hills of the Sierra Baja range, he could see far across the surrounding country—hill and canyon, deep, shadowy gulch, and rocky draw, to the rolling prairie that stretched away illimitable to the east—the wide grasslands of the Carson ranch. And the Kid's eyes were fixed upon a deep, hollow draw, shadowed by rocks and pines, where the low hills rose from the plain.

At the foot of the mesa, by a creek that was one of the trickling head-waters of the Rio Bajo, his broncho was staked out, in rich grass. Food, and water, and shade in plenty for the horse, while the Kid baked and sweated in the blazing sun on the top of the high mesa. But the hardy Kid seemed indifferent to discomfort. From the flat-topped rock he could watch the distant draw, and that was what the Kid wanted.

And his long vigil was rewarded at last.

From the shadows of the draw a horseman pulled out into view, riding slowly up into the hills—slowly, for the way was rocky and difficult. The Kid saw him first as a moving spot in the distance; but the figure drew nearer and clearer with every passing minute. Even while he was too far for his features to be discerned, the Kid was sure of him—he knew the well-built figure, the handsome riding-clothes, of Steve Carson, the nephew of Colonel Carson, of the Carson ranch. And as the horseman drew nearer, winding his way into the intricacies of the Sierra Baja, the Kid made out the handsome, reckless features of the rancher's nephew, and knew his man beyond doubt. And the Kid grinned quietly as he lay in cover and watched.

Click! Click!

The sound of the horse's hoofs came to his ears, echoing from the hard rocks. Steve Carson turned into a deep arroyo, so narrow that the walls of rock on either side seemed almost to meet, and in places arched over the rider's head. Through the arroyo ran a trickling stream, and the horseman was riding up the ravine in the shallow water. And the Rio Kid slipped, at last, quietly down from the mesa. He did not untether his horse. The Kid, like all cowpunchers, hated going afoot; he never went twenty yards out of the saddle if he could help it. But he knew that a single sound behind him would alarm the man he was tracking, and it was necessary for the Kid to keep in cover, and, mounted, he would have been seen by a backward glance of the lone rider. So the Kid left the broncho where he was, lying in the thick grass by the creek, and followed his man on foot. The toilsome way up the arroyo was slow, and the Kid knew that he could keep pace easily enough with the man from the ranch. And the Kid had a hunch that the trail would not be a long one.

Carson was out of sight in the steep arroyo, but the thudding and splashing of the horse came back to the Kid's ears. And every few minutes he had a glimpse of the rider, pushing slowly on his upward way. Twice he saw Steve Carson turn his head—not suspiciously, for the man did not dream that he was being trailed, but from the habit of caution. But the Kid was an old hand at this game, and there was no sign of him for the horseman to see when he glanced over his shoulder.

The rider pulled out of the arroyo at last, and drew his horse to a halt by a clump of trees at the opening of the canyon. And the Kid, winding his way on in cover of rock, and pine, and straggling bush, silent as a panther stalking his prey, dropped behind a boulder within a dozen feet of him, unseen, unsuspected.

"The durned, dog-goned gink!" the Kid muttered under his breath as he watched the halted horseman from cover. "I guess I savvy a whole heap what you're waiting there for, and what kinda galoot you're waiting for. I reckon if the Carson bunch could see you now they'd be put wise mighty sudden."

The horseman, at a halt on the rough ground at the head of the arroyo, was waiting with evident impatience. He had given no signal, so far as the Kid could discern or hear, but his manner showed plainly enough that he expected to be met. If the rustlers were camped in the hills it was likely that the spot was within view of some look-out. It was certain that watch would be kept by the cattle-thieves, with all the Rio Bajo country up in the hunt for them.

There was a sound of clinking hoofs, and a rider came from the shadowy pines of the canyon and joined Steve Carson. The Kid, from his cover, looked at him curiously and keenly.

He was a powerfully-built man, with a rugged, tanned, bearded face, dressed like a puncher, but evidently not a ranchman. He wore two guns in his belt, as well as a bowie-knife, and a rifle was in a sheath at his saddle. A tougher specimen of the "border ruffian" the Kid had never seen in the wildest cow town of Texas or Montana. A scar, from an old bullet wound, ran across the man's tanned right cheek.

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There are all kinds of Western characters—gunmen, roughnecks, outlaws, and cowboys. But there's **ONLY ONE KIND** OF RIO KID—and this is he!

like a gash, from his mouth to his ear, giving that side of his face a gristly expression.

"You here, Steve?"

"I've been waiting for you, Judson," snapped the young man.

"I reckon I moseyed down as soon as you was seen," answered the scarred man. "What's on? I sent down Juan with a message for you. Didn't you meet up with him in the draw, as usual?"

"Yep."

Carson dismounted from his horse and stood, leaning one arm on the saddle while he talked to the rustler. The limp of his left leg was very perceptible when the rancher's nephew moved on foot. Judson seemed to notice it, for he remarked:

"Your laig ain't any better, Steve."

"Nope. Never mind that; it will mend," grunted Steve. "I came up here to give you the office, Jud. Juan's gone up."

"Sho!" ejaculated the scarred man.

"He was shot by a puncher from Texas—a kid puncher, who calls himself Carfax."

The Rio Kid grinned behind the boulder. Steve Carson had no suspicion that the kid puncher who called himself Carfax was within hearing of his voice.

"Who's Carfax?" asked Jud.

"Search me!" growled Steve. "Buck Wilson found him nosing on the trail of Tommy Tucker's bunch of cows that were driven off the day before yesterday. He ran him into the ranch on suspicion of savvyng something about the rustling, and my uncle ordered him to be held. He's too fresh for this country. He spotted the tracks of a man with a limp on the cattle-trail, and told the outfit."

Jud whistled.

"Sho! They don't suspect that you are—"

"Of course not!" interrupted Carson irritably. "I reckon they ain't likely to figure that the boss' nephew has a hand in the rustling of the Carson herds. But that puncher is sure wise to it, and I ain't safe at the ranch with him around."

"Don't you pack a gun?" grinned Jud.

"I drew on him, and he beat me to it," growled Steve. "He was shut up in the kerosene shack, and I dropped a knife in the window to help him out, and when he vamoosed I was lying ready to wing him. I reckoned it was a cinch, but he got clear. When I was with Juan in the draw we sighted him on a horse on the prairie, and rode him down. But he's got guns from somewhere; he shot up Juan and I reckoned I hit the horizon mighty quick. I figured that he might come after me, and I waited for him in the draw, but he never showed up."

Again the Rio Kid chuckled silently. The Kid had made a wide circle to get to the rear of the draw, where the rancher's nephew waited for him, rifle in hand.

"I reckon he's taking a hand in the game," went on Steve. "I guess he's a meddlesome galoot, ready to horn into any rookus that don't concern him any. You want to watch out for him, Jud, and give him his as soon as you sight him. They figure at the ranch that he's one of the rustlers."

"Sho!" ejaculated Jud again.

"There won't be any questions asked if he's found laid out!" said Steve. "I reckon he's in these hills, lying low to keep clear of the Carson bunch."

"I guess a stranger rooting in these

hills ain't likely to be long-lived," grinned Jud. "More likely he's pulled out and vamoosed."

Steve shook his head impatiently.

"If he was hitting the trail for Texas he'd have gone east," he answered. "But when I saw him he was on this side of the ranch—west. He's got a hunch for taking a hand in this game, I tell you, Jud."

"I'll sure tell the boys to watch out," said Jud carelessly. "If he's nosing around in the hills he won't hit our camp easy; and if he does he'll go up so quick he won't never savvy what struck him."

Steve grunted. After his own experience with Kid Carfax he did not figure that dealing with the boy puncher would be so easy as the rustler reckoned. He changed the subject abruptly.

"You cleared the last herd?" he asked.

"Sure! Every gol-durned cow was driven down to the construction camps on the other side of the sierra," answered Jud. "So long as the railroad's building—and I guess that will be years yet—they'll take off our hands all the beef we can get—cheap!" He chuckled. "I reckon it's time for another drive. I told Juan to speak to you about it."

"Juan won't never speak again," grunted Steve. "You want to rope in Posy Pete's herd. He's got Tommy Tucker's old range since Tommy was shot up. It's the farthest from the ranch, and the safest to work. He's got two hundred cows on that range, along the fork of the Rio Bajo. But look here, Jud, no killing, if it can be helped. I reckon it made me sure sick of the game when Tommy Tucker was shot up."

"It was you that pulled on him," growled Jud. "I don't stand for shooting up cowmen. It makes the game too pesky dangerous. All the ranch will be howling for blood over that."

Steve muttered an oath.

"He had to go up when he came on us suddenly and reckernized me," he snarled. "Do you reckon I could let him get back to the ranch and let on to Colonel Carson that his nephew was in cahoots with a gang of rustlers? But I sure hated to draw on him." The young man shook himself impatiently. "I reckon it made me sick that I ever took a hand in this rustling game."

The Kid could see the sardonic grin on the rugged face of the rustler.

"It's easy money," said Jud. "You've roped in some thousands of dollars to your share, Steve, though I guess it's all gone on poker and euchre among the tin-horn gamblers at Bunch Grass."

"That's my funeral," snarled Steve. "When I couldn't touch my uncle for any more I had to raise the dust somehow. Never mind that when will you be rustling Posy Pete's herd? Make it after dark; it sure ain't safe to move in the daylight, even so far from the ranch, since there's been killing. I tell you the whole outfit is raging."

"To-night, then," said Jud. "You'll be there?"

"I reckon not," snapped Steve. "After what that gol-darned Texas galoot has been saying at the ranch I sure want to be off the scene next time cows are rustled. I reckon I'm staying in to-night, like a good boy, with plenty of witnesses that I was home."

The rustler chuckled.

"That's sure wise," he said. "I reckon you want to watch out, Steve."

After a few more words Steve Carson remounted his horse and rode away, clinking and clattering, down the

narrow arroyo, to return to the plains and the ranch. Judson turned his horse and dashed away into the rocky canyon at a gallop. From his cover the Rio Kid stared after him grimly. The rustler vanished from sight, and the clatter of hoofs died away in a few moments.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Hut on the Range!

THE stockman's hut stood lonely, far from any other habitation, close by the fork of the Rio Bajo. It was built of sawn planks and posts, with a shuttered window and a door that swung loose on leather hinges. It looked lonely and deserted in the setting sun as the Rio Kid rode within sight of it and watched it keenly across the glistening, waving grass of the range.

The Kid rode slowly towards the stockman's hut.

The hut was ten miles from the ranch-house, and was one of the loneliest stations on the ranch. The puncher in charge of the herd on the range was accustomed to bring with him rations for a week and camp in the hut at night. At the end of the week he would be relieved by the next man on duty. It was a lonely life, and when the rustlers were at work it was a dangerous one. But it was a matter of course to the cow-punchers. The Rio Kid had done range riding, in the old days on the Double-Bar in Texas, and he knew the work of a ranch from beginning to end. The Kid knew that Posy Pete would be alone in the stockman's hut, with no other within miles of him. What worried him now was whether the range-rider was at the hut or out on the range with the feeding cows. It was unlikely that he would be back at the hut before dark, still, the Kid was not taking chances. At the Carson ranch they had marked down the Kid as a rustler himself; he had been made a prisoner on suspicion, and his escape, he had no doubt, had convinced Colonel Carson, that the suspicion was well founded, and there was no doubt that Steve did all he could to further that view. Since the shooting up of Tommy Tucker on the same range a few days before, the new man in charge was not likely to be slow with his gun, and if Posy Pete was in the hut and sighted the Kid coming, the boy puncher was more than likely to be met by a whizzing bullet.

So the Kid was very wary as he approached the hut, his keen eyes watching it for a sign of an occupant.

There was no sign; but that might only mean that the puncher was watching him from within and waiting for him to come within easy range.

At a hundred yards the Kid dismounted from his broncho and walked on towards the hut, watchful as a cat. At fifty yards the Kid staked out the broncho and advanced on hands and knees, almost hidden by the high grass.

Still there was no movement, no shot, and the Kid came to the edge of the clearing round the hut and watched from the grass for a good ten minutes before he advanced farther.

The silence was deep, and he was fairly well satisfied that the hut was untenanted. But he was still watchful and wary when he quitted all cover at last and ran swiftly towards the hut.

"Shucks!" ejaculated the Kid.

The hut was empty, as he had expected. The puncher was out on the range with his herd. The Kid threw open the door and looked in, gun in hand, but the room was empty.

One glance round was enough for the Kid. Then he walked back to his broncho, untethered him, and led him to the hut, and led him inside. Nothing was to be in view to alarm Posy Pete when he came in from the range.

The stove was cold, but the Kid, though he was more than ready for food, did not think of lighting it. He waited in the hut, watching from a split in the shutter, across the plains, now shadowed as the sun set lower behind the Sierra Baja.

It was an hour later that a tanned cow-puncher came riding into sight towards the stockman's hut.

The Kid smiled as he watched him.

Posy Pete, tired by a day on the open range, rode slowly towards the lonely hut, thinking chiefly of supper and his bunk. A few days ago a puncher had been killed by rustlers on that lonely range. But chances like that came all in the day's work; the work of the ranch went on just the same. Posy Pete was watchful over his herd, but as he rode back to the hut he thought of supper and bed. He dismounted at the door, turned his horse into the little fenced corral adjoining the hut, threw the creaking door open, and tramped heavily in. And from the gloomy interior there was a gleam of a levelled barrel, and a soft voice said pleasantly, in the leisurely Texas drawl: "Hands up!"

Posy Pete gave a convulsive start, and his hand, by instinct, shot towards his belt. But he did not touch a gun. A levelled revolver was looking him in the face at a distance of six feet, and Posy Pete knew too much to draw.

He put his hands quietly above his head and stared at the handsome, sun-burnt face that glimmered out of the shadows.

"You durned rustler!" he muttered. The Kid laughed softly. "Drop your hardware, feller," he said, "and don't you try to lift a gun, or you get yours so sudden that you'll never know how you got over the range."

"It's your say-so!" answered Posy Pete, and he lifted the gun from his belt and dropped it to the floor and kicked it across to the Rio Kid.

"You're sure a good little man," said the Kid approvingly. "I should hate to spill your juice over the floor, feller."

"Oh, can it!" snapped Posy Pete. "If you're arter the cows you've got me dead to rights. You'll go up to a branch for it."

"But I ain't arter the cows," grinned the Kid. "I keep on telling you that I ain't no rustler, same as I told them at the ranch."

"Then what are you doing here?" demanded Posy Pete. "That's Buck Wilson's hoss you've got in the corner, you durned hoss-thief!"

"Buck Wilson sure roped in my



IN THE CATTLE STAMPEDE! A shadowy figure loomed beside the Kid as he rode with the stampede—a hoarse voice called him: "You, Jud?" "I guess not!" answered the Kid coolly as he clubbed his quirt and swept down the heavy butt. The horseman gave a yell and rolled from his mount. (See Chapter 3.)

mustang and my guns," said the Kid. "I met up with him on the prairie and borrowed his'n. This ain't a country for a galoot to take a little pasear without a gun or without a cayuse. I'm ready to trade back with Buck Wilson when he wants."

Posy Pete eyed him suspiciously. "What are you doing here if you ain't arter the cows?" he asked. "You met me with a gat in your grip."

"I reckon you'd have blowed my roof off, and no questions asked, if I hadn't," chuckled the Kid. "If I was a rustler, you gol-durned moss-head, what's to stop me from handing out yours and driving your herd?" The Kid thrust the revolver back into the holster at his belt. "I'm here to help you beat them rustlers, Pete."

"Oh, shucks!" said Pete. "Honest Injun!" grinned the Kid. "I've got wise to it that they're arter your cows this hyer night, and I'm sure going to take a hand in the game. Ever heard of a galoot named Judson, with a big scar on his face?"

"Every cow-man in New Mexico has heard of Scar-Face Judson, the durndest fire-bug between this and the Rio Colorado!" growled Pete. "He's the galoot that's arter the herd. I'm going to watch out with you to stop him."

"Oh, shucks!"

"You ain't taking that in?"

"Not any."

"I guess I'll prove it up," said the Kid. "You're a white man, Posy Pete, and I sure like you, though you're a durned moss-head, like the rest of your bunch. But I'll prove it up."

"And how?" jeered Pete.

"This-away, feller."

The Kid picked up the stockman's pistol, and, holding it by the barrel, handed it to Posy Pete. His own gun was in his holster. Posy Pete grasped the Colt by the butt and stared over it at the smiling face of the Rio Kid. Deliberately the Kid had placed the game in his hands. He had placed himself at the cow-puncher's mercy.

"Waal, carry me home to die!" ejaculated Posy Pete, staring blankly at the Kid.

Slowly he dropped the gun into his belt.

"I reckon I more'n half believed that you was white," he said. "I guess you've proved it up, feller. Look here, is it the straight goods about a raid on my herd this night?"

"Sure!"

"And you're standing by me if they come?"

"I sure am!"

"You're a white man," said Posy Pete.

"I reckon we've got time for a leetle supper before the galoots show up," said the Kid.

And he crammed pine chips into the stove and lighted it, turning his back cheerfully on the puncher as he did so with a complete confidence that made Posy Pete dismiss any lingering suspicion that might have been in his mind.

The stove was soon roaring, and sending up a stream of smoke from the iron pipe in the roof towards the glittering stars of New Mexico. Posy Pete lighted a kerosene lamp and turned the Kid's broncho into the corral. And then the two punchers, with cheery confidence established, sat down on either side of the stove to supper, while the darkness deepened and deepened on the lonely prairie round the stockman's hut.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Stampede!

STARS twinkled in the sky, but the night was dark. From the shadowed grass came the low, deep murmur of the herd. By a bunch of cedars, close by the resting herd, the Kid and Posy Pete stood, holding their bridles. The Kid was speaking in a low voice.

"I guess I'm talking hoss-sense, feller. I've given you the office that Scar-Face Judson and his gang will be working your herd to-night. I guess I'll stand by you to the last shot. I sure hate a rustler. But if you had as much sense as a hoss-fly you'd ride to the ranch end bring up some of the outfit."

Posy Pete shook his head.

"Forget it!" he answered. "I'm on this range and looking after this bunch of cows. I guess I believe you're white, Kid Carfax, but up at the ranch they figure that you're one of the cattle-thieves. I reckon the boss would give me the marble eye if I rode up and told him I'd left you alone with the herd on your word."

"I reckon I'd ride to the ranch myself, only the dog-goned moss-heads would shoot me up at sight," grunted the Kid. "Anyhow, we're two, and if they drive the cows we can trail them if we can't beat them to it. I'm sure anxious to find out how they drive the cows without leaving a trail."

Posy Pete eyed him curiously in the gloom of the cedars.

He trusted the Kid. The Kid had fairly forced the puncher to trust him. But the puncher still had his doubts. The Kid meant well, he believed that. But he was not sure that the Kid had it right. If the rustlers did not come—and Pete did not feel at all sure that they were coming—he was losing his night's sleep in the stockman's hut—and losing it for nothing. And a cowman who had ridden range all day did not want to lose his night's rest for nothing. And Posy Pete did not quite understand, either, why the Kid, who had been treated as a rustler himself at the Carson ranch, was taking a hand in the game against the rustlers to save Colonel Carson's herds. The night was calm and still, the cattle rested peacefully in the grass, from a little distance came a soft murmur of the waters of the Rio Bajo. For two hours the punchers had been watching the herd, and there had been no sign of the rustlers.

But the Kid started suddenly, and

bent his head to listen, and laid a hand on Posy Pete's arm.

"I reckon they're on hand," he whispered.

In the midnight stillness Posy Pete listened intently. He shook his head.

"I guess I ain't wise to it if they are," he said.

"Listen, you moss-head!" grunted the Kid.

And in a few minutes more Posy Pete could hear the faint sounds—from the darkened prairie, that had already reached the keener ears of the Rio Kid. Horsemen were riding in the night.

"Might be some of the outfit," muttered Pete. "I guess the boss is keeping the boys riding hard these days. He's sure mad at Tommy Tucker being shot up by the rustlers."

"Outfit nothing!" snapped the Kid. "It's Scar-Face Judson and his gang, or I'll sure eat my Stetson."

They listened. From a distance the glow of the stove from the stockman's hut could be seen, glowing out by slits and crannies in the timber walls. The horsemen were riding nowhere near the hut, and the Kid drew his companion's attention to the fact.

"If they was some of the Carson outfit they'd sure hit the hut to call on you there," he said. "If they're rustlers they'll miss the hut as wide as they can, figuring that you're in it, sleeping with a gun handy. Don't your pesky ears tell you that them riders ain't passing anywhere near that hut?"

"Sure!" assented Pete, after a pause.

He drew his repeating-rifle from the leather sheath at his saddle. He was convinced now, and he was ready for shooting. The Kid had a six-gun in his hand, and his eyes were glinting and searching through the darkness. The thudding of hoofs was nearer and clearer, but it stopped, and from the sleeping herd came murmuring sounds of disturbance. The resting cows were waking and grunting. Sharply through the silence came the crack of a cowman's quirt. The punchers at the cedar clump heard muffled voices calling to one another. It was only too plain that the rustlers were at work round the herd, and that the cows were getting into motion. Here and there, in the dim starlight, shadowy figures showed, the figures of horsemen, who were starting up the herd.

There were several of them—several seen at once, and probably more hidden in the shadows. But it did not even cross Posy Pete's mind to lie doggo and keep safe from heavy odds. He was there to guard the cows, and he was ready to do his duty—more than ready, for he was keen to draw trigger on the cattle-thieves who had shot up one of the outfit.

"You standing by on this, Carfax?" he muttered.

"Ain't I said so?"

"Stand to it, then!" said the puncher. He clambered on his horse, and, guiding the animal with his knees, his rifle in his hands, rode out from the shadow of the cedar clump.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

The roar of the rifle awoke a thousand echoes on the prairie. There was a startled bellowing from the cattle and a shouting of alarmed voices. A voice the Kid thought he knew—the voice of Scar-Face Judson—yelled from the darkness.

"Look out! That durned puncher ain't at the hut!"

Bang! Bang! Bang! came the ring of the rustler's revolver, following his words.

It was wild shooting, in the darkness under the dim stars. But if the shooting was not effective on the intended targets it was effective in alarming the herd and stampeding them. A single shot, sometimes, will startle a herd of cows into a stampede. No beasts are quicker to take fright. Trampling and bellowing, horning wildly, the two hundred cows on the Rio Bajo pasture left their resting-place, careering wildly through the night. In the midst of the trampling, tossing herd, and on its skirts, rode the rustlers, cracking their whips like shots, only aiming to keep the herd together and head the stampede in the direction they desired. Cows on all sides left the main herd and escaped in the gloom, but the greater part kept in the bunch, and that bunch was herded towards the hills by the rustlers with cracking whips.

No cowboy, or score of cowboys, could have stopped the stampede, once it had started.

The utmost the herder could have done would have been to ride with the bunch and keep it together, riding with it till it tired, and then hoping to herd it back to its pasture.

But in this case the riders were urging on the stampede with cracking whip and cracking revolver. Only they sought to head it towards the hills, and that was easily in their power. The cows cared nothing which way they rushed, so long as they were allowed to rush free. It was heading them off and stopping them that would have been impossible.

Crack! Crack! Crack! rang quirt and revolver, the sharp reports hardly distinguishable from one another.

The Rio Kid was riding with the stampede, but he was not firing. In the gloom no man could have told friend from foe, and he did not want to drop Posy Pete in mistake for a rustler. Stopping the stampede was impossible, singling out one dark shadow from another in the night was impossible; but the Kid could ride with the herd, and keep up with it, and take his chance of dealing with the rustlers later. Posy Pete was firing, and some of the rustlers losing off shots, and when a bullet whistled by an inch from the Kid's hat he did not know whether it came from friend or foe.

But the firing died suddenly. Posy Pete, baffled by the darkness, rode with the rushing herd, as the Kid was doing, only seeking to keep up with it. And it was no child's play riding with a stampeding herd in the darkness. A rider once down in that sea of tossing hoofs and horns was a dead man—all that was left of him would be an unrecognisable mass in the trampled grass; and a single false step, the catching of a horse's hoof in a gopher hole might mean a fall and sudden destruction. The rustlers and the punchers were taking the same risks, and they had their hands full enough.

A shadowy figure loomed up beside the Kid as he rode. A hoarse voice called to him:

"You, Jud?"

"I guess not," answered the Kid coolly as he clubbed his quirt and swept down the heavy metal butt, and the horseman rolled from his horse with a yell. And the Kid rode on, with one fewer foe to deal with when the time came.



THE GOOD SAMARITAN! Holding the wounded man on his horse, the Rio Kid pushed forward through the deepening dusk towards the ranch. All the ranchers were his foes—but that did not stop the Kid. That wounded man had to be got home! (See Chapter 4.)

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Shot Up!

SCAR-FACE JUDSON swore through his set teeth as he rode with the tossing horns round him, cracking his quirt. It was no part of his plan to stampede the herd. He had hoped to drive the cows from their pasture by stealth, under cover of night, while Posy Pete slept in his bunk in the stockman's hut, or rolled up in his blanket under the stars. In a stampede many head of cattle were certain to be lost to the raiders, and it was a question whether the excited herd could be slowed down in time to suit the rustler. But it could not be helped now. The firing had stampeded the herd and they were going fast. Judson rode with them, cracking his quirt, keeping back, so far as he could, cows that sought to rush out of the main drove, as all his men were doing. He stared through the darkness about him in the midst of a sea of tossing horns and rolling, wild eyes, calling to his men, and watchful for Posy Pete. He knew that the puncher would not be quitting his cows. But one shadowy figure of a horseman was exactly like another; when a man rode by his side he could not have told whether it was Posy Pete or one of his own gang. He swore savagely as he rode.

A horseman came thundering by him, and Jud stared at the rider, unable to pick him out in the dark. But a voice called to him:

"Say, you!"

Posy Pete's finger was on the trigger, but he called before he fired. He did not want to drop his comrade by mistake.

"Keep riding!" called back Judson. The hoarse shout might have come from one of his own men.

Posy Pete threw up his rifle and fired. He knew that that gruff voice was not that of Carfax.

Scar-Face Judson spat out an oath as the bullet tore a strip of skin from his cheek. Heedless of the pain, and of the blood that streamed down his face, the rustler whirled his horse towards the puncher and rode at him, firing as he came. Bang! Bang! bang! rang his heavy Colt, and Posy Pete fired blindly, dropped his rifle, and clung

wildly to his horse as the lead went home. Twice wounded, the cow-puncher was carried on by his rushing horse and vanished from the sight of the rustler, who sent a savage laugh after him as he wiped the blood from his cheek.

"You've got yours, I reckon!" snarled Judson. "And he roared, above the uproar of the stampede: "That puncher's down! All's clear! Slow down the herd as soon as you can, you galoots!"

The shout reached the ears of the Rio Kid, riding in darkness amid tossing horns and the shadowy figures of horsemen.

"Oh, shucks!" snapped the Kid. "They've got Posy Pete—"

In the gloom, a horse came galloping by, with a rider clinging to its neck. The wounded man was crumpled up on the horse's back. But with all that was left of his strength Posy Pete was holding on, knowing full well that if he fell he would be trampled to death without hope. It was only a glimpse of him that the Kid had in the shadows, but he figured that it was Posy Pete, and he dashed in pursuit. In a couple of minutes he was beside the unguided horse, and had caught the loose reins.

"That you, Pete?" snapped the Kid. It might have been a wounded rustler, and the Kid's heavy quirt was ready to dash him from the saddle at a hostile movement. But the deep groan from the wounded rider told him that he had nothing to fear from him, whether he was friend or foe.

The Kid rode closer beside the shadowy figure. He guided the horse away from the press of cattle. A faint voice came from the crumpled rider.

"You Kid Carfax?"

"Yep!"

"They've given me mine!" A groan followed the words. "It was Scar-Face Judson. I saw him in the flash of the gun."

He groaned again, and lurched in the saddle, and would have fallen but for the boy puncher's strong arm that caught him in time and held him.

"Oh, shucks!" growled the Kid.

He had ridden clear of the stampeding herd now, guiding the puncher's horse to safety. Past him in the darkness swept the press of maddened

cattle, bellowing, past him and beyond him. It was with bitter chagrin that the Kid let them go, and did not follow. He had aimed to keep with the herd and with the rustlers, and trail them to the secret place in the hills. But he could not abandon the man who was sinking under his wounds. The roar of the stampede died away in the black distance as the Kid dismounted and lifted the groaning puncher from his saddle.

Posy Pete lay in the thick grass as the light fingers of the Kid groped over him. The Kid could do nothing but staunch the flow of blood and bind up the wounds.

"I reckon you're worth a whole lot of dead galoots yet, feller," said the Kid cheerfully. "It's sure pizen to me to let them rustlers go, but I reckon I aim to get you to the ranch pronto. I guess I'll be able to pick up the trail of that stampede in the daylight, anyhow. You figure that you can hold on if I stick you in the saddle?"

"Yep!"

The Kid swung the wounded man to his horse. Posy Pete was hard hit, and if he was to live he had to get to the ranch without delay. Darkness and silence had already swallowed up the stampeding herd and the rustlers who were riding with it. The Rio Kid turned in the opposite direction—eastward towards the distant ranch.

With a steady hand to his companion the Kid rode. Posy Pete's head had sunk on his chest and he was only half conscious. But for the Kid's hand he would have fallen from the saddle. But the Kid held him, and rode, heading for the ranch. At the ranch all were his foes, and what his reception would be like there the Kid could not tell; but he gave it little thought, he was thinking only of the wounded man lurching helplessly in his saddle. It was in the rosy flush of the sunrise that the Rio Kid came in sight of the Carson ranch and headed for the bunk-house.

THE END.

(What kind of reception will the Rio Kid get when he arrives at the ranch with his wounded companion? Next week's long Western yarn will tell you. Don't miss: "THE SECRET OF THE LOST TRAIL!")

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