

5 COMPLETE STORIES - and Every One a Winner!

The POPULAR

EVERY
TUESDAY.



**IN THE
HANDS of
CANNIBALS!** - AND NO CHANCE OF RESCUE!

*See the Rousing Long Tale of
the Southern Seas inside!*

YOU WANT A THRILL?—THEN READ THIS ROARING TALE OF THE WEST!

A DEBT REPAID!

by RALPH REDWAY



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Camp on the Prairie!

THE Rio Kid lay and listened. Blackness hung over the prairie. Hardly a star gleamed in the dark sky over the camp where the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande lay a prisoner.

Round him lay Cactus Pete and his gang, sleeping in their blankets. The Kid's mustang, tethered close at hand, slept in the thick grass. But the Kid was wakeful.

Ropes were knotted on his sturdy limbs, and a rope held him to a peg driven in the ground, close by the side of Cactus Pete. Escape for the boy outlaw seemed impossible. Twenty miles of rugged prairie lay between him and the cow-town of Blue Pine, whither the gang were taking him when dawn came. The Kid reflected grimly how glad the sheriff of Blue Pine would be to see him. Cactus Pete and his gang, more than suspected of horse-stealing, were not liked in the cow-town, or any other cow-town in Texas; but they would be made right welcome if they brought in such a prisoner as the boy outlaw who had so long defied capture. Horse-stealing and cattle-lifting and maverick-hunting were Cactus Pete's usual game, but the reward of a thousand dollars, offered for the Rio Kid, awaited him if he handed over the Kid to the sheriff of Blue Pine.

At one time in his adventurous career, the Rio Kid saved the life of an outcast Indian Chief, an episode he soon forgot. But Chief Many Ponies has not forgotten, and the time arrives when he is able to repay the debt he owes this young outlaw of Texas!

And the Kid was in his hands, a helpless prisoner.

But the Kid, as he lay, listened. From the darkness surrounding the camp of the horse-thieves, the hoot of the night-owl came to him; a sound of hope to the ears of the Kid. From of old the boy outlaw remembered that signal, and he knew that Chief Many Ponies, the outcast Apache, lurked in the darkness near at hand, seeking to help him. Cool as he was, the Kid's heart was beating fast. Other hope there was none. He had tried his strength on the ropes with which the horse thieves had bound him, and his strength had failed. He lay with aching limbs, a powerless prisoner; awaiting the dawn, when the bunch would hit the trail for Blue Pine; and once the door of the calaboose closed upon him the game was up for the Kid; his long, wild trail at an end. Only that hooting signal from the darkness of the night gave him hope.

The Rio Kid had a wild reputation in

his own country. Many a hold-up and a shooting, of which he had never heard, was laid to his charge. If he had done reckless deeds, he had done also good ones—many a time. He had succored the wounded Apache, cared for him in sickness, saved a life that no other white man would have deemed worth the saving; never expecting to see Chief Many Ponies again, never expecting to be even remembered by him. But it seemed that a kind action was never wasted. In his extremity, it was the outcast Apache, the thief and loafer, who was seeking to save him. Chief Many Ponies had not forgotten.

The hoot of the owl came again from the darkness. It was very near now to the camp of the three horse-thieves.

The Kid listened. If the ruffians round him awakened— What the Apache's intentions were, he could not guess, but all depended on silence and caution. Chief Many Ponies, in his day, had been a great warrior, but that day was long past. The outcast, the drunken hanger-on of the cow-town saloons, was no warrior now. If the horse-thieves awakened, on their guard, the Apache had little chance of helping the Kid. For that reason, the Kid made no response

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to the signal repeated again and again by the unseen, creeping Redskin. The slightest sound might have given the alarm.

There was a stirring in the blankets, and the Kid set his teeth. One, at least, of the ruffians had awakened.

Cactus Pete sat up, with a sleepy grunt.

The Kid lay still, listening with painful intentness. But the creeping Indian in the darkness was on his guard; he had heard some slight sound, and the hoot of the owl was silent.

Cactus Pete jerked himself out of his blankets and groped to the Kid. He had little doubt, however, of his prisoner's safety, but caution was second nature with the horse-thief. And he knew, as every galoot in Texas knew, how very slippery a customer was the Rio Kid.

His rough hand groped over the prisoner, feeling the knotted ropes, and he gave another grunt, peering at the Kid in the darkness.

"I guess you're safe, darn your hide," "You've said it!" answered the Kid coolly. "I guess no guy would get out of this rope in a hurry. Say, feller, you don't feel any hunch to let a galoot loose to get a little sleep?"

Cactus Pete chuckled hoarsely. "I guess not! I ain't taking any chances with you, Kid! Your hide is worth a thousand dollars to me."

"You sure are a pizen skunk, feller," said the Kid. "I guess there's more agin you, than agin me, if the sheriff of Blue Pine knowed all about you."

"Mebbe," said Cactus Pete, "but that don't cut no ice, Kid! There's a reward out for you, and there ain't none for me—and I guess all the guys in Blue Pine will be powerful glad to see me when I tote you in and hand you over."

"Dog don't eat dog, as a rule!" urged the Kid.

"Forget it!" jeered Cactus Pete, "and it ain't only the reward, Kid. I got a grouch agin you, darn you. You bulldozed me at Frio, dog-gone you; you was one that lent a hand when I was rid out of the town on a rail."

"I'd sure lend a hand agin," said the Kid, "and, more willing still, I'd lend a hand to put a rope round your pizen neck."

"I guess it's your own neck that will get a necktie, Kid," chuckled Cactus Pete; "they won't waste time on you at Blue Pine to-morrow. You won't stay long in the calaboose, I reckon. The boys will string you up to a cottonwood in short order."

"They ain't got me yet!" said the Kid.

"You reckon you'll get away from this?" sneered Cactus Pete. He groped over the Kid's bonds again, to make sure once more. "You're a darned slippery cuss, Kid, and when the sheriffs arter you you surely do get into a hole and pull it in arter you. But I got you by the short hairs now. If we hadn't lost our cayuses, I'd have had you at Blue Pine already—you'd have gone up at the end of a rista this hyer night, Kid. Dog-gone that Redskin!"

Cactus Pete swore savagely.

It was the loss of the horses that had compelled the gag to camp that night on the prairie. On foot the going was slow and hard.

The Kid smiled softly.

He, as well as the rustlers, had been puzzled by the killing of the horses, in the timber, fifteen miles behind the present camp. But he knew now why the lurking Redskin had killed the horses, sparing only the Kid's own mustang; now that he had heard the signal from Chief Many Ponies. And he knew, what

the horse-thieves did not suspect, that the lurking Indian of the timber had followed the trail of the bunch, and was now close at hand—probably within hearing of their voices at this moment, hidden in darkness.

Cactus Pete peered at him, and swore again.

"You'd have gone up already, dog-gone you, if we hadn't got to hoof it to Blue Pine! But we'll get you there to-morrow safe enough, Kid! Don't you make any mistake about that."

There was a movement from the other two ruffians: the voices had awakened them. Kansas and Laredo Jim sat up in their blankets.

"What's the lookus?" mumbled Kansas.

"Just looking at that darned fire-bug to make sure he's safe," answered Cactus Pete.

"I guess he's O.K.," said Laredo Jim. "He sure is."

Cactus Pete returned to his blankets. The three ruffians settled down to sleep again. And the Kid breathed more freely. No sound had come from the Redskin, lurking in the darkness close to the camp; not one of the bunch had any suspicion of his presence. They were sleeping again, and the Kid, wakeful, watchful, lay and listened.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Hand of the Apache!

THE faint rustle that came to the Kid's ears, in the long grass amid which the bunch were camped, might have been caused by the wind that stirred on the prairie towards the approach of dawn.

But the Rio Kid did not think so.

Silent, motionless, he lay and strained his ears. It might have been the wind, so light was the faint rustling; but it was not the wind. The creeping Indian was close at hand, and the Kid's heart beat faster. Cactus Pete and his gang were sleeping, deep in slumber after that weary tramp over the rugged plains. They had awakened once, but they showed no sign of waking again. Only the Kid awakened—and listened. And a black shadow, blacker than the darkness, passed before his eyes.

He did not stir.

Only softly, faintly, from his lips, fell the imitation of the night-owl's hoot, the signal that Chief Many Ponies knew. It was to tell the Redskin where he lay—which of the recumbent figures was a friend among the foes.

The soft sound, faintly audible for a moment, died away, and all was deeply silent again. But the Kid knew that the Redskin had heard it, and understood.

Silence!

The Kid felt a shudder creep through his limbs. What was the creeping Redskin doing in the silence, the darkness? Knife in hand, Chief Many Ponies was there to help his friend; and even had he desired, he would not have dared to waken the ruffians. Awake, any one of them would have been too much for the Apache: any one of them would have grasped a six-gun and riddled him with bullets. And treachery was the Redskin way: even had it not been needed, the Apache would have chosen to slay his enemies by stealth. What was happening close by the Kid in the darkness, unheard, unseen?

Almost it was upon the Kid's lips to cry out, to warn the ruffians of their peril, to send the stealthy Redskin scuttling back into the dark prairie. They were horse-thieves, rustlers, ruffians; but they were white men. They were of his

own race—and the call of blood was strong to any white man. And it was only one consideration that held the Kid silent, though his own life was in the balance. They had taken him, not because he was an outlaw, but because there was a price on his head—they had taken him for blood-money; they were dragging him to death because of the price on his life! They were human wolves, deeper down in the scale of humanity than the stealthy Indian whose knife was bared to shed their blood. To give them warning, and for gratitude to be handed over to the sheriff and his rope—the Kid figured that that was not good enough. And he shut his teeth hard, and was silent.

A faint sound came from the gloom—a sound that made the blood chill in the Kid's veins, in spite of his iron nerve. The sound was faint, but he knew what it implied.

Faint as it was, it stirred Cactus Pete in his slumber. The rustler slept like a wolf, with an ear open.

There was a sudden movement as Cactus Pete threw aside his blanket and started to his feet.

"What the thunder—!" came his stiff, savage voice.

The next moment he yelled furiously: "Injuns! Wake, you ginks, wake! Injuns!"

Bang! Bang!

His six-gun roared into the night.

There was a scuttling sound, a rustling of high, dry grass. The Redskin was gone. From the darkness far out on the plain came a yell—a yell to freeze the blood; the fierce war-whoop of the Apache. Loud and savage, throbbing with blood-thirst and ferocity, the Indian's yell rang through the night. The throbbing echoes died away, and all was silent again on the shadowed plains: but from the camp came crash after crash of revolver-fire, bullets whizzing right and left in the gloom. Two of the rustlers were firing fast and fiercely, blazing away hurried bullets in their rage and alarm; but the third lay still in his blankets, without sound or motion.

"Let up!" snarled Cactus Pete at last. "I guess that Red's got clear! The darned skunk's made his get-away!"

"The dog-gone pesky scallywag!" growled Kansas. "I reckon that'll be the Red who killed our cayuses in the timber way back, Pete. He's sure followed our trail."

He peered down at the still figure in the blankets.

"Jim! Dog-gone him, he ain't woke, with all that shootin' and yellin'. What's got hold of Laredo Jim?"

Cactus Pete swore savagely.

"I guess that Injun got him afore he woke."

"Thunder!"

Kansas dragged the blankets from the figure of the rustler. There was no sound or movement from Laredo Jim.

"Dead!" breathed Kansas.

"He's sure got his!" said Cactus Pete, leaning down and scanning the face of Laredo Jim, dim and white in the gloom. "The Injun got him, sure."

He touched the still figure, and his fingers came away crimson. There was a deep knife-wound in the throat of the rustler. Only one faint cry had escaped Laredo Jim as the Indian's blade went home, but that faint cry had saved the lives of his associates. But for that sound that had alarmed Cactus Pete, the knife of the Apache would have claimed other victims. Well they could guess what the Redskin's intention had

been when he crept in the darkness to the sleeping camp.

Kansas shuddered, and cast uneasy glances round into the darkness, gripping his revolver.

"He's got Jim," he muttered, "jest like he got Pawnee Bill, way back in the timber! He see Jim! He'd have got us—"

"Dog-gone him!" Cactus Pete ground his teeth and threw another random shot into the darkness. "Durn him, what's his game—what's he got agin us? We ain't had no trouble with any Red, 'ceptin' them Yaquis we shot up down in the Rio Grande country, and there ain't no Yaquis hyer. That was an Apache yell he gave after he levanted. I guess I know the Apache yell; I've heard it in the Staked Plain. We ain't had no trouble with Apaches. Dog-gone him, what's he got this grouch for?"

Kansas did not answer. He was staring round in the darkness, fearful of seeing the glittering eyes and coppery face of a Redskin looming up in the gloom.

Cactus Pete remembered his prisoner, whom in the excitement he had forgotten. He stepped towards the Kid.

"Thunder! If that Red's got the Kid, too— I guess it's likely enough—him tied hand and foot."

guess I've known it happen afore. Thunder! If he's, in sight when the daylight comes—"

"I guess he won't be," said Kansas. "And I'm sure glad that we'll strike Blue Pine afore sundown to-morrow. I guess I don't want another night camping on the prairie, with that wild Red buck loose."

"Dog-gone him, we may get him at dawn!"

There was already a glimmer of light in the east.

To the two horse-thieves the coming of daylight meant safety and relief from watching and terror. But it did not bring hope to the Kid. With the rising of the sun over the rolling prairie,

said Kansas. "He wouldn't hang on arter daylight. He's gone."

Cactus Pete nodded, and thrust his six-gun back into the holster.

"I reckon he's hit the horizon," he assented. "Durn him! I'd give a heap



THE KID'S PERIL! Headless of the prisoner, dragged with bump on bump at the end of the rope, Cactus Pete spurred the grey mustang madly, driving him to a furious gallop. Behind the horse, the Kid was mercilessly dragged.

(See Chapter 3.)

The Kid smiled in the darkness.

"I guess I'm still to home, feller," he said. "Say, what's all this hyer rookus about? Was that an Injun?"

"It sure was an Injun," growled Cactus Pete, relieved to find that his prisoner was still alive, "and I guess if I hadn't wakened, you'd hev gone on the long trail with us, durn you!"

"I sure wouldn't have any kick coming, feller," drawled the Kid. "My prospects ain't bright for to-morrow, they sure ain't."

"Can it!" growled Pete.

There was no more sleep for the horse-thieves that night. While the last hour of darkness slowly crawled by they sat gun in hand, watching, eyes and ears on the alert. A faint rustle, a shifting shadow, was enough to draw a hurried alarmed shot from them. But of the Redskin nothing was seen or heard, and they had little doubt that he was far from the camp.

But they dared not close their eyes. Why the Redskin was trailing them ruthlessly and deadly, was a puzzle to the two ruffians. Of Chief Many Ponies, and his old comradeship with the Rio Kid, they knew nothing.

"Some buck broken out of the reservation, I guess, and hunting for trouble," said Cactus Pete at last. "I

the Kid came near to giving up hope. The Redskin had struck—one of the horse-thieves lay dead in the grass. But in the daylight he could never venture under the guns of the white men; and it would be yet daylight when Cactus Pete and Kansas led the grey mustang into Blue Pine with the Rio Kid a prisoner. Chief Many Ponies had tried to help the paleface

who had befriended him but he had, after all, failed. With grim ruthlessness the Redskin had aimed to wipe out the bunch and relieve the Kid of his foes; but only one of the three had perished under his stealthy knife; and now that day had come the Apache could do no more. He would follow the trail again, the Kid reckoned; but it would only be to see the boy outlaw toted into Blue Pine and handed over to the sheriff. The Kid's face was grim as the golden sun shot up above the horizon and the light of day streamed down once more on the Texas prairie.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
In Ambush!

CACTUS PETE, with knitted brows, stared round over the grassy plain in the rising light of the sun. He did not reckon that the Redskin had lingered near the camp where he had done so fearful a deed, to face the vengeance of the two surviving rustlers. But he had a savage hope that he might yet be at hand—within range of a bullet. With keen eyes he scanned the prairie. But only the vast spaces of waving grass met his searching eyes. There was no sign of the Redskin.

"I guess he's absquatulated, Pete,"

of dollars to draw a bead on his red hide!"

He stared round once more on the boundless prairie. There were hollows in the plain, ridges and hillocks of rough, high grass. It was possible, if not likely, that the Redskin was hidden in some nook of the prairie not far away from the camp. It was possible that, from cover in the high grass, he was watching the rustlers at that moment. And they knew that he had a revolver, taken from the man he had killed in the timber the day before.

"We want to watch out," growled Cactus Pete. "I reckon the skunk's gone, but we want to keep our eyes peeled. It's all of twenty miles to Blue Pine, and we mayn't meet up with any guy afore we hit the town. I reckon what's happened to Jim has made me feel some uneasy."

"I guess he's levanted," answered Kansas.

The two rustlers kept their eyes about them as they ate their breakfast before taking the trail. The meal did not delay them long. The hour was yet early, the sun only a little above the rim of the prairie, when they packed the "truck" on the back of the grey mustang and prepared to hit the trail. The Rio Kid was jerked roughly to his feet.

Cactus Pete unfastened the rope from his legs. His arms remained bound to his sides as before, but his legs had to be freed for him to walk. The Kid staggered as he was stood on his feet, and Cactus Pete grasped him roughly by the shoulder and steadied him.

"Stand up, dog-gone you!" he growled. "You got a long pasear afore you this morning, you galoot!"

The Kid shut his teeth to keep back

a sound of pain. His cramped legs were aching from the rope, his arms were almost numb. His eyes gleamed like steel at the rustlers.

"Beat it!" snapped Kansas.

He led the grey mustang, with its load, away from the camp. Side-kicker turned his head, looking back at his master. Kansas jerked savagely at the bridle and dragged him on.

"Git!" snarled Cactus Pete.

He gave the Kid a violent shove, and the boy outlaw started on his way, following the mustang. His aching legs almost crumpled beneath him, but he made an effort to keep on. He was in merciless hands. As he stumbled over the rough ground, Cactus Pete grasped his quirt, swung it through the air, and brought it down with a crash across the Kid's shoulders.

"Now beat it, dog-gone you!" he roared. "You figure that we're hanging about on the prerar all day, waiting for you, Kid? Beat it, darn you, or I'll sure quit you like an ornery steer!"

"Gee!" said the Kid between his teeth, his eyes burning at the ruffian. "I guess I was plumb loco not to shoot you up, Cactus Pete, that time in the San Pedro country; I sure was!"

"Git!" roared the ruffian, and the quirt came down across the Kid's shoulders again with a savage crack.

The Kid stumbled on his way. But his aching legs yielded under him and he fell in the grass.

Kansas looked back. He was already at a distance with the grey mustang.

"Say, you ginks, you coming?" he shouted.

Cactus Pete answered with an oath. "Bring that cayuse back here, Kansas. I guess I'll run a riata from him to this dog-goned guy, and if he won't walk he'll be dragged."

"You've said it," grinned Kansas.

He led the mustang back. A rope, run from the saddle, was knotted round the Kid's waist. Cactus Pete dragged him up again.

"Now hit the trail!" he snarled.

"It's your say-so!" said the Kid between his teeth. "Bat, by thunder, if I get a dog's chance at you, Cactus Pete—"

"Drive that critter on, Kansas!" snarled Cactus Pete.

"You bet!" grinned Kansas.

He mounted the grey mustang, gathered up the reins and drove the horse onward. The drag of the rope pulled the Kid forward. He stumbled after the horse, succeeding now in keeping his footing on the rough ground. Cactus Pete followed him, cursing savagely.

"I reckoned I'd make you hump it," he said. "I guess you ain't got any hunch to hit Blue Pine in a hurry, Kid; but I reckon you're hitting that cow-town afore noon, all the same. Beat it, darn you, or I'll give you the quirt again!"

The Kid, in silence, stumbled on after the horse. Cactus Pete strode behind him, quirt in hand. There was no trail marked on the prairie, but the horse-thieves knew the country, and they headed direct for the distant cow-town. The way lay through a hollow between two high grassy swells of the prairie. Deep in the hollow was a swampy pool, the margin marked by the tracks of cattle that came there to drink, and the grassy bluffs on either side were patched with straggling thickets of mesquite and post-oak.

Again and again the grey mustang looked round at his master stumbling behind, as if in perplexity. But each

time Kansas dragged savagely at the reins, and gave the horse a cut with his quirt. The Kid grunted his teeth as a squall of pain from Side-kicker reached him. More than his own mis-usage the Kid resented the mis-usage of his faithful mustang. But he was helpless and he could only store up anger and vengeance in his heart.

A mile, two miles, passed under the tramping feet, and the bunch entered the hollow between the grassy bluffs. Behind, in the camp, where the body of Laredo Jim had been left, the snarling of coyotes followed them till they were out of hearing.

In the hollow of the prairie, where shallow water gleamed in the sun through patches of thicket, the mustang would have turned aside from the way to reach the water. Again Kansas dragged at the reins and lashed with the quirt and drove him on.

Suddenly the rider of the grey mustang gave a start and clapped his hand to his side. The Kid, seeing the action, stared at him—Cactus Pete stared blankly. The dull echo of a report from somewhere in the straggling mesquite was heard a second later—the report following the shot that had struck Kansas to the heart. Heavily, with hardly a cry, the ruffian pitched from the saddle of the mustang and slumped into the grass.

Cactus Pete gave a gasping cry.

"Kansas! By thunder!"

He tore the revolver from his belt and glared round him with wild, startled eyes. The next moment, with a bound, he reached Side-kicker and placed the horse between him and the direction from whence the shot had come.

"Kansas!" he shouted.

But there was no reply from the fallen man. The bullet from the mesquite was in his heart, and the rustler had been dead ere he struck the ground.

"By thunder, Kansas has gone up!" muttered Cactus Pete, and, six-gun in hand, he glared over the back of the snelting horse, searching for the enemy who had fired.

But no enemy was to be seen. The man who had shot Kansas from the back of the mustang lay in cover in the straggling thickets.

"The Injun!" muttered Cactus Pete.

The Rio Kid's eyes were dancing.

He had given up hope of seeing Chief Many Ponies after the camp was struck and his captors headed for the cow-town. But the Apache had not abandoned him.

"Gee," murmured the Kid gleefully, "that Injun sure is some galoot! He sure is! I guess he figured that them pizen skunks was heading for Blue Pine. And he got ahead of them on the trail! Gee!"

Cactus Pete, glaring with rage and alarm, stared round for the enemy. He, too, like the Kid, had no doubt that it was the unknown Redskin again. The cunning Apache, figuring that the horse-thieves were heading for the cow-town with their prisoner, had lain in wait in cover among the mesquite in the hollow between the grassy bluffs. One of the rustlers had gone down under his fire and lay dead in the grass. Cactus Pete, the last of the horse-thief gang, stood gun in hand, covered by the halbed mustang, with fury in his face and fear in his heart.

"If that Injun breaks cover—" muttered Cactus Pete hoarsely.

He watched like a cat. The Kid looked round him anxiously. In open gun-play, gun to gun, he knew that a Redskin had little chance against a gunman like Cactus Pete. But Chief Many

Ponies knew that as well as the Kid, and he did not break cover. Neither did he pull trigger again. A shot would have guided return fire from the watchful rustler. Silence lay on the grassy hollow between the prairie bluffs, tense and deadly silence.

The horse-thief muttered curses while he watched and waited. His glance roved unasily across his shoulder.

The Kid read his thoughts, for the same thought was in his own mind. Chief Many Ponies was silent—but he was not inactive. The mustang stood between Cactus Pete and the direction whence had come the shot that had struck down Kansas. But the Kid knew, and Cactus Pete suspected, that the wily Indian, keeping in the cover of the straggling bushes, was circling round the hollow to take the gun-men from behind. Every minute that passed added to Cactus Pete's danger of getting his fire from a new direction.

The ruffian gritted his teeth. He gave the Rio Kid a deadly glare.

"I guess I'm hitting the trail!" he muttered. "I'm sure lighting out of this, and you can take your chance at the end of the rope, darn you. Dead or alive, I'll tote you into Blue Pine."

He holstered his revolver, and gave one searching glance round the wide grassy hollow. Then he leaped into the saddle, grasped the reins, and spurred the grey mustang savagely. The startled horse leaped forward, and the drag of the rope tore the Kid from his feet.

heedless of the prisoner, dragged with bump on bump at the end of the rope, Cactus Pete spurred the grey mustang madly, driving him to a furious gallop. Behind the galloping horse, the Kid was mercilessly dragged. There was no more mercy in the heart of the scared ruffian than in a wolf's. It was death to the Kid—it was a dead man that the fleeing ruffian would have dragged behind him over the rugged prairie, had that wild ride gone on.

But the dazed, half-stunned Kid felt a sudden cessation of the drag of the rope.

With dizzy brain, the Kid lay in the grass, his breath, almost his senses, knocked out of him; only knowing that he was still, that the rope no longer dragged, and then gradually becoming aware that the muzzle of his faithful mustang was nuzzling him as he lay. Side-kicker was at his side, his intelligent eyes gleaming at his master; and the Kid dizzily saw that the saddle was empty; but he had not even heard the shot that had hurled Cactus Pete from his seat.

"Old hoss!" gasped the Kid, as his brain cleared. "Old hoss, that was a close call, it sure was!"

He struggled to a sitting posture in the grass, and stared wildly round him. On his ears burst a wild discordant sound—the yell of the Apache. Chief Many Ponies, in his tattered blanket, the draggled feather in his matted locks, was speeding towards him, knife in hand. A moment more and the Redskin's knife slid over the ropes, and the Rio Kid was free.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Hitting the Trail!

"**W**AH! It is good!" granted the Apache.

The Rio Kid stretched his aching limbs.

The Apache crouched in the thick grass by his side, his black eyes watching, gleaming. As the Kid would have risen to his feet, the bronze hand of the Indian held him back.

Bong!

From across the hollow came the roar of a six-gun. The bullet hummed by over the head of the Rio Kid.

"Search me!" said the Kid. He understood. The Indian had shot at Cactus Pete as he galloped, and the ruffian had fallen from the mustang. But the horse-thief was still to be reckoned with.

The Kid's eyes gleamed. "Injun," he said, "I guess I'm powerful glad to see you, and you've sure done me a good turn. But jest leave that pizen skunk Cactus Pete to me. I sure want to handle that dog-goned geck."

Chief Many Ponies nodded. "My brother has spoken," he said, with a solemn dignity that contrasted strangely with his tatters. "It is good!"

Bang! bang! came the roar of the six-gun. Cactus Pete was firing desperately. He lay where he had fallen from the mustang, a dozen yards away. There was a streak of crimson across his savage, bearded face, from which the blood flowed. The Indian's bullet, intended for his brain, had missed by inches, with the horseman in rapid motion; it had gashed across the gunman's face, and the shock had hurled him from the saddle, leaving the grey mustang to run free. But the wound was slight. The ruffian was far from disabled. And in rage and terror he pumped out bullets from his six-gun in the direction where the Rio Kid and the Redskin lay in the grass. Even yet, the ruffian did not guess that it was the Kid's rescue that the Redskin intended, and he had no doubt that the Apache had sunk into the grass beside the Kid, to drive his knife to the heart of the boy outlaw. And then would come his own turn—unless his six-gun saved him. He fired again and again, till an empty click warned him that his gun was expended, and then he hurriedly reloaded, fearing a rush. With the reloaded gun gripped in his hand, he crouched in the grass, waiting, watching, in terror and rage.

"Say, you gink!" Cactus Pete started violently. It was the Kid's voice that called. The ruffian realised that he had not fallen under the knife of the Redskin, who had sunk down in the high thick grass beside him.

"You dog-goned, pesky skunk!" came the Kid's voice. "You hear me, you pizen polecat!"

Cactus Pete panted hoarsely. The truth dawned on his mind at last; the Kid, helpless within reach of the Apache's knife, still lived. It was to save the Kid, that the Apache had trailed the bunch of horse-thieves. Cactus Pete understood now.

"You durned fire-bug!" he yelled back desperately. "Come out in the open, darn you, and I guess I'll give you yours."

The Kid chuckled. "I guess I'm coming, you pizen snake," he said, "I'm coming, you coyote, and I'm coming a-shooting."

Silently the Redskin passed the revolver to the Rio Kid. The Kid's own guns were in the holsters on the mustang. But it was a good Colt that the Kid gripped in his hand, and his fingers closed joyfully on the butt. He was a free man again, with a six-gun in his hand, and his long and bitter score was about to be settled.

"Come out, dog-gone you!" howled Cactus Pete, in the desperation of terror. "I guess I'm waiting."

"I sure won't keep you waiting," called back the Kid. "I'm coming a-shooting, Cactus Pete!"

He leaped up from the cover of the

high grass, and ran towards the rustler, firing as he went. One hurried shot that flew wild and wide came from Cactus Pete, and then the ruffian's courage petered out, and he sprang up from the grass, holding his hands above his head.

"Let up, Kid!" he panted. The Kid's eyes blazed at him. The revolver was aimed at the face of the ruffian who stood with his hands up.

"You durned pesky polecat!" yelled the Kid. "Take a holt of your gun, you yellow coyote, afore I shoot you up in your tracks! Ain't I giving you an even break, you lobo-wolf!"

But Cactus Pete stood with his hands above his head. He dared not grip his gun with the deadliest shot in Texas holding a Colt in his hand before him.

The Kid, with a muttered curse, lowered his gun.

"You pizen skunk," he said, "I guess you get away with it, but, by thunder, I'll quirt you afore you beat it."

He picked up the rustler's guns, and pitched them into the shallow water of the pool in the hollow. Chief Many Ponies glided up, knife in hand, his eyes intent on the rustler. There was a yell of terror from Cactus Pete.

"Let up, Injun!" said the Kid. "Dog-gone you, stick that rib-tickler in your leggings! You ain't carving that galoot. Let up, I'm telling you." He pushed the Redskin back.

"Wah!" grunted the Apache. "Heap good kill."

The Kid grinned. "I guess you're right, Injun; but you ain't carving a white man. Let up, feller!"

The Indian unwillingly stood back, his black eyes wolfishly on the rustler. The Rio Kid took a quirt in his hand. "You durned lobo-wolf," he said.

"You was powerful handy with this, and I guess you're going to get what was coming to you."

For a good ten minutes, the Rio Kid was busy; till his strong arm ached again, while Cactus Pete yelled and howled and writhed under the lashes.

Chief Many Ponies looked on grimly. His way would have been to drive a knife to his enemy's heart.

With a heavy hand, the Kid laid on the quirt, while the horse-thief howled and writhed, and when he ceased at last, Cactus Pete lay groaning in the grass.

"I guess that lets you out!" growled the Kid. "I guess I sure ought to send you after your dog-goned pards, you pesky skunk; but I reckon you won't forget that quirting in a hurry!"

He turned his back on the groaning ruffian.

Under the blazing sun, a horseman, mounted on a grey mustang, rode across the rolling prairie, and by the side of the mustang loped an Indian in a tattered blanket, keeping pace with the horse with the tirelessness of a Redskin. The Rio Kid and Chief Many Ponies went together; together, for the time, the outcast Apache and the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had cast in their lots.

It was sundown when a dusty, haggard, tottering figure limped into the cow-town of Blue Pine. What Cactus Pete had to tell, caused a hurried hunt for the Rio Kid. But they hunted for him in vain; night and the prairie had swallowed the Kid.

THE END.

(Next week's issue of the POPULAR contains another roaring long complete yarn of the Rio Kid. "AMBUSHED!" is a story you mustn't miss reading.)



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