

The sheriff's posse is hot on the trail of the Rio Kid—yet this young boy outlaw stops and attends a wounded puncher. It is not the first time the Kid has played the Good Samaritan—but it is the first time he has met with such painful consequences as a result of such gallantry!



Don't miss this powerful yarn of Western adventure—starring the Rio Kid, Boy Outlaw!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Red Harris!

THE blows of the quirt came to the Rio Kid's ears, like the cracking of successive pistol-shots, and at every sounding crack, his brow grew blacker and blacker, and his eyes glinted more ominously.

Yet he did not stir.

Interfering between any galoot and his cayuse was against the code of the cow country. Neither was the Kid, though he loved a horse like a brother, a soft guy. More than once, when he had backed an "outlaw" bronc, the Kid had used a quirt with a heavy hand, as heavy a hand as was needed. When rough measures were necessary, the Kid could use them. So, for a time, the Kid did not heed the cracking of the heavy thong on the squealing broncho; it was a sound too common in the cow country to draw particular attention.

And when he heeded, at last, he did not stir.

Unnecessary cruelty to a horse got the Kid's goat surely. But the unwritten laws of cow-land held him quiet. Between a man and his critter, no other man must intervene.

But the slow anger of the Kid was rising and rising, and reaching white heat. Sooner or later, he knew, if this game did not stop, he would chip in.

and if he went to the length of chipping in, against all a cowman's principles, he surely was going to give that guy with the red beard something to remember him by.

The Kid was sprawling in the shade of the stockman's hut, on a lonely range, by the Rio Pocos. His mustang

who watched the herds in that part of the range. Days and nights the cowman would spend alone on the range, riding the plains by day, sleeping in the solitary hut at night; for a week or more, until relieved by the next man on duty. A lonely life—and any man on an outlying range was naturally glad when a guy dropped in, so had the

stockman been at home, the Kid would have expected a welcome—not mentioning, of course, that he happened to be the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw for whom a reward of a thousand dollars was out. But the stockman was away, and the Kid camped for noon there, cooked his provender at the iron stove in the hut, and took his siesta in the shade of the pine-wood wall.

The sound of approach was enough to awaken the Kid. His opening eyes fell on the man with the red beard, who was riding up to the hut from the boundless prairie. The Kid figured that it was the stockman coming back, and

and he did not move. But he watched with interest. The broncho ridden by the red-bearded guy was giving trouble; a new horse not yet in hand, the Kid reckoned. Within a short distance of the hut, the rider dismounted, and tethered the bronc to the stump of a pecan. His attention was so wholly taken up with the recalcitrant horse, that he did not observe the Kid sitting

The PUNCHER of BLUE BIRD RANCH!

RALPH REDWAY

was in the corral attached to the hut. The Kid had ridden up that morning, and found the place vacant, and had made himself at home, in the free and easy way of the Texas ranch-hands. The hut, he figured, belonged to the Blue Bird Ranch, which ran for many a score of miles in that region. It lay at least twenty miles from the ranch-house; a shelter for the lone cowman.

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there in the shade of the wall. Having tethered the broncho, the red-bearded man set to work with the quirt. His face was full of bitter anger and malice, as he rained blows on the animal.

Like pistol-shots the blows rang and cracked, sending echoes far across the prairie. The hapless broncho reared and kicked, and squealed, but he had been tethered short, and the man kept well out of the way of snapping teeth and lunging hoofs. And all the time he lashed and lashed, and the broncho squealed; and the Kid looked on, with darker and darker brow.

A bucking cayuse might need a severe quirting, even a savage quirting, and the Kid was not squeamish. But this was sheer cruelty and malice. The brute was wreaking a savage rage on the helpless animal, and that kind of game got the Kid's goat. More and more the Kid felt that he would have to chip in. He hated to do it; a galoot's cayuse was a galoot's cayuse. But there was a limit, and the guy with the red beard had got to the limit, the Kid reckoned. He was not going to sit quiet and see a horse tortured.

And when, at last, the Kid made up his mind to horn in, he rose to his feet, and hitched his holster round a little, to bring a gun within easy reach of his hand. The red-bearded guy looked a fairly tough specimen, but tough or not, no man in Texas was likely to take such intervention smiling. The Kid, when he decided what to do, naturally expected gun-play to follow.

So the walnut butt of a gun, in the tied-down holster, was quite near the Kid's hand, as he strolled across towards the evil-faced man who was still savagely beating the horse.

"Say, bo!" called out the Kid. There was a sudden cessation of the pistol-like cracks of the quirt. The man spun round towards the Kid, the quirt dropped, and he grabbed at a gun as if by instinct. It was rather sudden, the Kid reckoned, as the galoot could not have known, yet, that he was going to horn in. But sudden as it was, it did not take the Kid by surprise. His gun was looking at the red-bearded face before the man had freed his Colt from his belt.

"Let up!" said the Kid laconically. The man relinquished the gun. His evil eyes stared at the Kid, taking him in. What he saw was a handsome, sunburnt young puncher, with silken neck-scarf, and goatskin chaps, and a band of silver nuggets round his Stetson hat, and silver spurs on his high-heeled riding-boots. The Kid made a handsome picture, standing there in the sunlight—a striking contrast to the burly, rough-bearded man in his dirty blue woollen shirt and leather crackers. But that handsome picture evidently had no placating effect on the broncho-buster. He scowled savagely at the Kid as he dropped his hand from his gun.

"That's better, feller," smiled the Kid, and his own gun went home at once. "You don't want to handle your hardware. Say! You the guy that belongs to this shebang?"

The man started. "Sure!" he answered, after a pause. "You're sure lathering that bronco some," remarked the Kid. "I guess I can handle that cayuse as I darned well choose!" snarled the red-bearded man.

"Up to a point, feller, up to a point," said the Kid amiably. "I reckon you've shot past the point."

"Mind your own business, darn your hide."

"You've hurt that critter," said the Kid quietly. "You've given him too

much, though I allow he was cavorting some. You was going to give him more! Well, you ain't getting away with it! I'm stopping you."

The man's hand crept towards his gun again.

The Kid did not seem to notice it. His gaze was on the man's eyes. The Kid was an old hand at that game. He never watched a man's hand, like a tenderfoot. He knew from a galoot's eyes when he was going to draw.

"Generally," said the Kid, in the same amiable tone. "I ain't any hunch for hornin' in between a man and his critter. That ain't my style. But I guess I'm doing jest that now. You want to know that I'm going to take that quirt to you, and give you some of what you've given that cayuse, and then I'm going to shoo the critter off—and I guess you ain't likely to see him again soon. You get me?"

The gun flashed out of the red-bearded man's belt.

Crack!

It was the Kid who fired, from the hip, without troubling to lift the gun. The red-bearded man gave a fearful howl, as the revolver spun from his hand, a spurt of blood going with it.

The Kid smiled.

"I warned you, feller," he murmured. "You sure ain't sudden enough on the draw to try that game, though I allow you ain't slow. You trying it on agin?"

A stream of curses was the only reply, as the man sucked at his bleeding hand. A strip of skin had been torn away by the bullet that had lifted the revolver from his grasp.

The Kid grinned, and holstered his gun.

"I guess swearing won't buy you anything, feller," he remarked. "You ready to take your medicine, you wall-eyed, ornery, bone-headed scallywag."

He picked up the quirt the ruffian had dropped.

"Dog-gone you!" hissed the man with the red beard. "Dog-gone you, I guess—"

He broke off with a savage yell, as the quirt came down with a crash across the blue woollen shirt.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

The quirt rang on the ruffian, as a few minutes before it had been ringing on the heaving flanks of the tethered broncho.

The Kid struck, and struck hard. He had no mercy on the man who tortured a horse. He had been driven to horn in, against all the laws and customs of the cow country, and his idea was that the guy should pay for it. And so the Kid laid on the quirt with a heavy hand.

The ruffian yelled and dodged, and howled for mercy. Once he made a spring at the Kid with a drawn knife. But the quirt lashed the weapon from his hand, and a lash across the face drove him yelling back. Again and again the leather thong crashed, till the screaming ruffian fairly turned and ran. The Kid strode after him, still lashing, till he took to his heels at frantic speed, and vanished into the prairie.

Then the Kid carelessly tossed the quirt away.

He turned to the broncho tethered to the pecan stump. The animal, lathered with sweat and blood, reared and cavorted in frantic fear. But the Kid had a way with horses, and in a few minutes he had the broncho quiet, untied him, and led him into the corral. There, under the hot sunshine, the Kid spent an hour or more tending the hurt animal, after which he let him loose on the plain—fully assured that whosoever he wandered, it would not be

into the keeping of the galoot who had so cruelly used him. The animal, as soon as he was free, loped away in the direction from which the red-bearded man had ridden him up to the stockman's hut, and disappeared in the distant grass. And the Kid stretched himself by the shady wall again, to rest in lazy ease till the sun went down and he could resume his trail in the cool of the evening.

THE SECOND CHAPTER

The Good Samaritan!

"SEARCH me!" murmured the Rio Kid.

Lying lazily against the pine boards of the hut, idly looking over the sea of grass that stretched before his eyes, the Kid wondered.

Long ago, the dismounted man with the red beard had vanished into the prairie. Long since, the riderless broncho had disappeared to the south. Vast and lonely the prairie stretched round the lone stockman's hut, with no living thing in the Kid's sight, save his own mustang in the corral—excepting certain black dots in the sky, which eyes less keen than the Kid's would not have taken for living things. But the Kid knew what they were—the zopilotes—the black vultures that were the scavengers of the plains. Far to the south—the direction the loosened horse had taken—those black dots gathered, dropping to the earth one after another, and all in the same spot.

The Kid knew, of course, what that meant—a dead or dying man or beast on the plain, and the obscene birds gathering to a hideous feast.

And he was wondering.

He had taken the blue-shirted man with the red beard, as a matter of course, to be the stockman who belonged to the hut. But on further consideration the Kid doubted it. The man had been dressed as a puncher, but he looked more like a border ruffian than an honest cowman. And brute as he was, his brutality to the broncho was not, the Kid figured, just the brutality of a cruel rider. If the man was a horse-thief, exasperated by the unwillingness of an animal he had taken from its master, his savage cruelty was more easily accounted for. The broncho as soon as it was free, had not wandered at random, but had loped off in a direct line southward—the way it had come. The Kid knew it must have a reason for that.

The gathering of the black dots in the distant sky, dropping one after another to the plain, furnished the reason, to the Kid's mind, when he had pondered over it.

The red-bearded man was not the stockman stationed at the lonely hut. But the broncho, likely enough, was the stockman's broncho. And the stockman himself—what had happened to him was indicated, the Kid reckoned, by the dropping of those black dots from the sky. Unless the Kid was out in his reckoning, the broncho had gone back to the spot where his master's body lay.

"Search me!" said the Kid again.

He rose from his resting-place in the thick grass, and stretched his sinewy limbs. The burning heat of the day was over, and it was time for the Kid to hit the trail. He did not want to linger on the range—he was on his way to safer quarters. The hunt for the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had been left behind, but delays were dangerous. Hoss-sense, the Kid reckoned, ur him to mount the grey mustang, pursue his way to the northward. The Kid realised, with a sigh, that

was not given to following the dictates of hoss-sense.

Out on the plains, unless he missed his guess, lay a cowman, dead or badly hurt. Dead, the Kid could not help him, only to save the body from the vultures, but if he lived yet, the Kid could help him, and no other help was likely to reach him. Northward lay the Kid's way of safety, southward lay the spot where the black vultures were gathering, and anyone who knew the Rio Kid could have guessed in once, in which direction he would ride. He called his mustang out of the corral, and rode southward.

The trail by which the red-bearded galoot had come was plain enough in the thick grass, but the Kid did not need it. The dropping of the zopilotes from the sky was guide enough.

Once having worked out, in his own mind, the probable state of affairs, the Rio Kid lost no time. His mustang covered the ground at a swift gallop.

In a very short time, the black dots became vultures, plain to the eye, and the Kid sighted the broncho, standing knee-deep in the grass. Round him vultures were squatting and squawking—waiting! That told the Kid that the intended victim of the filthy birds was yet alive. While he lived, even so much as to move an eyelid, the foul scavengers would not touch him, but they would wait no longer than that. And they were waiting!

The Kid came up at a gallop, slashing round him with his quirt, and the vultures, with discordant cawing, rose on the wing. They scuttled away in fear, with a chorus of hideous sounds, as the Kid drew rein close by the standing broncho.

He leaped from the saddle. He could see, now, what the horse had returned for—the Kid's figuring had been correct. A man dressed as a cow-puncher lay in the grass—his face ghastly under his Stetson hat, his nerveless hand gripping a six-gun. He was conscious, and his eyes roved wildly to the Kid as he came. Then, as he saw the boy puncher close at hand, he made an effort to lift the gun, his finger on the trigger.

"The Rio Kid!" he muttered.

Evidently the ranch-man knew the boy outlaw by sight.

The Kid, with a swift jerk of his quirt, knocked the six-gun from the puncher's hand.

"I guess you won't want that, feller," said the Kid good-humouredly. "Forget it! Say, you got it bad, feller."

The puncher stared at him.

"You got me, Kid," he said faintly. "You dog-goned bone-headed guy," growled the Kid. "Ain't you got the savvy to know that I came here to help you? Say!"

"I reckon you're the Rio Kid," said the puncher. "The durned fire-bug that the Rangers are hunting for."

"Jest that!" agreed the Kid. "Quit chewing the rag, feller—and don't worry about your hardware. Take a drink."

He placed a tin pannikin of water to the parched lips of the puncher, and the man drank eagerly.

Then he stared again at the Kid, in wonder.

"You ain't in cahoots with that scallywag that laid me out?" he asked.

"Forget it!" snapped the Kid.

He bent over the man, and wasting no further time to talk proceeded to examine his wound. A bullet had passed through the puncher's shoulder, leaving a clean hole. The wound was serious, and the man had lost a great quantity of blood, and there was no

doubt that had he remained a few hours longer unaided, the zopilotes would not have been denied their supper. But he was in good hands now. Life on the prairie and in the sierra had taught the Kid a rough surgery, and he bound up the wound with deft hands. The puncher lay silent, wondering.

"I reckon you'll pull through," said the Kid quietly. "I got to get you to the hut, feller. Say, I reckon it was a guy with a red beard and a blue shirt that gave you this."

The puncher nodded.

"You've said it," he muttered faintly. "It was Red Harris, the horse-thief. He got me, and I pitched off the bronc—and he roped the bronc in, durn him. I guess he'd have finished me, but I got my gun ready for him, and he rode away and left me here—I guess he figured I wouldn't last long."

"You belong to the stockman's hut yonder?" asked the Kid.

"Sure! I'm a Blue Bird puncher. I guess that hoss-thief has gone there now, to lift my fixings."

The Kid grinned.

"He won't lift anything at that shebang," he said. "I guess he lit out like he was sent for, and on foot, after I met up with him. He was beating up that bronc in a way I sure disliked, and I quirted him and sent him travelling. Say that's a good bronc. I mightn't have guessed that you was spilled around here, if he hadn't come back for you."

"He sure is a good cayuse," said the puncher. "I reckoned he'd throwed that scallywag, when he came back."

"Throwed nothing," said the Kid. "It was this little infant that horned in, and I reckon if I'd knowed what that gold-darned galoot had done, I'd have given him a bullet through the head instead of a quirting. Say, you reckon you can sit a hoss?"

"Sure!"

The Kid lifted the cow-puncher from the grass in his strong arms, and helped him into the saddle of the broncho.

Then he remounted his own mustang, and taking the reins of both steeds, he set out for the stockman's hut.

The puncher held on to the saddle, keeping his seat steadily, though every movement of his horse racked him with pain.

His face was ghastly under its tan. In haste as the Kid was to get him to the hut and at rest on his bunk there, he dared not proceed faster than a walk, lest the bandaged wound should break out afresh. It was slow progress, and more than once the Kid's ready arm helped and supported the wounded man as he lurched in the saddle. It seemed an age to the Kid before the stockman's hut was approached at last.

But he reached it at length, and lifted the wounded man from the broncho. He turned both horses into the corral and helped the tottering puncher into the hut.

With strong but tender hands the Kid placed him on the blankets on the low bunk in the corner. The ghastly face looked up at him with a strange wonder in it.

"Say!" breathed the puncher.

"Shoot!" said the Kid.

"Say, this sure beats me to a frazzle," muttered the Blue Bird cowman. "Ain't you the Rio Kid, like I reckoned?"

"Jest that identical galoot."

"I'll say you're a white man, all same, then," said the puncher. "If I pull out of this, feller, it's you that's saved me. I guess when the guys at the ranch are shooting off their mouths about the Rio

Kid, after this, Rube Wilkins will have suthin' to say about it, he sure will. You sure are a white man."

He sank back heavily on the blankets, "Gee!" murmured the Kid, "The puncher had fainted."

THE THIRD CHAPTER. Red Harris' Revenge!

"DOG-GONE the luck!" growled the Rio Kid.

He stood in the doorway of the lone stockman's hut, scanning the grassy plains that stretched under the sunlight.

It was the Kid's second day at the stockman's hut.

He had halted there for a noonday rest; aiming to ride on, and ride hard, figuring that the same night would find him thirty miles farther on his way to safety. And this was the outcome. Now it was the second day since he had off-saddled there that hot noontide; and the Kid was still at the lone hut. There was no help for it—the Kid being the galoot he was. He had a sick man on his hands—a man who, if he left him, would be left to death. The Kid did not think of leaving him.

Rube Wilkins had been delirious for a long night, the Kid had watched him and guarded him like a brother. A man he did not know—a man he had never seen before—a man who had tried to lift a six-gun at the sight of him—it cut no ice with the Kid. It was the law of the land that one puncher stood by another in need, and the fate that had driven the Kid into outlawry had not made him less a cow-puncher. Had the Texas Rangers, or a sheriff and his posse, been close on his trail, the Kid would not have left Rube to his fate.

The Kid had, he reckoned, thrown his pursuers off the track, and they did not know that he was riding the rangos in the valley of the Pecos. But any day, any hour, he knew well, they might pick up the scent, any hour a bunch of horse-men might ride up to the lone hut, hunting for the elusive Kid. And if they did, they would find him.

The Kid cursed the luck—but not in the hearing of the sick man in the bunk. When Rube Wilkins saw his face, it was cool and cheery; when Rube heard his voice, it was as gentle as a woman's. Few nurses could have been more kind and devoted than the Rio Kid—the fire-bug who was hunted by the Rangers, the outlaw who was wanted by a score of sheriffs. It was the Kid's way, and he went his way without a thought of self—only cursing the luck out of the sick man's hearing. For the Kid was not tired of life, and he knew that his life was in the balance every hour that he lingered on the range.

Deliriums had passed, and the puncher was mending the Kid reckoned, but he was weak as water and needed constant care. What he needed, the Kid gave him.

Many times it had been in the Kid's mind to ride over to the ranch and give the word there of Rube's plight, and leave his own friends to tend him. Guns would leap from their holsters at the sight of the Rio Kid riding up, that was a cinch, but it was not that that deterred the Kid. It was a long ride to the Blue Bird ranch, and a long ride back, the cow-man's hut was on one of the loneliest of the vast ranges along the Pecos. And he could not leave the sick man for so long. It would be days, yet, the Kid figured, before he could leave him as long as that. In the meantime, he lingered—knowing that every hour brought closer and closer the danger he had so far escaped.

"Dog-gone the luck!" said the Kid to

the cicadas that chirruped in the sun-browned grass. "Dog-gone it! The Texas Rangers combing the llano for me—and me sticking here like I was glued. Any day a bunch may ride hyer—and I guess they won't stop to chew the rag when they sight me! Kid you was always a dog-gone bouthead—but this time you saro do cap the stack."

"Kid!"
It was a faint voice from within the stockman's hut.
The Kid turned back into the hut, with a smiling face and a cheery voice. "You awake, feller?"
The white, wan face looked at him from the bunk. Rube Wilkins had been through the valley of the shadow of death, but the Kid was pulling him through.

"Oh, I ain't worrying any," said the Kid, with a smile. "After shooting up a Blue Bird puncher, I guess he won't hang on this range, longer'n it takes to hoof off'n it."
"I dunno," said Rube. "He allowed that he had fixed me for keeps—he knowed I was alone on this range, and he never reckoned I'd get help. I'd have ptered out sure as thunder, if you hadn't horned in, Kid. That guy reckons I'm dead as George Washington, he docs, and so he ain't nothing to fear that he knows of. If he savvies you're the Kid, he might want to get back on you for that quirting."
"I ain't worrying," said the Kid reassuringly.
He felt the wounded man sinking into a placid sleep, a little later, and went

the night they had not closed, and it was now late in the day, and the Kid was weary.
In the shimmering heat, he slept. He dreamed in his sleep, of old days on the Double-Bar ranch, when he had punched cows and never fancied what



CAUGHT NAPPING! From deep sleep, the Kid came to wakefulness. He started up, and his hand flew to a gun. But he did not draw, for four levelled revolvers were looking him in the face. "Hands up, kid!" came the terse command. (See Chapter 3.)

"Say, Kid, I'm sure feeling better," said the puncher. "I reckon I could peck some."
"And I've sure got your grub ready, feller," said the Kid.
He propped the sick man up in the bunk, and brought him his meal. So weak was the man that the Kid had to help him to feed. And he helped him with an almost womanly tenderness.
The puncher grinned at him whimsically.
"Say, who'd believe that it was the Rio Kid, nussin' a guy this-a-way," he said. "I guess when I tell them, in the bunk-house at the Blue Bird, they'll allow I've been dreaming some. They sure will! The bunch have heard a lot about you, Kid, that I guess now ain't k'rect."
"I reckon," assented the Kid.
"I'll put them wise after this," said Rube earnestly. "But say, did that red-bearded galoot you quirted, know that you was the Rio Kid?"
"Like enough."
"You ain't feared that he'll bring a sheriff's bunch down on you here?" asked the puncher.

out into the hot sunshine before the hut. As a matter of fact, lightly as he talked of it to the wounded puncher, the Kid had been thinking about Red Harris. It was all Texas to a Mexican dollar, as the Kid put it, that the red-bearded guy had known who he was, and the Kid knew in what mood the ruffian had gone. Revenge was his for the asking—he had only to carry the news to any sheriff, or to any ranch outfit, that the Kid was in the vicinity. Believing that Rube Wilkins was dead, Red Harris would not fear to go to the Blue Bird Ranch itself, for help to deal with the Kid. And there was the reward, too—that would tempt the ruffian.
But there was no help for it. Leaving Rube was impossible, except if he was to be left to die, and that was not in the Kid's thoughts. The Kid had to take a chance, as often he had done before.
Within the stockman's hut, Rube was sleeping soundly, peacefully. The Kid sat down where the corral fence cast a shadow, and leaned on the pine poles, and closed his tired eyes. All through

the future held in store for him. In his dreams, the Kid was riding once more with the old bunch, he could hear the clattering of hoofs, the jangling of spur and stirrup and bridle.
But it was not all a dream.
From deep sleep, the Kid came to wakefulness, and the tramping and the jingling were still in his ears. He started up, and his hand flew to a gun.
But he did not draw the gun. For three or four levelled revolvers were looking him in the face, with grim bronzed faces behind them, and a gruff voice rapped out tensely:
"Hands up, Kid!"
"Gee!" murmured the Kid, and his fingers relinquished the butt of his gun.
"Put 'em up! Thunder, it's the Kid, and we've got him! Up with 'ein, Kid, or you get yours."
And the Kid, with a bitter smile, put his hands up over his head. Six brawny punchers were round him, every man with a gun in his hand, and every gun aimed at the Kid. And behind them, grinning with revengful malice and

triumph, was the evil face of the red-bearded man. Red Harris had come back for his revenge.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. The Luck of the Kid!

THE Rio Kid stood with his hands up, cool as ice, his smiling face telling nothing of the bitterness in his heart.

He had taken a chance, and the chance had turned against him. The Kid had no kick coming. He had known the risk he ran, when he lingered at the stockman's hut on the Blue Bird range to tend the wounded puncher. He had known the risk and taken it, and now that it had materialised, the Kid was not the galoot to complain.

There were ready fingers on the triggers of the guns that covered him. Death looked the Kid in the face— instant death if he gave trouble. They had him completely now, and the Kid put up his hands like a lamb. But his eyes were watchful, he only needed a dog's chance, to draw his guns and make a fight for it. Six to one was long odds, but the Kid had faced heavy odds before, and lived to tell of it.

"It's the Kid, sure enough!" said the puncher whose gruff voice had first spoken. "I guess that galoot Harris was giving us the straight goods. It's sure the Kid."

"It sure is, Buck Williams," said another of the bunch. "I seen him shooting up Trail End, and I guess I know the Kid."

"You've said it, fellers!" remarked the Kid easily. "I ain't denying it any! Say, you guys have all the luck! I reckon if you hadn't found me asleep, you'd be cavorting over Jordan this very minute."

"You was always a cool cuss, Kid," said Buck Williams, with a grin. "Keep your paws up—we ain't taking chances. He thrust the long barrel of his Colt fairly into the Kid's sunburnt face. "We've got you, and by thunder we ain't letting you slip."

"You got me!" assented the Kid. "Run a rope round his paws, you Harris."

The red-bearded ruffian grinned, and took a turn of a trail-rope round the Kid's wrists, and knotted it. The Kid was safe enough now, and the punchers returned the guns to their belts.

"You allowed you was through with me, darn your hide," said Red Harris, between his teeth, his evil eyes burning at the boy outlaw. "You quirted me, you dog-goned fire-bug, and you reckoned you was through. But I knew you was the Rio Kid, and I got you fixed, dog-gone you." His clenched fist was raised, to be dashed into the face of the bound man—but Buck Williams angrily struck his arm aside.

"Let up on that, you galoot!" snapped Buck.

The red-bearded ruffian swore savagely.

"I tell you he quirted me!" he roared.

"And I tell you I'll quirt you some more if you handle a galoot with his hands tied," growled Buck.

"Say, fellers, that guy sure is a pizen skunk," said the Kid coolly. "He's told you where to lay your hands on me, but he ain't told you I quirted him for beating up a stolen horse."

Red Harris laughed savagely.

"You won't get away with that, dog-gone you," he said. "I guess no galoot's going to take an outlaw's word."

"I guess you don't look any too good for it, Harris, and you sure ain't got a

good reputation along the Pecos," growled Buck Williams. "But that don't cut no ice. You're our mutton Kid and we're sure going to tote you to the nearest sheriff and hand you over."

"Sure!" assented the Kid. "But I reckon you better tote that picaro along too, fellers, for stealing a horse and shooting up a cowman."

"What cowman has he shot up?" asked Buck, eyeing the Kid.

"The galoot that belongs to this shebang," answered the Kid.

"Oh, come off!" jeered Red Harris. "If Rube Wilkins is shot up, it was you shot him up, you durned fire-bug. Ain't we found you camping in his place?"

There was a growl from the punchers, and they cast grim looks on the Kid. One of them unloosed a lasso from a saddle-horn.

"If Rube has been shot up, I guess we ain't worrying any sheriff with this scallywag, Buck," he said. "We'll sure hang him over the corral fence."

"Rube a pard of yours?" drawled the Kid.

"Sure—we're Blue Bird punchers," said Buck Williams.

The Kid's eyes danced.

"Jumping Jehosaphat!" he ejaculated. "You galoots from the Blue Bird ranch, say?"

"We sure are—and if you've shot up Rube, you're for the rope," said Buck. "His cayuse is in the corral, along with your mustang—where's Rube?"

"Ask that guy Harris where he left him?" said the Kid, unmoved.

"Oh, come off!" said Buck impatiently. "It ain't any use giving us that guff, Kid. Harris hit the Blue Bird ranch on foot, and told us the Rio Kid was around, and was camping at this shebang. We didn't half believe it, but we moseyed along to look, see. We found you hyer. There's Rube's cayuse in the corral—and I guess Rube wouldn't be out on the plains without his critter. Where is he?"

Savage faces surrounded the Kid now.

The Kid smiled.

"Look in the hut!" he said.

"Dog-gone you, if Rube was in the hut, he'd have showed up afore this," growled Buck. "Rube ain't deaf, I reckon."

"Didn't I tell you he'd been shot up," drawled the Kid.

"And I guess these guys are wise to the galoot that did it," grinned Red Harris. "String him up to the corral fence, boys."

The loop of the lasso dropped over the Kid's neck. But his face was still cool and smiling.

"Say, you fellers are sure in some hurry," he remarked. "I told you Rube had been shot up. But I never allowed he was a dead coon. I guess you'll find him in the shebang, and he'll sure tell you who shot him up, if you ask him."

"Look in the shebang, Pete," said Buck Williams tersely, and one of the punchers strode away to the hut.

The Kid's eyes were on the evil face of Red Harris. That face had suddenly grown pale and drawn.

"Say fellers, Red Harris don't seem pleased any to hear that Rube is alive," drawled the Kid. "He surely don't."

Red Harris glared at him, and then stared after the puncher who was going to the stockman's hut. There was deadly terror in his eyes. If Rube Wilkins was living and could tell who had shot him on the prairie—

With a bitter curse, the red-bearded ruffian snatched a revolver from his belt. But the Kid was watching. His hands were bound, but as the ruffian swung the Colt towards him to fire, the

Kid made a sudden spring, and kicked, and Red Harris staggered back from a high-heeled riding-boot that drove into his stomach.

The revolver exploded as he sagged over, gasping, the bullet narrowly missing one of the punchers.

The next moment, two or three pairs of hands were grasping the red-bearded man. He struggled desperately but in vain.

A torrent of curses poured from the lips of the ruffian. The Kid looked at him coolly.

"Say, feller, can it," he suggested. "Swearing won't buy you anything. I guess you'll be coming along with me to see the sheriff, you pizen skunk, and I sure ain't proud of your company."

"Keep him safe," growled Buck, and he strode away to the hut. There was a murmur of voices from the stockman's hut. In five minutes Buck came striding back, with his hand upheld, and there was a strango look on his face. He eyed the Rio Kid curiously, and then glanced round at the group of punchers.

"Rube's there," he said, jerking his thumb towards the hut. "He's all shot up—but he's bandaged and doing fine—and he allows that it was Red Harris shot him up, out on the plains, and stole his horse."

"How'd he make the hut, then?" asked one of the punchers.

Buck made a gesture towards the Kid.

"He allows that that dog-goned Kid toted him in, and nussed him up, and looked arter him like a brother," he said. "I guess that's how we come to find the Kid here! It sure gets my goat."

There was a rush of the punchers towards the stockman's hut. Buck Williams was left alone with the prisoners.

For some moments, he stood staring at the Kid, as if in doubt. Then he drew his knife and cut through the rope at the Kid's wrists.

"I guess you'd have been fur enough away, if you hadn't hung on to look after Rube," he said.

"You've sure said it," grinned the Kid.

"Your cayuse is in the corral—you want to saddle up and hit the horizon," said the puncher.

"Foller," said the Kid, "you're a white man. I'm sure proud to have met up with you."

Not a hand was raised to the Rio Kid, when, leading the grey mustang by the bridle, he looked in at the doorway of the stockman's hut, and nodded to the wounded man in the bunk.

"Say, Rube, you'll be O.K. now your pards are around," he called out cheerily. "I guess it was good luck for me that it was the Blue Bird outfit that happened in, and not the Rangers or a sheriff's bunch."

"Sure thing," grinned Rube. "There ain't any guy here wants to hold you, Kid, now I've put them wise."

A minute more and the galloping hoofs of the grey mustang rang on the prairie. The Rio Kid was riding. The punchers waved their hats as he went.

But Red Harris did not ride.

When the Rio Kid looked back towards the stockman's hut, from a distance, there was something that swung over the high corral fence, at the end of a lasso. The swift justice of the ranch-hands had overtaken the border ruffian.

THE END.

(The Rio Kid gallops headfirst into another rousing adventure again next week. Look out for: "THE RIO KID —RANCHER!")