

OUR COMPLETE WESTERN YARN! There is only one way of gaining the confidence of his roughneck cowpunchers, and that is by proving to them that he is fit to run a ranch. This the Rio Kid fully realises, and is determined to do, in spite of the many perils and obstacles that confront him!

THRILLS!
THRILLS!
THRILLS!



THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Gunplay on the Prairie!

THE Rio Kid smiled. He was amused, though the situation was one that few would have found amusing. For three long hours, the Kid had been riding the prairie, in company with a galoot who was watching for a chance to pull a gun on him—watching, waiting, his fingers itching to grasp the butt of a Colt.

A score of times, at least, Panhandle Pete had sought to drop behind the Kid; but the new boss of the Lazy O Ranch was too wary for that. Again and again had Pete almost resolved to chance it, to pull his gun and make it an even break. But every time he weakened when it came to the pinch. Giving "Mister Fairfax" an even break was not much use to the Lazy O cowman. The boy rancher, who had shot up Lariat, the gunman, at Packsaddle, was too good a man for him at gunplay, and Panhandle Pete knew it. Yet with every hour of that long ride under the hot Texas sun the rage suppressed in his heart grew more savage and bitter.

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and again and again the temptation assailed him.

And the Kid, who read every thought that passed behind the dark, scowling face, smiled. Not for a second was he off his guard, while at the same time he was taking a keen interest in his survey of the wide-stretching ranges of the Lazy O. The Rio Kid, under the name of "Mister Fairfax," had bought that ranch, and he was looking over his new

end of the horn in dealing with the scowling cowman.

"Say, this is sure a good proposition," the Kid remarked amiably as they turned their horses in the direction of the ranch again, with a good ten miles before them. "This hyer is as good land as any I've seen along the Rio Pecos, hombre, and I'm sure glad that I horned in and bought the Lazy O.

"Far as I've seen as yet, it comes right up to specification. Lawyer Lucas at Pecos Bend put me wise to it, and he sure did spill a mouthful; but I guess it was all straight goods. This hyer is the ranch I've been wanting. I guess I'm settling down in the Packsaddle country from now on."

"You ain't the first guy that's bought the Lazy O," said Panhandle Pete, with a venomous glint in his eyes.

"You've said it," agreed the Kid, with another smile; "and I hear that things have happened to the other guys, and they was sure glad to sell again and get shut of it. I guess Barney Baker worked it, and he sure was a whole team and a cross dog under the wagon when it came to a gum game. But he won't put it over on this infant, hombre."

The Kid Takes THE REINS!

by RALPH REDWAY

property, guided by Panhandle Pete, and the fact that the cowman was watching for a chance to let daylight through him did not worry the Kid any.

He only wondered whether Panhandle Pete would break out before they rode back to the ranch-house. If he did, the Kid was ready, and he did not figure that he would come out at the little

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Panhandle Pete muttered an oath in his beard.

"Figure it out for yourself, feller," said the Kid cheerily. "That pesky foreman has ruled the roost so long he's come to figure that the ranch was his own to play with. He's scared off, or shot up, every guy that's put up his money on it—or he's stood pat and put up the bunch to do it. Where is he now? Lying in the bunkhouse, all shot up. Where's the gunman he set on me in Packsaddle? Not in a place he'll come back from. And look at you," went on the Kid. "I tell you to ride round the shebang with me to guide me over my own ranch—and you a paid man in my bunch and bound to do it—and all the time you're itching to draw a gun and drop me off this pinto—jest honing to let the sun shine through me, ain't you, feller?" The Kid laughed. "And I don't give a continental red cent for you and your gun, and if you drop your paw on it while we're riding round, you know as well as I do that it will be the last thing you'll do on this side of Jordan. Why not forget it, feller, and make up your mind that your new boss has come to stay?"

Panhandle Pete made no reply to that. He had known that the new boss of the Lazy O was on his guard; but it surprised him to hear it put so plainly and cheerfully.

"Look at the way you've been trying to drop behind me," continued the Kid banteringly. "You're the kind of pizen cuss that would shoot a hombre in the back. You've been watching for a chance. Have you got away with it? Say!"

"You reckon—" muttered the cowman. The Kid laughed contemptuously.

"I guess I'm wise to it, and knew it afore we pulled cut of the ranch," he answered. "It cuts no ice with me. I guess that when a boneheaded jay like you is able to put it across me, it'll sure be time for me to go over the range, and I'll go smiling. I've toted you round the ranges all this god-darned afternoon, knowing what was in your pizen skunk's mind, and not caring a cuss. If you've got hoss-sense you'll leave your gun where it is, feller—it won't be healthy for you to pull."

The Kid rode on, the smile still on his lips, the cowman at his side scowling more blackly than before. For hours Panhandle Pete had been watching for a chance, and he had had no chance. But he was desperately determined that the new boss should not live to ride back to the Lazy O. The utter contempt with which Mister Fairfax regarded him, and his murderous intention, was the last straw. If no chance of treachery came his way the cowman savagely resolved that he would pull and try an even break.

They rode on in silence for a time. Then the Kid spoke again, as amiably as before.

"Chew on it, feller," he said. "I've bought this ranch—and what I've seen of it has cinched it—I guess I'm paying down the balance to Lawyer Lucas, and the Lazy O is mine. You're an ornery galoot, but I ain't honing to fire any man of the old bunch. Get it into your cabeza that I'm here to stay, and that I'll treat you like a white man so long as you toe the line. And forget all about Barney Baker and his gum game. That's your best holt."

Panhandle Pete breathed hard. "I guess you're about right, Mister Fairfax," he said, with an air of frankness. "The bunch sure don't cotton to

the idea of a new boss running the Lazy O—the foreman's good enough for us, and he's made it worth our while to stand in with him. But if the game's up, it ain't any use kicking, that I allow. I'm your man, sir."

"That's the music," said the Kid encouragingly. "Keep to that, hombre, and we're going to be friends."

And as if the cowman's words had given him confidence the Kid turned a little in his saddle, away from him, to survey a group of cattle gathered round a water hole at a little distance.

Panhandle Pete's eyes snapped. It was his chance at last—the chance for which he had been longing. A few words had fooled this kid rancher, and now—Like a flash his hand went to his belt, and the long-barrelled Colt leaped out. But the new boss of the Lazy O seemed to have eyes in the back of his head; and lightning had nothing on him when it came to reaching for a gun. There was a sharp report as the cowman's Colt leaped up; but it was not Panhandle Pete who fired. The cowman uttered a yell of pain as the bullet smashed into his hand and the Colt dropped into the grass of the prairie, unused. And the Kid grinned at him cheerily.

"Say, feller, didn't I warn you that you couldn't put it across this infant?" chuckled the Kid. "Why, you durned polecat, I was giving you a chance to play up like a white man or to show that you was a yellow coyote that couldn't be trusted. Say, you sure are some bonehead."

Panhandle Pete groaned as he clasped his shattered right hand with his left. The Kid rode closer to him.

"I guess you'll never use a gun with that paw again, feller," he said coolly, "and it's only because you're a no-account bonehead that I didn't put the pill through your heart."

The cowman muttered curses. The Kid, smiling, jerked away his neck-scarf, and bound up the bleeding hand with it, and made a sling for the arm.

"Now you're fixed," he said. "But I guess you want to see a doc as soon as you hit Packsaddle."

"I ain't hitting Packsaddle!" hissed Panhandle Pete.

"It's your best guess," said the Kid. "You ain't riding the Lazy O any more. You're fired, you gink! And if I see you on this ranch again, I'll take the quirt to you. Hit the trail for town, and hit it pronto, or you get the quirt for a starter."

The Kid swished his heavy quirt in the air. Panhandle Pete stared at him with rage and hatred in his burning eyes. But his hand hung wounded at his breast, and his gun was in the grass. Slowly, guiding his broncho with his left hand, he swung round in the direction of the distant cow-town.

"I guess—" he began, his voice thick with rage.

"Can it!" interrupted the Kid. "I've sure let you off easy. But it won't be healthy for you to give me any more chin-wag. I've told you to hit the trail for Packsaddle."

The quirt cracked in the air, and touched the flank of Panhandle Pete's broncho. The animal leaped into motion. The cowman, furious with rage, strove to drag him in; and the quirt rose and fell again, with a heavy lash across Panhandle Pete's back. The cowman gave a yell, and let the broncho go.

"Beat it!" snapped the Kid. "If you ain't on the horizon in three minutes, Packsaddle way, my gun talks again. Beat it, you pizen skunk."

and the cowman, foaming with rage, rode for the cow-town as fast as the broncho could stretch. The Kid sat in the saddle watching the galloping horseman till he disappeared beyond a fold in the prairie, in the direction of Packsaddle.

Then, with a smile, the Rio Kid wheeled his horse, and rode on towards the Lazy O ranch alone.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Long Bill's Idea!

BARNEY BAKER, foreman of the Lazy O, lay propped in his bunk in the ranch bunkhouse wrapped in bandages, white-faced, black-browed. Coyote Jenson sat beside the bunk, smoking. Outside the sunset glowed red across the plains. Barney Baker's eyes were turned on the open doorway, and occasionally a puncher passed his range of vision, generally with a glance towards the bunkhouse where the wounded foreman lay. Barney stirred continually with the pain of his wound, and the bitter discomfort of his thoughts. He was no longer foreman of the Lazy O, according to "Mister Fairfax," the new owner and boss of the ranch. He was "fired." And as soon as he was able to travel he was to hit the trail, and never see the Lazy O again, according to Mister Fairfax.

But it was likely to be some time before Barney was able to sit a horse. And the Kid was not the man to turn him out while he was unfit to ride. That gave the foreman a respite. And he was not thinking of hitting the trail as he lay there. He was revolving schemes of vengeance in his mind, and plans for yet keeping his hold on the Lazy O. Every new owner of the Lazy O, hitherto, had failed to make the grade, owing to the wiles of Barney Baker. And he had not despaired of getting the upper hand of Mister Fairfax.

That it was a tough proposition, Barney admitted. So far, he had registered defeat after defeat, and worst of all was the failure of the ambush on the plains, when Kansas Jake had shot him down instead of the new boss. In his disabled state he could do nothing; but, at least, it enabled him to remain on the Lazy O, and plot and plan. Had he been well the new boss would have cleared him off the ranch. And Barney did not feel at all sure that the bunch, who had stood by him so long, would have chipped in to stop it. The wildest bunch in the Packsaddle country were learning to respect their new boss.

"Ain't he come in yet, Coyote?" grunted the foreman, at last turning wearily in the bunk.

Coyote Jenson grinned. "I guess he won't come in, Barney. Panhandle Pete is taking him over the ranges, and Pete ain't the guy to lose a chance."

"I guess he will put paid to Pete if Pete tries on any gun-play," growled the foreman. "I saw him shoot up Lariat at Packsaddle. And I'll tell the world that that kid can handle a gun. Panhandle Pete won't get away with anything."

"I'm banking on Pete," said the Coyote confidently. "And I guess Mister Fairfax would be a dead coon now, if I could use my gun hand."

And the Coyote scowled down at his right arm, which was in a sling.

"Aw, can it?" snapped Barney Baker. "You could use your gun-hand."

when you met up with him on the trail; and he winged you. You ain't good enough for him, any more'n Pete."

The Coyote scowled and smoked in silence.

"Where's Jake?" snapped the foreman.

"Loafin' outside."

"Call him in."

Kansas Jake came into the bunkhouse. He eyed the scowling man in the bunk uneasily. Barney gave him a bitter look.

"You dog-goned gink!" he growled. "A pesky mess you made of it, didn't you?"

"I guess it was your own funeral, Barney," answered the gunman. "You sure told me you'd be riding a white horse. And how was a guy to guess that that god-darned peck would change hosses with you—and that you'd let him do it?"

"He had a gun on me," snarled Barney. "Cry it out! It can't be helped now. You got to try agin."

"Sure!" assented Jake.

"He'll be riding back to the ranch afore dark. You want to get him from cover as he comes in."

Kansas Jake looked dubious.

"The boys won't stand for it, Barney," he said. "They're sure a tough bunch, but shooting down a man from cover ain't the goods for them. They sure been cussing me a whole lot already."

"You don't want to tell them, or let them see you, you gink," snarled the foreman. "I'm telling you, if we don't get that guy Fairfax the game's up hyer, and we all got to ride. Are we goin' to let that kid rancher brag in Packsaddle that he's tamed the toughest bunch in Texas?"

"He's sure tamed them some," said Kansas. "There ain't a guy in the bunch wants to pull a gun on him. They sure don't want trouble with the galoot that shot up an all-fired gunman like Lariat."

"And me lying here!" groaned Barney. "If I was on my feet I'd soon give him his. You got to get him, Jake. I tell you, in a few days he'll have the bunch feeding out of his hand, and the game will be up here. We've run the Lazy O for years on end, and are we going to be beat at the finish by a kid like Fairfax?"

"I guess I'll try," said Kansas Jake; and he lounged out of the bunkhouse.

Barney Baker sank back on his pillows, with a muttered oath. Long Bill, the horse-wrangler of the Lazy O, stepped in and came across to him. Barney gave him a scowl.

"You takin' candy from the new boss, Bill, like the rest of the bunch?" he asked bitterly.

"Not any," answered the horse-wrangler. "I guess I'm as keen as any guy here to set him going. But I don't stand for shooting a man down from behind a tree, Barney Baker, like a dog-goned dago, and I reckon the bunch won't stand for it either. I tell you the boys are talking about booting Jake off'n the ranch."

"Aw can it!" snarled Barney. "The boys can shoot off their mouths while I'm lying here. I guess they'll shut up when I'm around agin."

"I'm telling you, Barney—"

"Can it! Ain't there a guy in the whole bunch that's man enough to pull a gun on him to his face?" sneered Barney.

"I guess I pulled, and he had me covered so quick it made my head swim," grinned Long Bill. "I ain't

trying that agin, siree. No! And you never pulled on him. You put Kansas Jake behind a tree with a rifle, Barney. Why didn't you pull on him yourself, come to that?"

A curse was the only answer.

"But I got an idea, Barney," went on the horse-wrangler. "Apache is in the corral now—the durndest outlaw bronc in the Packsaddle country. That kid Fairfax can sit a hoss, I allow, but if a guy could get him to back Apache for—"

Barney's eyes gleamed.

"Now you're talking!" he exclaimed. "You want to get him to back Apache, and if that hoss don't kill him, I guess he's got a charm on his life. There ain't a man in the valley of the Pecos can ride Apache; and I'd have had him shot afore this, only I reckoned I could sell him to some guy with his eyes shut. Say, you get that gink Fairfax on Apache, and the Lazy O will be in the market agin for Lawyer Lucas to sell to some other guy."

"I guess I can work it!" chuckled the horse-wrangler. "He's come here to run the ranch, and if he can't ride it's his own funeral. I'll sure get him on Apache and leave it to the hoss."

Long Bill lounged out of the bunkhouse, grinning. Barney Baker was left looking a little comforted. Coyote rose from his bench, and looked out of the doorway, and muttered an oath. Far away on the prairie, in the sunset, a lone horseman appeared in sight, riding towards the ranch.

"He's coming in!" growled the Coyote.

"Mister Fairfax?"

"Yep!"

"And Pete—"

"Pete ain't with him."

"What did I tell you?" growled Barney Baker. "He was too good for Pete, jest as he was too good for you. But if Bill can get him on Apache that outlaw bronc will fix him!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Shot for Shot!

THE Rio Kid rode cheerily towards the ranch in the sunset. He hummed the tune of a Mexican fandango as he rode the pinto.

But his eyes, under the brim of his Stetson hat, were wary and on the alert. Well the Kid knew he was taking his life in his hands, every minute of the day and the night, in undertaking to handle the toughest bunch in Texas. As he approached the ranch the Kid would not have been surprised, any minute, to hear the crack of a rifle. Most of the bunch, tough as they were, would not stand for such dirty work as assassination; but there were two or three gunmen in the outfit who were none too good for it. And the Kid was well aware that Barney Baker, lying disabled in the bunkhouse, had not given up hope of ridding the Lazy O of its new boss. The bunch treated Mister Fairfax with more or less respect; but secretly they were still looking to the wounded foreman as their leader, and backing his play.

A quarter of a mile from the gate in the home fence, on the trail that led up to the ranch, a clump of cottonwoods grew; and the Kid had his eyes keenly on that clump as he neared the ranch. If any gunman in the bunch had a fancy for laying for him as he returned to the Lazy O, that was exactly the spot he would select; for the trail ran almost under the branches of the trees, and any passing horseman

was at the mercy of a marksman hidden there. And the Kid smiled as he saw a blue jay fluttering over the tree-tops. The Kid did not need telling that the bird had been startled by someone moving in the trees below; and he knew that a man was in cover amid the tall trees that grew close together over the trail.

"They sure do want to give a guy a lively time on this hyer ranch!" smiled the Kid as he rode on.

The trail ran past the south side of the clump; and the Kid knew, as if he had seen him, that a man was hidden in the trees, with a rifle already bearing on the trail, watching for him to pass. He had already been seen coming, and the gunman was waiting, he figured. And still at a distance the Kid swung to the right, and galloped towards the trees on the north side of the clump.

He plied quirt and spur as he rode, and the pinto's hoofs seemed scarcely to touch the ground as he flew.

Swiftly he reached the cottonwoods, threw himself from the foaming horse, and leaped into the trees.

A Stetson hat showed in the underwoods that grew thickly among the tall, massive trunks. It had gone as the Kid figured. The ambushed gunman had been watching the south; and when the Kid changed his direction the man came scrambling and plunging through the timber towards the northern side. But he had not counted on the Kid's having spotted the ambushade, or on the swiftness of Mister Fairfax in reaching the timber.

The Kid's gun was in his hand, and the bang of the long-barrelled Colt woke a thousand echoes in the timber and across the plain. The Stetson spun from the head it covered, and there was a yell of surprise and rage.

"Say, you gink, here I am, and I'm coming a shooting!" shouted the Kid.

A rifle cracked in the thicket, and the bullet sang by a yard from the Kid.

He could not see the man who had fired; but the shot was guide enough for him. His return fire crashed through the thicket, bullet after bullet as fast as the Kid could pull the trigger. Leaves and twigs flew before the crashing lead, and there was a scream and a heavy fall.

"I guess that gink has got his!" murmured the Kid.

And he ran on.

Kansas Jake lay stretched under the trees, a rifle by his side, groaning.

The Kid looked down at him, his gun ready if the ruffian lifted a hand. But Kansas Jake was past that. Two of the Kid's bullets had gone through him, and the gunman lay helpless in a pool of blood.

He glared up at the Rio Kid with glazing eyes.

"You got me!" he muttered thickly.

"You've said it!" agreed the Kid coolly. "You durned lobo wolf, it was you, I reckon, that laid for me on the prairie afore! I guess you was some hog not to know when you'd had enough!"

Kansas Jake's hand groped feebly towards his belt. But his strength was gone, and his hand did not reach his gun.

The Kid looked down on him grimly. "I reckon your jig is up," he said. "It was Barney Baker put you up to this game, I guess."

"Durn him!" muttered Kansas. "I guess I'd have let up on you, but Barney—" He choked.

The Kid waited a moment or two, and then turned away and went back to his horse. There came no sound again from the man who was left lying under the cottonwoods.

The new boss of the Lazy O remounted the pinto and rode on to the ranch. He leaped the gate and rode towards the bunkhouse.

From the doorway Coyote Jenson was staring at him moodily; and three or four punchers watched him ride up.

"Where's Pete, boss?" called out Shorty.

"Pete?" answered the Kid. "I guess Panhandle Pete's fired. He pulled on me, and got hurt, and I sure started him for Packsaddle. He won't be around any more—not so long as I'm boss of the Lazy O!"

"Take that cayuse and look after him," said the Kid. "He's sure a good hoss, and I want him cared for. You get me?"

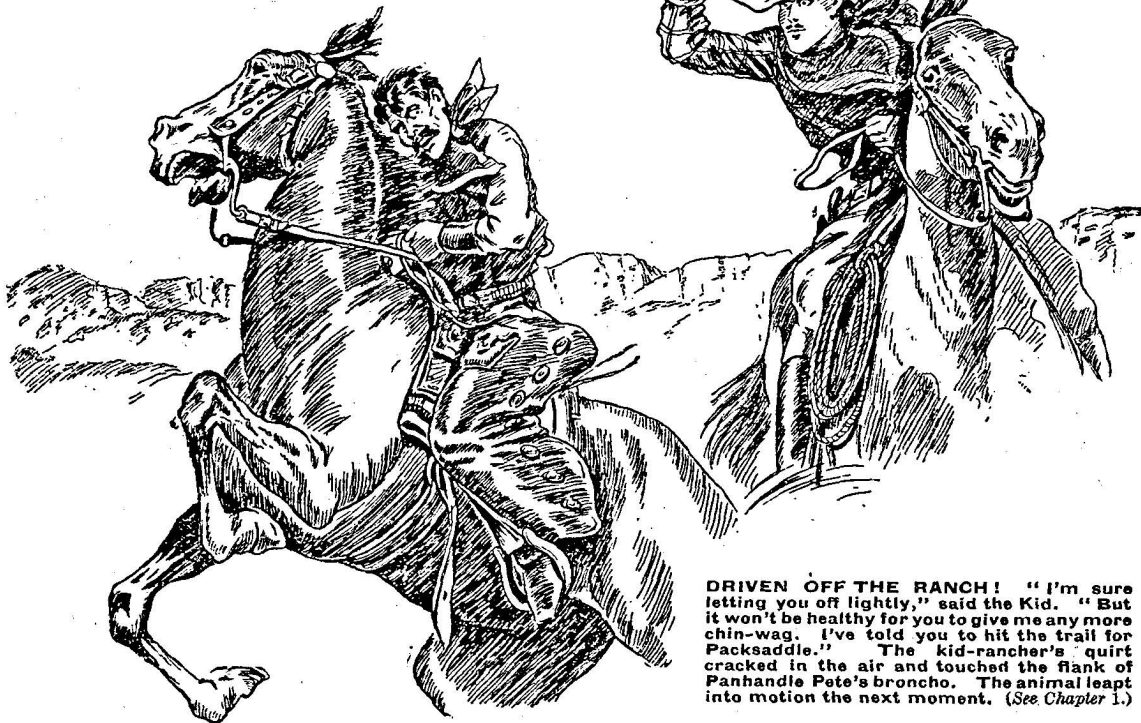
"I get you boss," said Long Bill; and he led the pinto into the corral.

The Kid walked away to the ranch-house. He disappeared into the building, and the Lazy O punchers still stared at one another. Shorty and another man started for the cottonwood clump on the trail. In the bunk-

bought; more than pleased by the new prospect opening before him of life as a rancher in the Packsaddle country.

So long as no galoot tumbled to the fact that he was the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande the Kid figured that it was going to be good. And so far no Packsaddle guy had dreamed of guessing that Mister Fairfax was the "firebug" once known as the Rio Kid.

It made the Kid smile to think what the Lazy O bunch would have said and



DRIVEN OFF THE RANCH! "I'm sure letting you off lightly," said the Kid. "But it won't be healthy for you to give me any more chin-wag. I've told you to hit the trail for Packsaddle." The kid-rancher's quirt cracked in the air and touched the flank of Panhandle Pete's broncho. The animal leapt into motion the next moment. (See Chapter 1.)

"I guess that won't be powerful long!" muttered Coyote Jenson, with a scowl.

The Kid glanced at him.

"What's that?" he asked. "Say it louder, feller, if you want me to hear."

But the Coyote did not say it louder. He backed into the bunkhouse and disappeared from sight.

"Here, you, Shorty," called out the Kid, "take another man, and hit for that clump of cottonwoods along the trail."

"What's the game, boss?"

"I guess you'll find a gink there, all shot up," answered the Kid. "It's the galoot you call Kansas Jake. He laid for me there with a rifle, and came out at the little end of the horn."

"Oh, sho!" ejaculated Shorty.

"He's got his ticket for soup, but I reckon he ain't going to be left for the coyotes and the buzzards," said the Kid. "You take a guy with you, and see him planted decent."

The punchers looked at one another in silence.

"Here you, Long Bill!" called out the Kid, dismounting.

The horse wrangler lounged over from the corral.

house Coyote Jenson stepped to the bunk of the wounded foreman.

"Jake's got his!" he said laconically.

Barney Baker gritted his teeth.

"I guess," said Coyote slowly, "that that guy, Fairfax, is too good a man for this bunch, Barney! If that outlaw bronc don't get him I reckon I'm throwing in my hand."

An oath was the only answer from Barney Baker.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The Broncho Buster!

"MISTER FAIRFAX!"

The Rio Kid was sunning himself in the ranch-house porch after breakfast, when Long Bill came loping up. From the porch the Kid could look over many a square mile of rolling prairie and belts of timber all within the borders of the Lazy O. The kid looked, and figured that it was good. This was better, the Kid reckoned, than riding the llano with the Texas Rangers at his heels, or dodging the sheriffs in the tangled paths of the chaparral. The Kid was more than satisfied with the ranch he had

done had they been wise to it; what Barney Baker would have said and done. But it was, the Kid reckoned, all O.K. To the bunch, and to the foreman, he was simply a kid rancher, who had bought the Lazy O and fancied that he could run it.

As the horse-wrangler came up to the porch the Kid turned his head, and gave him a cheery nod. Of all the bunch he liked Long Bill the best, none the less because the horse-wrangler had once tried to pull a gun on him. That gave the Kid no grouch. In fact, rough and tough as the Lazy O bunch were, the Kid did not dislike them any. He knew that they would get the upper hand of him if they could, by any means that came within their rough code, but a fight had always had a good savour to the Kid. He had looked over all the bunch now, and there were a few of them that he reckoned were "pizen" enough for Kansas Jake's tactics, and those few, he reckoned, would watch out how they brought on themselves the fate of Kansas. So long as a square game was played the Kid was not likely to get any grouch against the bunch. As for firing the whole outfit and gettin'

new men in, the Kid did not think of it. He was going to run the ranch, and run the bunch, or know the reason why. Only a guy who asked for it was going to be fired.

"Mister Fairfax, sir," said Long Bill, and there was respect in his tones, though there was a curious glimmer in his eyes.

"Shoot!" said the Kid.

"I guess I want to know, sir," said the wrangler. "There's that there cayuse Apache in the corral, and I guess we've had to keep him fenced off in a corner, all on his lonesome, to keep him from savaging the other critters. There ain't a guy in the bunch can ride him, but I've been telling the boys, sir, that you could do it, Mister Fairfax; and sure if that critter could be broke to the rein he would be worth a thousand dollars to you, sir. Now he ain't worth more'n a ride cartridge."

The Kid's eyes fixed for a second on Long Bill's face. Then he smiled and nodded.

"I guess I seen that cayuse," he said. "I guess he's an outlaw, on his looks."

"Sure thing," assented Long Bill, "and the boys say there ain't a guy in Texas could ride him, unless it was the Rio Kid."

The Kid started ever so slightly.

"The Rio Kid?" he repeated.

"Who's that?"

"Guess you must have come a long way, sir, if you ain't heard of the Rio Kid," said Long Bill, with a stare. "He's the durndest fire-bug in Texas; and they say he's the best rider between the Grande and the Colorado. He ain't never been seen in this section, but any Guy in Packsaddle could tell you all about him."

The Kid smiled.

"But I reckon, sir, I've seen you riding that pinto, and I guess you know suthin' about hosses," went on the wrangler, "and I'm sure telling the bunch you could back Apache, and teach him manners. I've put up ten dollars on it, if you'd care to try it on, Mister Fairfax, sir."

"I can sure ride, a few!" said Mister Fairfax thoughtfully. "I've sat buck-jumpers in my time, but that Apache does look an ornery cuss of a cayuse." Then he nodded. "But if you've bet ten dollars on your boss, feller, your boss ain't letting you lose them if he can help it. Get that cayuse roped in."

"You'll ride him, sir?"

"I'll sure be along as soon as you've got him roped."

Long Bill did not grin till his back was turned. But he grinned widely then, as he walked back to the corral. Shorty was waiting by the corral gate, and he grinned, too, as he received a wink from the wrangler. A dozen punchers, breakfasting at the bunk-house, came out eagerly on the news that Mister Fairfax was going to ride Apache. Even the ranch cook came out of the chuck-house, a frying-pan in his hand, to look on. Coyote Jenson lounged in the bunk-house doorway, with an eager light in his eyes, Barney Baker, lying in his bandages, breathed hard and waited for what would happen. There was a thrill of excitement when Mister Fairfax sauntered on the scene.

Long Bill roped in the "outlaw" in the corral, and Apache—the wickedest-looking broncho in Packsaddle Country—was led out on two lassoes, one held by Long Bill, the other by Shorty. He came out with his heels lashing, his ears laid back, his eyes glinting, and his teeth showing bare. Two strong ropes held him, but the Lazy O bunch gave him a wide berth, all the same. Long

Bill himself, a master-hand with horses, would never have dreamed of riding Apache; indeed, the outlaw would have been shot long since, but for Barney Baker's hope of selling him to some greenhorn. Nobody on the Lazy O believed that he could be tamed—and every man in the bunch was convinced that if Mister Fairfax put a leg across him Mister Fairfax was a gone coon.

That, according to the ideas of the bunch, was all in the game. If Mister Fairfax fancied that he could ride Apache, and was gink enough to try, it was his own funeral. The bunch were ready to pick up and bury what was left of him afterwards.

Held by the ropes, kicking and squealing, Apache looked a prize-packet, and the Rio Kid regarded him thoughtfully. The Kid had never met his match in horseflesh yet; and his chief thought as he looked at the outlaw was what a fine cayuse he would be if he found his master.

The Kid was quite wise to the game that was going on; he knew that the whole bunch expected him to be killed by the outlaw bronc, and that the wrangler fancied that he had led him into a death-trap. It made the Kid smile. He reckoned he could ride any four-legged critter in Texas, and he knew, too, that if he wanted to put it over on the Lazy O bunch he could not do it better than by riding a horse that no other man in Packsaddle dared to ride. Horsemanship was the surest way to the heart of a cowpuncher.

"I guess he's ready for you to saddle up, Mister Fairfax!" said Long Bill, grinning. "Say, he looks sorter wild, but I guess you'll handle him. I've bet the boys ten dollars you'll make the grade, sir."

"You'll win!" said the Kid.

He took the saddle and fixings and approached the sprawling broncho coolly but cautiously. It was not easy to saddle Apache, even while the ropes held him, but the Kid contrived it; and the staring punchers had to admit that he was "no slouch." But riding the outlaw was another matter.

"Let him rip!"

The Kid's voice rang clearly.

The ropes slipped off, and the sprawling outlaw scrambled furiously to his feet, squealing with rage. He was scarcely on his feet when the Kid was on his back.

"He's up!" yelled Long Bill.

Not a man had expected Mister Fairfax even to be able to mount the outlaw. They had expected the brute to trample him, tear him with his teeth, savage him to death. And they were prepared to watch, with grim ruthlessness, that fate befall the man who fancied that he could run the Lazy O ranch and handle the Lazy O bunch. They stared as they saw him in the saddle, with a powerful grip on the reins.

Apache for a second stood stock-still, as if thunderstruck. Then the circus began.

In a cloud of dust bared teeth gleamed, a shaggy tail whisked, hoofs lashed and leaped and pounded. Every second the punchers expected to see Mister Fairfax go down, to be trampled to death under crashing hoofs, torn by savage teeth.

But Mister Fairfax did not go down. He stuck to the saddle as if he were part of it, an iron hand gripping the reins, the other hand gripping the quirt and lashing.

Squealing and snorting with rage, panting and foaming, Apache tried every demon's trick he knew—and tried them all in vain. He reared on his

hind legs and seemed as if about to topple backwards on his rider, and the Kid clung to his back like a limpet; he came down again with a crash of his forefeet that seemed to shake the earth, but the Kid did not shoot over his head. He rolled sideways on the ground, and the Kid leaped clear; and as the horse scrambled up again he sprang into the saddle once more.

Long minutes passed while man and horse fought for the mastery, and the Lazy O bunch stared on spellbound. They had seen buck-jumping before and hard riding, but they had not seen the like of this.

"He'll make the grade!" gasped Long Bill. "Gee-whiz! I'm telling you guys that he'll make the grade!"

"Carry me home to die!" said Shorty in awe.

Crash, crash, crash! went the thundering hoofs. Again and again the outlaw broncho strove to wind round his neck and tear at the rider with his teeth, and every time his head was jerked grimly back, and the quirt took its toll.

The enraged broncho threw himself down at last and refused to rise; but the lashing quirt drove him to his feet once more, and as soon as he was up the Kid was in the saddle, sticking there like grim death.

And suddenly Apache broke into a frantic gallop, heading for the gate on the trail, and it seemed that he would crash into the strong pine bars; but, under the Kid's iron hand, he rose to the leap and cleared the gate. Down the trail he went thundering at a mad gallop, as if by wild speed he sought to unseat the steady rider; but it was clear by this time that Mister Fairfax had mastered the outlaw, and that it was only a question of time before the horse gave in.

They vanished across the rolling prairie, leaving the Lazy O bunch staring in a buzzing, astonished crowd.

"He'll make it!" said Long Bill, with conviction. "Say, that guy Fairfax is some broncho buster! He sure is some broncho buster!"

Clatter, clatter, clatter!

Back from the prairie came Apache and his rider, leaping the gate and clattering on to the corral. But it was a docile Apache now, covered with dust and sweat, obedient to the rein, the devil in him quelled if not tamed.

"I guess you can turn that cayuse into the corral, Long Bill," drawled the Kid, as he dismounted. "I'll ride him agin to-morrow, but he's sure had enough for a day. Say, he's a good cayuse, and I'll be proud to ride him."

"Mister Fairfax, sir, I take off my hat to you!" said Long Bill almost reverently. "I ain't denying that I reckoned that cayuse would cook your goose, sir; but you've rode him, and I take off my hat to you, sir. The guy who can ride that-a-way is good enough to boss me and the Lazy O—and I reckon this bunch says the same!"

"You've said it!" grinned Shorty.

And there was a roar of approval from the bunch as Apache was turned into the corral.

The Kid lifted his Stetson to the cheering and walked away, smiling.

He had won the hearts of the wildest outfit in Packsaddle, and he knew—as Barney Baker, cursing in the bunk-house, knew—that from that hour he had the Lazy O bunch feeding from his hand.

THE END.

(Now, chums, look out for another topping long tale of the Rio Kid next week!)