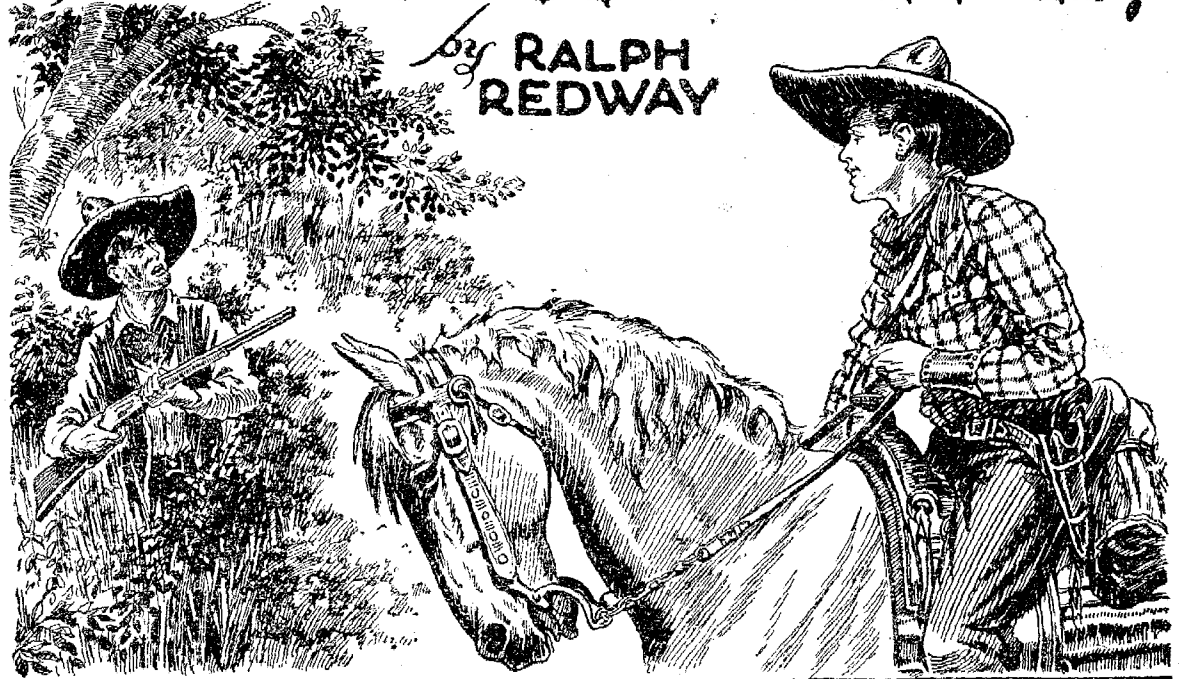


**THE OUTLAW-ADVENTURER IN THE THICK OF IT!**

*They couldn't stop the cattle-lifting on the Sampson Ranch--until the Rio Kid came along. This dare-devil outlaw saw what was going on, put on his thinking-cap, and then proceeded to create a sensation!*

# The CATTLE THIEVES!

By **RALPH REDWAY**



## OUR ROARING WESTERN YARN--STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

### THE FIRST CHAPTER. Ordered Off!

**T**HE Kid reined in his mustang on the last hill, and looked across miles of waving grass to the blue beyond. The Kid knew little of the sea, and had seen little of it. His ways had lain in other places, far from the blue waters that washed the coast of Texas, for the Frio country lay three hundred miles and more from the salt water.

Twice, perhaps thrice, in his young life, had the Kid seen the ocean rolling, not oftener than that. There were men on the ranches thrice his age who had never seen it, who hardly knew that Texas had a coast at all! And the Kid, generally speaking, did not think much of the blue water, and did not envy the men who went down to the sea in ships. As a method of locomotion, he chose the saddle on a good horse, with firm ground under thundering hoofs. Sails did not appeal to him, nor steam, either on a ship or a railway train.

But as he came in sight of the Gulf of Mexico from the brow of the hill, the Kid drew rein, and sat idle in the saddle, looking at the far stretch of waters with interested and admiring eyes.

"It's the big wash, old hoss," he told the grey mustang.

The Kid's eyes, keen as an eagle's, swept far and wide. Far out on the shining waters were sails—a schooner, a lugger, a brig—though the Kid would have admitted freely that he could not have told one rig from another. But he could admire their graceful gliding, and the sun catching the sails, the white wake glistening behind the shining blue waters stretching round them.

THE POPULAR.—No. 518.

One of the vessels—a schooner, had he known it—was heading in to the shore, making long tacks against the breeze that blew off the Texa plains, and the Kid watched it with interested, if perplexed, eyes. That galoot, the Kid told himself, was going a wroote piece to and fro to get where he wanted.

It was a lonely stretch of shore that lay before the Kid's eyes. He always kept clear of towns if he could. The sights of Galveston and Corpus Christi had no attraction for him. And it was not to see the rolling blue waters of the great gulf that he had come.

He had kept his compact with Jake Watson to ride out of the Frio country, and he had hit the trail for the east simply because it led away from Frio. He had ridden for days, and would have ridden for days more, had not the Gulf of Mexico lain in the way.

Now he was at journey's end, for he had no fancy for blue waters. The Kid, a handy man in all that pertained to horses and cows and ranch work generally, grinned at the idea of trying his luck on shipboard. And yet, had he guessed it—which he was far from doing—Fate had a cinch on the Kid, and he was to make a much closer acquaintance with the blue sea that rolled afar.

Right and left, as he looked down from the hill, the coast stretched. If there was the haze of a town in the distance, it was too far off even for the Kid's eagle eye to pick it out with certainty. Down by the waters was a collection of buildings by a little inlet, not to be called a town—not half the size of the cow-towns that the Kid knew. A few Mexican adobe buildings and a score of shacks, the Kid could see.

"That'll be San Pedro, old hoss," he said to the mustang.

Inland, to the Kid's right, he made out the distant buildings of a ranch-house.

The Kid wheeled his horse a little, and looked away towards the ranch; more interested in that than in the sea.

The Kid was considering. Long hundreds of miles lay between him and the Frio country, where he was known, where his name was on every man's tongue, and where a reward of a thousand dollars was on his head. In many other regions of that far-flung State he was known and looked for. But here, in this quiet stretch by the blue waters of the gulf, it seemed to him likely enough that the name and face of the Rio Kid had never penetrated, that to the ranchers of this country he would be nothing but a cow-puncher who had ridden in from the West. And the Kid was tired of riding lonely trails and camping in the lone chaparral. His heart yearned for the corrals and the horses and the herds, and the cheery good-fellowship of the bunkhouse. The Kid packed a substantial roll, and could have eaten the bread of idleness had he liked. But he did not like.

He turned his horse down the hill at last, and rode at a canter towards the distant ranch.

The sea disappeared from his sight, hidden by a fold of the grassy prairie. The Kid forgot it.

Cattle were grazing in bunches on the plains. The sight of the long-horns was pleasanter to the boy puncher's eyes than the sea had been.

Between him and the distant ranch buildings lay a stretch of timber, through which a well-marked trail ran. The Kid followed the trail, winding under the great branches of spreading cottonwoods.

But he had not penetrated a score of yards into the shadows of the wood, when a Stetson hat lifted from the thicket by the trail, and the barrel of a rifle glimmered from amid the pecans and pendant Spanish moss.

"Halt, you 'un!"

The Kid pulled rein with a smile.

He figured that it was some suspicious puncher who had spotted him for a stranger, and wanted to know his business. He did not touch a gun. He sat his halted horse, with a smile on his face, as the man who had challenged him emerged from the trees.

"I reckon you're on the wrong trail, stranger," said the man with the rifle, eyeing the Kid.

The Kid eyed him in turn.

The man was no puncher. He looked like a gunman now that the Kid saw him squarely.

But the Kid's answer was cheery and civil. He had not come to the San Pedro country hunting for trouble.

"I reckon not, feller," he answered good-humouredly.

"You don't belong to Old Man Sampson's bunch, you don't?" said the man with the rifle.

The Kid grinned.

"Never heard of Old Man Sampson, and I sure ain't one of his bunch," he assented.

"Yep, I reckon I ain't seed you around before."

"I'm from the Rio Grande," the Kid explained genially. "Is this how you meet strangers in this section, with a gun in your grip, feller?"

The man grinned sourly. He was a burly, grim-faced fellow, with a knife-scar across his cheek that showed white in the tan of the skin. He looked as tough a man as the Kid had ever seen in any cow-camp.

"I reckon I've said you're on the wrong trail, pilgrim," he said. "You want to turn that there cayuse of yourn right round, and beat it, pronto!"

"And why?" asked the Kid.

"Because this hyer rifle will go off, stranger, if you don't," said the man with the scar. "This hyer timber ain't healthy for strangers, and I'm telling you."

The Rio Kid sat in the saddle and looked at him. The man's rifle was half-raised, his look threatening. The Kid was lightning on the draw, and he had no doubt that he could have pulled a gun, and dropped this bulldozer in his tracks, before the rifle could have hurt him. And it went against the grain with the Kid to be bulldozed. Something, evidently, was going on in the timber, and this man was posted to watch the trail, and evidently it was something that strangers' eyes were not desired to see. The Rio Kid was powerfully tempted to try conclusions with the scarred gunman, and look into the matter further.

But he repressed that temptation. He had not come a-shooting to the San Pedro country. If he could help it, the walnut-butted guns should not be drawn from their holsters. What was going on in the timber was no business of his, he told himself, and, though he hated to be bulldozed, he wanted to keep clear of burning powder if he could.

Like many who did not know the Rio Kid by sight, the gunman took him for what he looked—a handsome boy puncher, and nothing more. As the Kid, after a brief pause, wheeled his horse, the gunman had no doubt that he had scared him off, and he grinned contemptuously.

That contemptuous grin tempted the Kid hard; he was very near to giving

the scarred man the surprise of his life. But he refrained.

"Feller, if you're particular about it, I guess I'll hit the back trail," he said amiably.

"Quit chewing the rag, and beat it!" grunted the other.

"Sure!" assented the Kid. "So-long!"

"Git!"

The Rio Kid rode back the way he had come, out of the timber.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER. Hornin' into Trouble!

HERE was a discontented frown on the brow of the Rio Kid.

By a roundabout trail, avoiding the wide stretch of timberland, he rode for the distant ranch.

It added three or four miles to his way; but three or four miles mattered nothing to the Kid or to the black-muzzled mustang.

It was backing down before the bullying gunman that worried the Kid.

More than once, as he rode on at an easy gallop, he was tempted to turn back, penetrate into the timber, and hand out to that gunman what he had asked for.

The fellow, taking the Kid for a young puncher who was easily scared by a scowling gunman, had been left in the belief that he had frightened the Kid away. It was a galling reflection.

Once the Kid drew rein, his mind made up to return and give the ruffian what was coming to him. But he shook his head and rode on again.

"Dog-gone the pesky gink!" growled the Kid. "He don't matter a continental red cent, anyhow. He sure gets my goat, but—dog-gone him!"

And the Kid resolutely dismissed the gunman from his mind, and rode on to the ranch.

The timber dropped out of sight in the folds of the rolling prairie behind him as he came nearer to the ranch buildings.

A puncher who was riding on the skirts of a bunch of cattle looked round at the thudding of hoofs, fixed his eyes keenly on the Kid, and rode across to intercept him.

The Kid reined in.

This man was evidently a member of the ranch outfit, a puncher in spurs and chaps, with a bronzed face under a Stetson hat.

"What you want hyer, stranger?" asked the puncher, eyeing the Kid.

"I guess I'm moseying along to the ranch," answered the Kid. "Say, feller, any room for a good man on the pay-roll?"

"I reckon Old Man Sampson ain't looking for strangers to take into the bunch," drawled the cowboy. "If you're up from the coast town, I guess you can save yourself the trouble."

"But I ain't!" smiled the Kid. "I'm from the Upper Rio Grande and the Pecos. Say, you fellers hyer got any grouse agin the galoots down in San Pedro?"

"You've said it," answered the puncher. "I guess they're too keen on cheap beef down in the town to please this hyer bunch. If you'll take my advice you'll beat it without seeing Old Man Sampson."

"Oh, sho!" said the Kid. "Does your boss bite strangers?"

The puncher grinned.

"There's a dozen cows missing from the herds, and the old man is sure as mad as a hornet," he answered. "We ain't gone on strangers on this hyer ranch, and I guess I ought to turn you back."

"Forget it!" said the Kid cheerily; and he gave his mustang a touch of the spur, and rode on towards the ranch.

The puncher stared after him doubtfully, and then clapped spurs to his broncho, and rode in pursuit of his Kid.

"Say, bo!" he shouted.

The Kid looked back.

"Stop, I'm telling you!" shouted the puncher; and he lifted a Colt from his belt and waved it in the air.

The Kid halted again.

With a clatter of hoofs, the puncher came up.

"Beat it!" he said. "I ain't saying that you don't look square; but the boss' orders is to keep strangers off the ranch, and I guess that goes. Beat it back to where you came from!"

The Kid's eyes gleamed.

This was the second time in an hour that he had been ordered to take the back trail, and the Kid was tired of getting orders.

"And if I don't beat it!" he asked.

The puncher half raised his revolver.

"You better!" he said briefly.

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid.

"Old Man Sampson's orders is to keep strangers off, and drive 'em off at the end of a gun if they raise objections," said the puncher. "Now get going. I guess—"

The puncher broke off suddenly.

A six-gun had appeared, as if by magic, in the Kid's hand, and the muzzie was looking him full in the face.

"Keep that gun down, feller," said the Kid quietly. "I reckon I ain't hunting trouble, but if you lift that shooter you get yours!"

"Great snakes!"

The puncher glared blankly at the Kid. But he did not lift his gun-hand. The Kid's eyes were gleaming like steel over the levelled six-gun.

"Drop that Colt!" said the Kid tersely.

For a second the puncher hesitated, his face red with rage. Then the Colt dropped into the grass.

"Now beat it back to your cows!"

The puncher breathed hard.

"You goin' on to the ranch?" he asked.

"Sure!"

"I reckon you'll get yours—the boys there can see you—"

"I reckon they're welcome to see all they want!" said the Kid coolly. "I've told you to beat it!"

"You've got the drop," said the puncher, shrugging his shoulders. "I guess I'll come along and help to plant you when the outfit get through with you. You can't bulldoze Santa Fe Sam this-a-way!"

And he galloped off to the herd he had left, leaving his revolver in the grass where it had dropped.

The Kid glanced after him curiously, and then rode on to the ranch.

Three or four punchers were standing by the buildings, watching him as he rode up. The Kid knew that they had observed that little scene from the distance. More men came from various quarters and joined the watching crowd, till nearly a dozen of the Sampson outfit stood there, their eyes on the approaching horseman. From the door of the ranch-house, a tall man with a white moustache and grizzled hair, stepped, and strode towards the group, and then fixed his eyes on the Kid. The Kid could guess that this was Old Man Sampson, the boss of the ranch.

That the looks of the ranch crowd were hostile the Kid could hardly fail

to note. But he rode on cheerily, as if all were friends there. There was a smile on his face, but the Kid was getting a grinch. His temper was rising, and he was ready for trouble if it came.

He drew rein with a clatter of hoofs in front of the frowning group. Two or three of them had dropped hands on their guns, but no weapons were drawn yet.

The man with the white moustache, his tanned face dark with anger, strode towards the Kid.

"Who are you?" he rapped out. "Puncher from the Rio Grande," answered the Kid amiably. "You can call me Carfax, if you're keen on the name."

"What do you want here?" "Punch cows." "No new man wanted in this hyer outfit."

"Well, I'll tell the world!" sighed the Kid. "You're losing a good man, Mr. Sampson."

"You held up Sante Fe Sam, back there on the prairie!" rapped out the rancher. "You was seen to do it."

"Sure!" assented the Kid. "The galoot wanted to stop me on the trail. But I ain't hurt the feller any. He was a good little man, and did jest what he was told."

"I guess you'd have been wise to turn back when you was told," said the rancher grimly.

"Oh, sho!" said the Kid. "If you don't want a man in your outfit, I guess you're going to let a galoot bed down for a night, ain't you? I've never struck a ranch in Texas where a stranger was turned away from the chuck-house."

Old Man Sampson scowled. "I guess this ranch is as hospitable as any in Texas!" he growled. "But we ain't gone on cow-thieves and gunmen here."

The Kid's eyes gleamed. "You calling me a cow-thief?" he demanded.

"I guess you know as much as any galoot about the beef that's missing from this ranch. You've horned in where you ain't wanted, and held up one of my men under my eyes. I guess this is a new stunt of them thieves down in San Pedro to get one of the gang on the ranch."

"Feller, I ain't never set foot in San Pedro, and never saw the place afore to-day, from the top of a hill."

"So you say?" sneered the rancher. "Every day there's cows missing—and when we ride down to San Pedro they know nothing about it. They kill beef every day on this ranch, and set it to the coasting boat. I guess I ain't running this hyer ranch for the loafers in San Pedro to live on!"

"Sure!" assented the Kid, his anger fading. "I reckon if I was boss of this hyer ranch I'd ride my outfit down to the place and shoot up the town as a warning."

The rancher eyed him keenly.

"That talk don't go here!" he snapped. "You're one of the gang, and I reckon now you've horned in here you ain't getting away as easy as you came. Hand over them guns!"

The Kid backed his horse a little. There were guns in the hands of the Sampson outfit now, and dark and lowering looks were cast on the Kid.

The Kid smiled whimsically. "You sure don't lose any time in jumping on a stranger, you 'uns," he said. "I reckon I understand you're suspicious of strangers, if there's a gang working the ranch for the beef. Buc—"

"That's enough talk; light down from that hoss and bank over your guns!" snapped the rancher. "You'll be held here till we find out more about you—and if we find you're one of that gang you'll go up to a branch on the end of a riata!"

"Them beef-stealers have kinder got you on the jump, I allow," said the Kid. "But you can't rope in a galoot about my size, rancher, on them lines. I'm a stranger in this country, and I never knew anything about your trouble here with the San Pedro bunch when I horned in. I'm the man to help you handle them, if you want."

"Quit chin-wag and light down, I'm telling you!"

"You ain't taking no for an answer?" asked the Kid.

"No. Light down, or you'll get yours so sudden you won't know what hit you!"

The Kid made a movement as if to obey. The next instant he had wheeled his mustang and dashed past the corner of the bunkhouse at a wild gallop.

He did not draw a gun. The Kid wanted no trouble with a bunch of cattlemen whose tempers were raw from a cause with which the Kid could deeply sympathise. But he had no intention of being held a prisoner at the ranch on suspicion. That did not suit the Kid at all. So sudden and unlooked-for was his break that the bunkhouse was between him and the bunch before a weapon could be raised.

There was a roar of wrath from the old rancher.

"Foller him! Shoot him down!"

The whole bunch rushed after the Kid.

But the bunkhouse and a range of buildings had been placed between by the Kid's rapid manoeuvre, and the black-muzzled mustang was streaking away across the prairie at a frantic gallop, the Kid bending low in the saddle.

As the enraged punchers came rushing round the buildings the galloping horseman was already at a distance.

Bang, bang, bang!

There was a roar of guns behind the Kid; and one of the bullets came near enough for him to feel the wind of it.

But the galloping hoofs carried him swiftly out of range, and he rode on at top speed, till at last he halted on a

low hill and looked back. Five or six horsemen were starting out from the ranch in pursuit.

The Kid grinned, and rode down the farther side of the hill.

"I guess we can beat that bunch, old hoss!" he said to the mustang.

And the Kid was right; by the time the angry riders breasted the hill the Kid was far out of sight.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

#### The Kid Takes a Hand!

THE Rio Kid dismounted on the edge of the timber and tethered his horse in a thicket of pecans.

The swift mustang had easily dropped the pursuit; the ranch riders had long since turned back in angry disappointment.

After dropping them, the Kid had made a wide sweep of more than twenty miles at a gallop, and reached the hill from which he had looked out on the sea earlier in the day.

From there he had ridden down to the timber where the gunman with the scarred cheek had turned him back.

The timber lay like a black shadow on the plain, in the level rays of the setting sun. The Kid was no following the trail into it, however. He had skirted the timber, and was approaching it from the eastern side—the side towards the sea.

Having tethered his horse in deep cover, the Kid advanced into the timber, with the stealthy caution of an Apache on the warpath.

There was a grim expression on the Kid's sunburnt face.

His reception at the Sampson ranch had got the Kid's goat; but his anger at that inhospitable reception had soon evaporated. A cowman born and bred, the Kid could understand only too well the bitter anger of the cowmen whose herds were thinned by cow thieves.

The ranch, whose broad lands lay contiguous to the coast town of San Pedro, was favourably placed for the operations of the beef stealers.

It was not a matter of "rustling" cows, such as the Kid had happened on often enough on the ranches on the Pecos and the Rio Grande. The gang at San Pedro who were "working" the Sampson ranch did not drive cows.

They slaughtered cows for the beef, the coasting vessels that came into the inlet affording them a ready market.

A rancher whose cows had been rustled might hope to trail them down, identify them by the brand, and recover them. But of the slaughtered cows only the hoofs and horns were left for the punchers to discover, in hidden places on the prairie.

The Kid did not wonder that the Sampson outfit were "on the jump," with the ranch being worked on those lines.

However numerous an outfit might be, and howsoever keen a watch they kept, the great herds could not be so closely guarded as to defeat the thieves who watched for stragglers, and for chances to drive small bunches into some sunken coulee or patch of timber.

Two or three or half a dozen cows every day, or every other day, made up a total that might mean ruin to a ranch in the long run; and such thievery was harder to deal with than attempts to drive off herds.

The Kid understood it quite well. He had no grinch against the ranch outfit, roughly as they had greeted him, and narrow as had been his escape from the shower of bullets that had been dispatched after him when he rode for his freedom.

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The Kid's grouch was entirely against the cow thieves; and he had determined to take a hand in the game.

He had been puzzled, as well as angered by the gunman who had turned him back on the trail in the timber. But the Rio Kid was no longer puzzled, after what he had learned at the ranch. He could guess now easily enough what had been going on in the timber, and why the scarred gunman had been set to watch the trail there. The Kid had a hunch that the cow thieves were at work in that hidden spot, and that that was why the gunman watched the trail.

Whether that hunch was well-founded

For a few minutes the Kid watched and listened; and then he was in stealthy motion again, and a cougar creeping on its prey could not have crept more silently than the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande.

The scarred gunman was knocking out his pipe when he gave a sudden, convulsive start. The cold steel rim of a muzzle was grinding into the back of his neck, and a soft voice whispered in his ear:

"Jest one yaup, you cuss, and you get yours!"

The gunman sat quite still. The Rio Kid pressed the six-gun harder on the

a gasp from the gunman of San Pedro.

"Three!" he muttered thickly.

"Killing beef?"

"Yes."

"How they getting it down to San Pedro?"

"They got a waggon."

"When they hitting the trail?"

"Soon arter sundown."

"Any other galoot on the watch?"

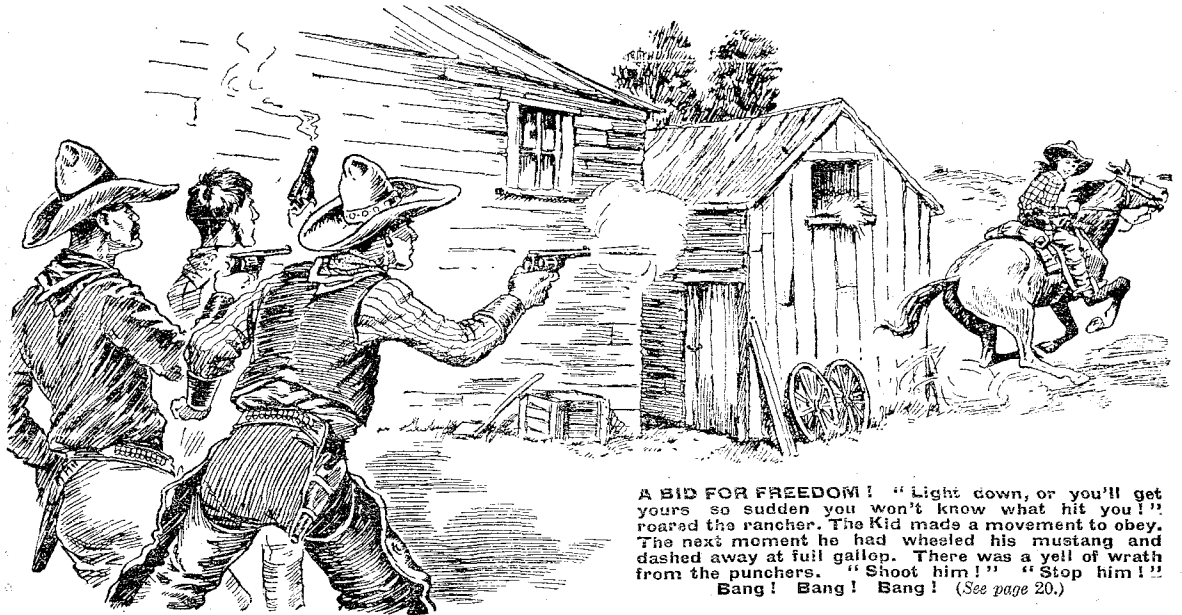
"Nope."

"How many cows they got into this timber?"

"Six."

"They killed the beef already.

guess?"



**A BID FOR FREEDOM!** "Light down, or you'll get yours so sudden you won't know what hit you!" roared the rancher. The Kid made a movement to obey. The next moment he had wheeled his mustang and dashed away at full gallop. There was a yell of wrath from the punchers. "Shoot him!" "Stop him!"  
Bang! Bang! Bang! (See page 20.)

the Kid was going to see. It was some hours now since the gunman had turned him back, but if the gang were gone the Kid had nothing to learn about trailing. But he did not figure that they were gone. If they had rounded up a small bunch of cows in the timber it was more than likely that they would wait till dark before conveying their plunder down to San Pedro.

Winding through the thick timber with the stealth of a cougar, the Kid silently approached the spot where the scarred gunman had been on guard. He made no sound as he went, stepping lightly among the clustering pecans and cottonwoods, or creeping on hands and knees among the thickets and ferns. The open trail through the timber lay before him at last, and the Kid stopped to watch and listen, peering out from thick cover.

He grinned as he looked.

A Stetson hat showed up on the beaten trail, and a scent of tobacco came to him. The scarred man was still there; he was seated on a log by the trail, his rifle across his knees, smoking, leaning back against a cottonwood. The Kid grinned, but his face grew grim. The ruffian had been content with scaring him away, as he supposed; but had a puncher of the Sampson outfit ridden into the timber, looking for lost cattle, the Kid could guess what would have happened.

"You dog-goned scallywag!" the Kid muttered inaudibly.

He could hear sounds in the timber, at a distance. He could not define the sounds, but he knew that several men, at least, were there; and he did not need telling what their occupation was.

bull-neck as he moved into sight. The gunman glared up at him, and his eyes blazed with rage as he recognised the Rio Kid. But he did not dare to move or to speak.

"Not a yaup, you dog-goned cow thief!" said the Kid quietly. "I'd spill your juice jest as soon as look at you! Quiet!"

The gunman breathed hard and deep.

"You figured that you'd scared me stiff, and scared me away," said the Kid contemptuously. "You've got another guess coming, feller!"

"You durned—"

"Forget it!"

The muzzle ground harder into the ruffian's neck, and he was silent.

With his left hand the Kid drew away the rifle, and the man put his hands behind him and turned. There was no need to speak; the Kid's gun enforced obedience. The ruffian's life hung on a thread, and he knew it. With the fellow's own neckscarf the Kid bound his hands tightly behind his back. Then, taking off the gunman's belt, he shackled his legs securely. The ruffian lay in the grass, his eyes burning up at the Kid.

Holstering his gun now, the Kid dragged him away from the trail, deep into the timber. There, with twisted lianas, he bound him to a tree.

"Now, you're goin' to talk some, feller!" said the Kid. "Jest in a whisper—your pards ain't goin' to hear. How many in the gang?"

The man did not speak.

The Kid bared the bowie knife from his belt, and pressed the point to the gunman's chest. His eyes gleamed at the ruffian like cold steel. There was

"Sure."

"And jest waiting for dark to beat it?"

"Yep."

"Good enough!" said the Kid.

He cut a strip from the gunman's shirt and gagged him securely. Leaving the man glaring after him, with eyes that burned with impotent rage, the Kid disappeared into the darkening wood.

#### THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

##### The Kid's Peace Offering!

THE three roughly-clad men who lounged by the wagon under the cottonwoods were smoking Mexican cheroots and talking in low tones, as they stared idly out of the trees towards the shore, and the shacks and doby houses of San Pedro in the distance.

The sun was low on the plains now, and the timber full of deep shadows. Only three miles from the timber lay the coast town; and over the rugged ground the masts of a schooner could be seen in the swampy inlet. The light wagon used by the beef thieves was ready packed; two horses were traced to it, and the gang were only waiting for darkness to fall to drive down to the coast.

They heard no sound to alarm them from the darkening timber. Any puncher who had ridden into the cottonwoods looking for cattle would have entered by the beaten trail that ran through the woods; and on that trail the gunman kept watch, with ready rifle. The three men with the wagon expected to hear a warning shot if an

enemy appeared, little dreaming that the sentinel was already a helpless prisoner, and that a pair of keen eyes were watching them from the thickets.

The Rio Kid watched, and listened, for long minutes, after he had sighted the gang of beef thieves.

He was satisfied that the gunman had told the truth; there were three in the gang, and no sign or sound of others.

Three cow thieves, all of them armed, and as desperate a crew as the Kid had ever seen, had no terrors for the boy outlaw.

Satisfied at last, the Kid stepped softly from cover, and advanced at a quick run towards the wagon.

At the cracking of a twig under his foot, the trio spun round as if moved by the same spring.

They found themselves looking at two leveled guns, with the Kid's eyes glittering over them.

"Hands up!"

The Rio Kid rapped out the words staccato.

The San Pedro gang stared at him blankly. At the sound of his step they had expected to see their comrade from the trail; but with the caution of their kind they had grasped their guns as they turned. But the leveled six-guns in the Kid's grasp daunted them, and they stared at him in rage and uncertainty.

"Hands up, you durned scallawags!" rapped out the Kid sharply. "Let them guns alone, and put up your paws, or it's you for the long jump!"

Slowly, savagely, two of the ruffians put up their hands. But the third, with a desperate oath, wrenched out his revolver and threw it up to fire.

Bang!

There was a wild yell from the cow thief as his right arm dropped to his side, shattered at the elbow by the bullet.

"You 'uns want yours?" snapped the Kid, his eyes flashing menace.

"Hold on, pardner!" gasped one of the ruffians. Both had their hands high above their heads. "You're the doctor, sure! Pass, pardner!"

"Keep to that!" growled the Kid.

He advanced into the glade. The wounded man was leaning against a tree, white as death, groaning out curses. Hoistering one gun, the Kid, with his free hand, disarmed the two cow thieves, tossing their Colts into the wood. Then he signed to them to get into the wagon.

"Look here, feller—" began one of them.

"Prcnto!" rapped out the Kid.

They clambered in, muttering curses. The Kid followed them in, picked up a rope, and threw a loop round them. In a few minutes they were secured, bound with their own lasso.

Cursing in low, deep tones, the two cow thieves lay bound and helpless, on the stack of beef they had aimed to drive down to San Pedro, but which was never to reach the coast town.

The Kid lifted the wounded man into the wagon, and bound up his arm with his neckscarf, binding the other arm to his side.

"I guess you 'uns are fixed!" he remarked cheerfully.

"You dog-goned puncher—"

"Oh, can it!" interrupted the Kid.

Leaving the wagon, and the prisoners bound in it, the Rio Kid plunged into the timber. He returned very quickly, leading his mustang, and driving the gunman before him.

"Hop into that hearse, feller!" said the Kid.

"I guess—"

"Hop in, I'm telling you!"

The Kid's eyes gleamed menace, and the scarred gunman clambered clumsily into the wagon, his arms bound behind him.

The Kid, with a cheery grin, led the horses out of the timber, on the side towards the Sampson ranch. The black-muzzled mustang ambled at his side.

"Where you heading, gol-darn you?" yelled one of the prisoners in the wagon.

"I guess we're hitting the ranch as fast as this hyer hearse can travel!" answered the Kid.

"Dog-gone you!" the man yelled in affright. "That bunch will string us up, if they get us, with the beef in the wagon!"

"I guess if they do you'll get what's coming to you sooner or later!" answered the Kid coolly.

He led the wagon out of the timber on to the open prairie, and then mounted to the driver's seat and gathered up the reins. His quirt cracked, and the horses trotted, the mustang trotting behind.

Over the darkening prairie the Kid drove, towards the ranch, to an accompaniment of mingled oaths and pleading from the captured cow thieves. The Kid did not heed them. The last rays of the sun disappeared as the wagon rumbled on; and the lights of the ranch and the bunkhouse gleamed out ahead.

There was a clatter of hoofs as the Kid turned into the beaten trail that led up to the ranch. A puncher loomed up in the shadows.

"Hyer, you!" he hailed.

It was Santa Fe Sam, the puncher on whom the Kid had pulled his gun that afternoon.

The Rio Kid shouted him a cheery greeting.

"All O.K., feller—you don't want to pull a gun! I'm sure hitting the ranch with a surprise packet for Old Man Sampson."

The puncher rode up to the wagon, stared into it, and stared at the Kid.

"Jumpin' gophers!" he ejaculated. "What's this lay-out?"

"Cow thieves!" said the Kid cheerily. "I guess I'm toting the beef where it belongs, and the thieves along with it—I reckon Old Man Sampson would like to talk to them a piece."

"Dog-gone my boots!" yelled the puncher in amazement. "I allowed I was going to fill you full of holes, feller, next time I seed you; but this sure lets you out. Gee-whiz! I guess Old Man Sampson will sure be ticked to death when he sees this outfit!"

And the puncher, wheeling his horse, rode ahead of the Kid to the ranch, cracking his quirt, and yelling to the bunch. By the time the Kid drove up a crowd of punchers were gathered, with the rancher, waiting for him. They gathered round the wagon; but there was no drawing of guns now, no sign of hostility. The Rio Kid threw down the reins and dropped to the ground and called to his mustang.

"You sure gave me the frozen mitt when I humped along here, you 'uns," he said. "But I ain't got no kick coming. You'll find your beef in that hearse, Mr. Sampson; and the gang that have been running it down to San Pedro. Adios!"

"Stop!" rapped out the rancher.

"I guess I'm through," answered the Kid.

"You've rounded up the toughest gang in San Pedro," said Old Man Sampson. "I've had my eye on that gang for a month of Sundays, and I reckoned they was the bunch that was working the ranch; but I never could prove it up agin them. You got them on the prod. I take back all the things I said to you, puncher—I own up I was mad. You rounded up that gang, and got back the beef, on your lonesome!"

The Kid smiled.

"That's the size of it, rancher. I give 'em to you."

"I've sure got a hunch to string them up out of hand!" growled Old Man Sampson. "But I reckon they'll keep for the pen. But you ain't hitting the trail none, young feller. You asked me for a job on this ranch; and now I'm asking you to join the outfit, and I guess the boys'll give you a welcome."

"Sure!" said the punchers in chorus.

The Kid nodded and smiled.

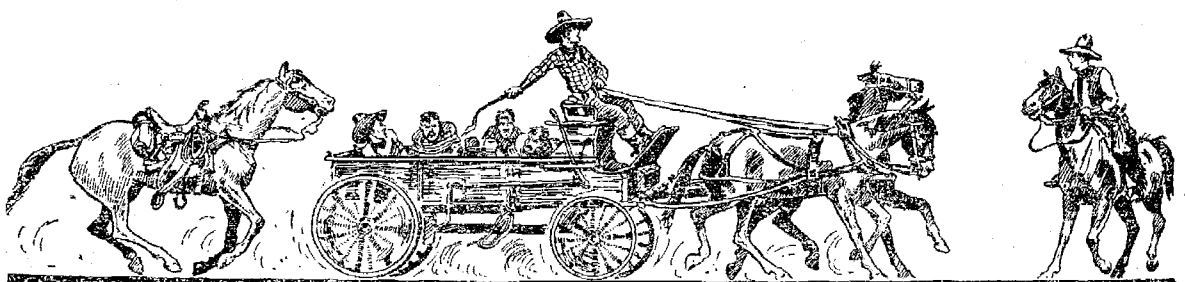
"It's a cinch!" he said.

And he turned his mustang into the corral.

The next day the Rio Kid was riding range with the Sampson outfit, with a cheery face and a light heart. Contented days followed for the Kid; though he wondered, at times, whether the trouble that ever dogged him would find him out once more, and how long it would be before it found him.

THE END.

(The Rio Kid is not left long in peace. You'll find this dare-devil boy outlaw well in the thick of a rousing adventure next week, chums. Look out for: "RUCTIONS ON THE SAMPSON RANCH!" another fine long Western tale.)





**X A HAPPY NEW YEAR-CHUMS! X**

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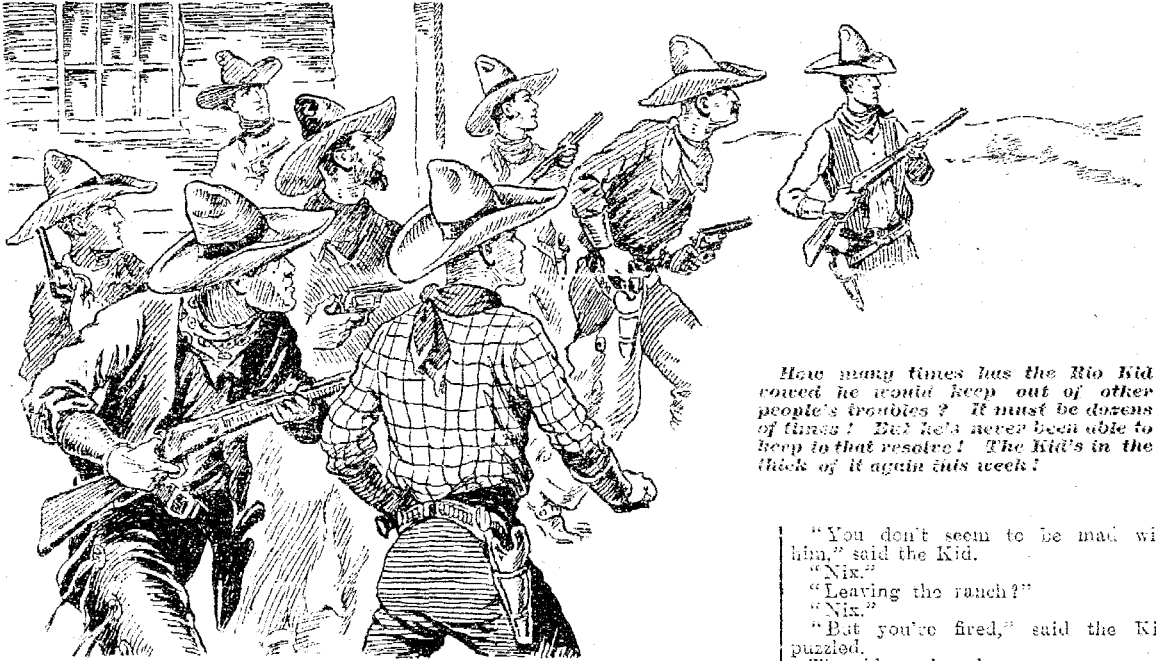
**2d**  
EVERY  
TUESDAY.



**RUCTIONS ON THE SAMPSON RANCH!**  
*A Western Yarn of Thrills & Adventure - inside*



# RUCTIONS ON THE



*How many times has the Rio Kid vowed he would keep out of other people's troubles? It must be dozens of times! But he's never been able to keep to that resolve! The Kid's in the thick of it again this week!*

## THE FIRST CHAPTER.

### Trouble on the Ranch!

"YOU posky, dog-goned, pie-faced gink!"

"Sho!"

"You gel-darned coyote—"

Old Man Sampson paused for breath. "You're fired!" he spluttered.

For a good five minutes Old Man Sampson, of the Sampson Ranch, in the San Pedro country, had been "shooting off his mouth."

The Rio Kid, standing in the doorway of the bunkhouse at a little distance, looked on, and listened, and wondered.

It was Santa Fe Sam, the range rider, who was getting the rough edge of the boss' tongue.

Every unpleasant name that the boss could think of was hurled at the young rider; and Old Man Sampson occasionally shook his fist to give additional point to his remarks. Santa Fe Sam stood before him, with a meek expression on his sunburnt face, only interjecting a monosyllable or two.

The Rio Kid couldn't help wondering. The Kid had recently joined the Sampson outfit, and for days he had been riding with the punchers. No man on the ranch knew, or dreamed, that the young puncher who had joined the outfit was anything but what he looked; the Kid was hundreds of miles now from the Frio country, and down in San Pedro, on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, they had never heard of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. The Kid hopes that they never would hear of him.

Riding with the Sampson outfit was a good deal like the old days at the Double-Bar at Frio, and the Kid was getting a happy and peaceful time. He liked the bunch, and the bunch liked him; and though Old Man Sampson was tart and testy, he never forgot that

the Kid had rendered him a big service in rousing up the gang who had been stealing beef from the ranch. No doubt that was why the Kid never got the rough edge of Old Man Sampson's tongue, as the rest of the bunch freely did.

The Kid, looking out of the bunkhouse, listening to the Old Man's tirade, wondered why Santa Fe Sam stood as meek as a boy before his schoolmaster, and let the boss bully-rag him to the top of his bent. The Kid certainly would not have been so patient had the boss turned that tirade upon him.

But the range rider did not seem to mind. Two or three other punchers glanced towards the scene, and grinned. The cook looked out of the chuck house and grinned, too. And the Kid wondered.

"You're fired!" roared Old Man Sampson, his white moustache bristling with wrath, his eyes glinting under his shaggy grey eyebrows. "You hear me shout? You can take your time instanter! Get off this ranch, you low-down, lazy, dog-goned geek!"

Auc, tired out by his own eloquence, Old Man Sampson turned and stamped back into the ranch-house and slammed the door after him.

"Sho!" said Santa Fe Sam.

And he wheeled and walked away to the bunkhouse, with a thoughtful expression on his face.

In the doorway he met the Rio Kid and gave him a grin.

"The Old Man was sure mad," he remarked.

"Sounded like," said the Kid. "What you been doing?"

"Me? Nothin'!"

"Shucks!" ejaculated the Kid. "I'll tell the world! Mean to say the Old Man poured all that out for nothing?"

"He's tilled to-day," explained Sam.

He picked up his saddle and quirt from a bench in the bunkhouse.

"You don't seem to be mad with him," said the Kid.

"Nix."

"Leaving the ranch?"

"Nix."

"But you're fired," said the Kid, puzzled.

The rider grinned.

"Half the outfit's been fired lately," he answered. "It's jest the Old Man's way of expressin' his feelin's. He would sure be surprised if I quit."

"Oh!" said the Kid blankly.

"The Old Man's ail right," explained Santa Fe Sam. "He's sure a good man, and a white man. If it helps him any to shoot off his mouth at a galoot, I ain't the feller to stop him. If it does him good, he's more than welcome."

"Oh, sho!" said the Kid.

The Rio Kid had already discovered that the bunch were devoted to their boss. Every day he heard Old Man Sampson slanging some member or other of the outfit; the Old Man's temper seemed to be raw all the time. Every man on the ranch packed a gun, and looked like a man who would use it. But they always took the boss' slanging like lambs.

I sure reckoned you'd pull a gun on him when he was calling you them fancy names," said the Kid.

"I guess a galoot who pulled a gun on the Old Man would get his so sudden he wouldn't know what hit him," answered Santa Fe Sam. "You ain't had it yet, Carfax; but when you get it, you take it quiet, same as we do. The boss is a good little man, if he does shoot off his mouth to some extent. The boss is a good man and a square man, and don't you forget it."

The Kid nodded. He had a respect for the Old Man; but he could not see himself taking that tall talk as Sam had taken it.

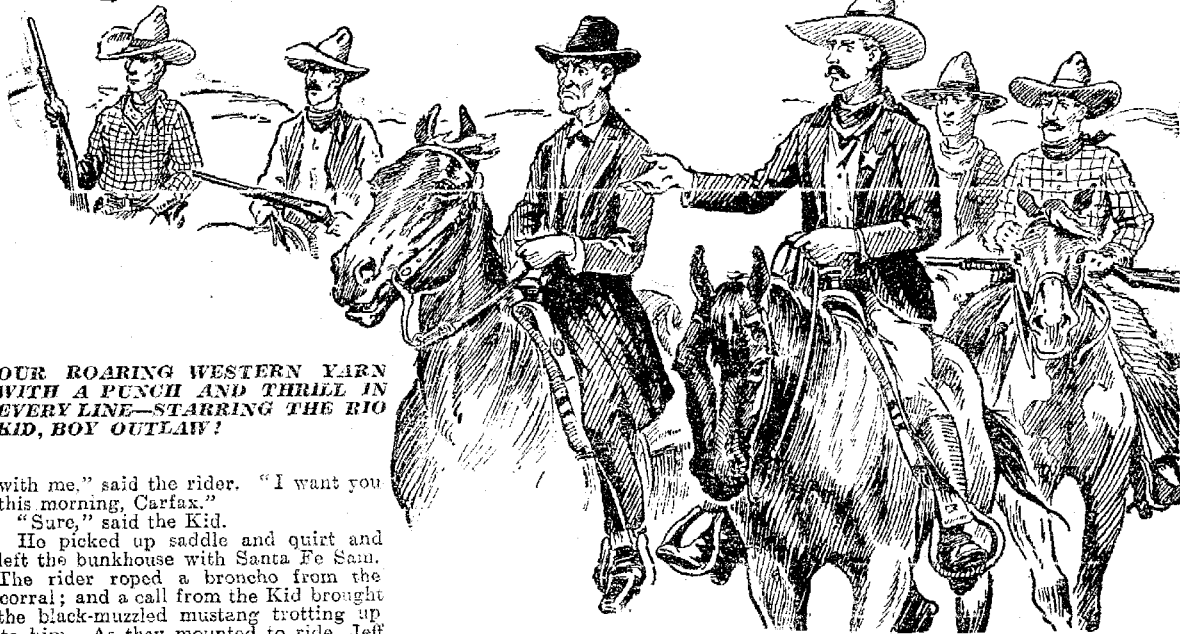
"You're new to the bunch," said Sam. "You don't savvy. The Old Man is up against trouble. But there ain't a man on this ranch that will quit, so long as it holds together. There's a lawyer coyote down at Nuce who's got his teeth into the Old Man's land, and if he's hopping mad, it's no wonder."

"Oh!" said the Kid.

"Get your cayuse and hit the trail

# SAMPSON RANCH!

by RALPH REDWAY



OUR ROARING WESTERN YARN WITH A PUNCH AND THRILL IN EVERY LINE—STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

with me," said the rider. "I want you this morning, Carfax."

"Sure," said the Kid.

He picked up saddle and quirt and left the bunkhouse with Santa Fe Sam. The rider roped a broncho from the corral; and a call from the Kid brought the black-muzzled mustang trotting up to him. As they mounted to ride, Jeff Barstow, the foreman of the ranch, came up. Barstow's bearded face was grave and grim.

"The Old Man was sure mad this morning, Sam," he said.

"Madder'n a hornet," agreed Sam.

"That durned coyote is coming down from Nuce to-day," growled the foreman. "I reckon if it would do any good I'd fill him with lead when he shows his caboza hyer."

"I guess I know he's due to-day," said Sam. "And the Old Man being so mad shows that he can't meet the mortgage."

"Sure."

"Mebbe that dog-goned scallyway, Files, won't hit the ranch to-day," said Sam.

"He's due."

"Mebbe he won't, all the same."

The foreman started a little.

"No shootin', Sam," he said.

"Shootin'," said Santa Fe Sam. "I wouldn't draw a gun on a skunk like Files. I got a quirt."

Jeff Barstow chuckled.

Santa Fe Sam gave his broncho a touch of the spur and rode away, the Rio Kid riding with him, in a very perplexed frame of mind.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### Roped In!

FAR away from the ranch buildings the trail from Nuce to San Pedro followed the bank of a creek, which later on flowed into the inlet where the little coast town stood. By a big cottonwood tree, on the creek, Santa Fe Sam drew rein, and signed to the Kid to do likewise.

The Kid reined in his mustang.

Not a word had been spoken during the ride, and the Kid wondered what the game was. It was not range riding that morning, at all events; he could see that his companion had quite other ideas in his mind, though he had not explained what they were.

Sitting in the saddle, Santa Fe Sam stared up the trail in the direction of the distant town of Nuce. There was no one in sight on the trail so far.

"I guess he'll be humping along soon," remarked the puncher.

"Who?" demanded the Kid.

"Lawyer Files, from Nuce."

"You're hyer to meet him?"

"Sure."

Santa Fe Sam cracked his quirt in the air.

"You better put me wise," suggested the Kid.

"I guess we're here to meet that durned coyote," said the puncher. "I guess I'm going to give him a quirtin', and then mebbe he'll be glad to hump it back to Nuce and keep there. He's the dog-gonedest, sneaking coyote in Nuce county, and I guess he's pinin' for it."

Far in the distance a hat bobbed on the trail. It announced the coming of a horseman, as yet out of sight.

"I guess I'll put you wise, Carfax," said Santa Fe Sam. "There's a stack of trouble at the ranch. Old Man Sampson's up agin it. Ain't you heard him blowin' off every day since you joined the bunch?"

"I sure have," grinned the Kid.

"There was drought last year, and it hit the Old Man hard," said Sam. "Then there was that pesky gang of thieves down at San Pedro, thinnin' out the herds, stealin' beef to sell to the coasting schooners. I guess you put the lid on that, Carfax, rounding up that gang as you did; but it'd been goin' on for a long time, and I guess it ate up the profits some. And then, the Old Man carries the whole bunch through the winter, instead of firing men like the other ranchers, and that costs money. But I guess the Old Man would have pulled out all right if he'd had a square deal. But he's too white a man to keep his end up with Lawyer Files.

He knows all about cows, but I guess he don't know much about signin' papers."

The Kid nodded; he could understand that.

"He got a loan from Files," went on Santa Fe Sam. "I guess he paid it, too, and a lot more; but there was interest pillin' up, and one thin' and another; and then there was a mortgage on the ranch. Every man in the bunch knows that the Old Man was rooked; Files has made money out of him hand over fist, and still there's the mortgage, and if it ain't met to-day, Files can foreclose if he likes—and you bet he's goin' to. Why, the ranch is worth ten times more'n he could claim on all his durned papers—but he's got the Old Man fixed, and he's got a pull at Nuce in the courts. He's comin' along to-day for ten thousand dollars, and I sure opine that the Old Man hasn't got half of it—that was why he was blowing off at me."

"It was sure mighty unreasonable," remarked the Kid.

"Oh, shucks!" snapped Santa Fe Sam. "Why shouldn't the Old Man blow off, if it does him any good?"

The Kid smiled.

"Ain't he got twice as many men in the bunch as he needs at this time of the year?" demanded the puncher. "He won't fire a man, the boss won't—only in the way of blowing off his mouth, and he don't mean it. I tell you, that coyote at Nuce has been bleedin' the Old Man white, and his game is near up; but so long as he's got a dollar left, he won't fire a man what's served him. Look how he gave you a job, because you rounded up that San Pedro bunch of beef stealers; and do you reckon he wanted an extra man, with half the outfit doin' nothin' at this time of year?"

"He's sure a white man," assented the Kid.



"And the bunch is goin' to stand by him," said Santa Fe Sam, with emphasis. "That Nuce galoot ain't gettin' to the ranch to-day with his dog-goned papers, to worry the Old Man. He sure ain't. Here he comes; and I've got a quirt hyer what says he ain't goin' any farther!"

"Oh, great gophers!" ejaculated the Kid. "I guess it might do him good, feller; but how's that goin' to help the Old Man?"

"Well, it won't hurt him any, I reckon," said Sam reflectively. "That coyote has got him fixed, anyhow."

The Kid whistled softly. He could understand and sympathise with the feelings of the puncher; but law was law, even when it was "squared" by a man with a "pull" in the courts. Quitting the man from Nuce was not likely, in the Kid's opinion, to help Old Man Sampson out of his legal entanglements.

But the Kid was not there to argue. Santa Fe Sam had brought him along to help, if help was necessary; and the Kid was ready to help, though he failed to see where the benefit to the Old Man would come in.

The horseman on the trail was drawing near now.

The Rio Kid watched him rather curiously. Lawyer Files, of Nuce, was not pleasing to the eye. He was a spare man, dressed in store clothes, with a Derby hat; he rode a good horse, but he rode it clumsily. His face was thin, and hard, his mouth like a gash, tight set. One of the hardest cases the Kid had ever seen, he reckoned.

Mr. Files, of Nuce, came up at a canter; and stopped as the two cow-punchers barred his way. His little, close-set black eyes gleamed at them.

"What's this?" he snapped. "Mr. Sampson sent you to meet me?"

"Nix! I reckon we've moseyed along sort of promiscuous," answered Santa Fe Sam. "You want to ride back to Nuce, Mr. Files, jest as quick as you know how."

"I'm going to the ranch."

"I guess not," said Sam coolly. "You're goin' back to Nuce, you dog-goned coyote, and you tell the galoots there what it's like to feel a cow-man's quirt across your pesky shoulders."

Santa Fe Sam's quirt whistled in the air. The lawyer from Nuce backed his horse swiftly, wheeled from the trail, and dashed into the plain, the quirt missing him by feet as it descended.

"Oh, sho!" ejaculated Sam.

With a thunder of hoofs, the man from Nuce dashed away at top speed, and the enraged puncher wheeled his broncho to pursue. But the cow-pony would never have overtaken the big-limbed "American" horse ridden by the man from Nuce, and Santa Fe Sam realised that at a glance; and his face flushed with rage as he dropped his hand to his gun.

There was a whiz in the air as the Rio Kid's riata flew.

The fifty-foot rope whirled in the air, and the loop dropped over the shoulders of the hard riding man from Nuce.

The Kid's mustang planted his fore-feet firmly against the shock, as he was accustomed to do when the rider roped a steer.

For a second the man from Nuce rode wildly on; then the rope tautened, and he was plucked from the saddle like a bag of alfalfa.

Crash!

The horse dashed on, with swinging stirrups; and Lawyer Files, of Nuce, lay in the grass, wriggling in the rope and dazed by the shock. He lay there

gasping, as the two punchers rode up, and Santa Fe Sam dropped from the saddle, quirt in hand.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

#### Quirting a Coyote!

THE Rio Kid shook loose his rope and coiled it. Lawyer Files sat up in the grass, spluttering with rage.

His horse, startled and scared, was already at a distance, and going at a gallop. The man from Nuce made a furious gesture after the vanishing animal.

"Rope in that horse!" he howled.

The Kid looked at him, and continued coiling his lasso.

"I guess you ain't giving orders hyer, Mr. Files," he remarked. "You want that cayuse, you hop after it."

"You ruffian!" roared Files.

Santa Fe Sam's grip closed on the coat collar, and Files was jerked to his feet. He stood panting for breath, glaring at the two punchers in mingled rage and dread. His foxy eyes were apprehensively on the quirt in Santa Fe Sam's grasp.

"You dare to touch me?" he panted.

"I guess I'd rather touch a polecat," drawled the Rio Kid. "You ain't a nice man to touch, Mr. Files."

"Git!" said Santa Fe Sam. "Turn round to Nuce, Lawyer Files, and hit the trail pronto."

The cowboy swung himself into the saddle.

"Do you think I can hoof it ten miles?" yelled Files.

"Sure! You got to."

"I'm going on to the ranch! This is a trick—Sampson has put you up to this!" shrieked Files furiously. "I'll sell him up! I'll boggar him! I'll drive him out of the country—"

The quirt cracked.

"You starting up the trail?" asked Santa Fe Sam. "Old Man Sampson don't know notnin' of this hyer stunt, and I guess he will jaw me like mad when he does know. But that don't cut no ice. I'm goin' to quirt you back to Nuce. Git goin'!"

And as Files still stood where he was, raving, the cow-puncher cracked the squirt round his long, thin legs, and the man from Nuce yelled with anguish, and started up the trail at a run.

Santa Fe Sam rode after him, the quirt singing in the air.

Lash after lash rang round the lawyer's legs, and across his back, and he ran frantically, yelling at every jump.

"Oh, shucks!" ejaculated the Rio Kid, staring after them. "I guess this ain't no funeral of mine, but that sure won't make the galoot feel any more sweet towards the Sampson outfit, and I'm a-shoutin' it! I reckon it ain't for me to horn in, but that sure will make the scallywag hoppin' mad."

For a moneylender who had got his grip on a rancher's land, the Kid was not likely to feel any sympathy. But he did not figure that Santa Fe Sam was doing any good, apart from the personal satisfaction he derived from quirting the lawyer.

But no doubt he had a heap of satisfaction from that. He looked like it, as he spurred his broncho after the fleeing man from Nuce, and lashed and lashed with the cracking thong.

For a mile up the trail, Santa Fe Sam pursued the hopping, bounding, yelling lawyer, lashing with the quirt, and then, at last he cantered back and rejoined the Rio Kid, grinning.

Lawyer Files, hatless, yelling raving, vanished up the creek.

"I guess that scallywag has been

asking for that, for dog's agas," said Santa Fe Sam, breathing hard. "It's sure come home to him now. He can tell them in Nuce how lawyer coyotes are handled on the Sampson ranch."

"He sure can," agreed the Kid. "You reckon that will keep him clear of the Old Man, feller?"

"Waal, I guess he won't come moseying on this ranch agin in a hurry, nohow," said the puncher.

The Kid chuckled.

"I guess that's a cinch," he agreed. "Not unless he comes with a sheriff's posse to see him through."

"I guess the boys will give the sheriff and his posse fits, if Old Man Sampson says the word," answered Santa Fe Sam. "Now we got to ride, feller—there's a bunch to be drove in from the chaparral."

And the two punchers rode away on duty, and the Kid dismissed the matter of Lawyer Files from his mind. Cattle had strayed into a patch of chaparral, and Santa Fe Sam and the Kid were busy all day rounding them up and driving them back to their pasture.

It was night when they returned to the ranch. Except for the men out with the herds, the outfit were in the bunk-house, and there was a general shout to the two as they came in. Every face was turned towards Santa Fe Sam, in the light of the kerosene lamps. Evidently the outfit knew what Sam had gone out to do that morning.

"Lawyer Files ain't turned up hyer to-day," said Jeff Barstow. "You 'uns seen anything of him?"

"I guess I sorter saw a scallywag about his size," answered Sam.

"What was he doin'?"

"Hoppin' back to Nuce with a quirt round his laigs."

There was a roar of laughter in the bunk-house. Santa Fe Sam's drastic methods with the "coyote" met with the full approval of the Sampson bunch. But the Kid could not help having his doubts. Sam was giving a description of the encounter with Lawyer Files, amid loud chuckles from the bunch when Old Man Sampson looked into the bunk-house doorway. There was silence at once at sight of the rancher. The Old Man was not in a temper now—but all the bunch would have preferred to see him in a rage, to seeing him with the anxious, harassed look that was on his kind old face now.

"You 'uns seen anything of that coyote from Nuce?" the Old Man, asked looking from face to face. "He sure ain't come."

"I—I guess he ain't coming, boss," faltered Santa Fe Sam.

"He sure was coming," said Old Man Sampson, looking more harassed than before. "I sure hope you 'uns ain't been cavorting around playing any locoed tricks on that coyote."

"What's the harm in quirting him a few, boss?" asked Sam.

"Oh, thunder," said the rancher. "That's it, is it? I sort of allowed it might be. You gink, you!"

Santa Fe Sam stood abashed.

"I guess you can jaw me all you want, boss," he said meekly. "I ain't got no kick coming."

But the boss, rather to the surprise of the bunk-house crowd, did not "jaw" the reckless puncher.

He sighed.

"I reckon you meant well, Sam," he said. "You're a dog-goned gink, but you sure meant well. I dunno that it makes any pow'ful difference, either. Forget it."

And the rancher turned away, and walked back to the house, leaving the outfit looking at one another in silence.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Guns to the Fore!

THE Rio Kid had gone into the chuck house for bacon and beans at noon the next day, when Santa Fe Sam put his head in at the door and shouted:

"Hyer, you Carfax!"  
 "Hallo!" drawled the Kid.  
 "Got your gun?"  
 "Sure."

"You'll want it, come and join the boys."

The puncher hurried away, and the Kid, leaving his dinner untasted, followed him from the chuck house, hitching round his holster as he went, to bring his gun within easy reach.

A dozen men of the outfit were gathering before the ranch-house, with Jeff Barstow the foreman at their head. Every man packed a gun, and one or two had brought out rifles. Even the cook came out of the chuck house with a Colt in his grip. The Rio Kid joined the crowd cheerfully, he was ready to draw a gun along with the bunch in any trouble that came along.

Far across the plain, bobbing over the grass, appeared a bunch of horseman, heading for the ranch.

The Rio Kid eyed them curiously.

"What's the gold-darned rookus?" he asked.

Barstow glanced at him.

"You're new here, Carfax, you can vamoose if you like. I guess this ain't no quarrel of yours. Slide out if you want."

"Aw, forget it," drawled the Kid. "If this bunch is pulling guns, I guess my gun is talking as soon as any. But put a feller wise. What's the pesky trouble?"

Barstow pointed to the distant bunch of riders. Seven men were to be counted. One, dressed in black with a Derby hat, the Kid recognised, even at the distance as Lawyer Files. The others he did not know.

"That's the sheriff's posse from Nuce!" said the foreman of the ranch.

"Great gophers!" ejaculated the Kid, in amazement. "You'uns pulling guns on a sheriff's posse?"

"We sure are," said the foreman. "If that bunch is coming to give the Old Man trouble we're pulling guns fast enough. They ain't serving any of their darned papers on the Old Man, while this outfit is around, and don't you forget it."

The Kid whistled.

"But you ain't no call to horn in," went on Jeff. "You're a stranger in this hyer country and a kid at that, and you don't want to hunt trouble with any sheriff. You slide."

The Kid chuckled involuntary. He had had more trouble with sheriffs, in many parts of Texas, than the whole of the Sampson bunch were ever likely to see.

"Feller, I don't take that kind," said the Kid. "You sure hurt my feelin's. I allow you're a bunch of locoed moss-heads if you start anything with a sheriff and his posse, but if you do, I guess it's me for a front seat."

"Jest as you like," said the foreman, shrugging his shoulders. He turned to the grim-looking bunch. "Don't you boys loose off a shot till I give the word. But them scallywags ain't getting this hyer ranch off the Old Man while we pack guns, nohow."

"I reckon not," said Santa Fe Sam. And there was a fierce, deep murmur from the group of punchers. All eyes were fixed on the horsemen from Nuce, as they came up at a gallop. The sheriff, a burly man with a tanned face, rode a little ahead, on his coat gleaming the silver star that was his badge of office. No doubt the sheriff of Nuce displayed that badge of authority intentionally, as a warning to the Sampson outfit.

The horsemen clattered up and halted. The Kid eyed them. The sheriff looked a determined man. His five deputies carried rifles across their saddles, and looked the men to use them. Lawyer Files glanced at the crowd of punchers,

in the ranch, pending the proceedings of the court!" rapped out Files. "If the money ain't paid down on the nail this very day, the mortgage is foreclosed, and I guess I ain't allowing cattle to be driven off into the hills, not if I know it. Not a stick stirs from that house, and not a hoof or a horn from the ranch. You get me?"

"I sure get you," assented the foreman. "And now you get me! Ride back the way you come, afore we pull on you!"

Files' eyes glinted.

"Sheriff, do your duty!" he rapped out.

"Boys," said the sheriff of Nuce, "You can't buck agin the law that-a-way. I ain't here for burning powder, if I can help it. But Mr. Files is within his legal rights, and I got to see him through. Don't you draw a gun, any of you bunch—in the name of the law!"

The name of the law seemed to have no terrors for the Sampson bunch. Guns were drawn on all sides.

The sheriff's hard face grew grimmer. His men were handling their rifles now; and Lawyer Files backed his horse. The Rio Kid pushed forward a little, between the two groups.

"Fellers," he said, "I reckon it ain't for me to chew the rag, but I sure do advise you to let up on this. Old Man Sampson would never stand for it if he was here. I guess we can wipe out that crowd, if we want. But what then? You'll be a bunch of outlaws, after shooting up a sheriff and his posse. Fellers, I reckon you've really got another guess coming."

The Kid spoke earnestly. He was heart and soul with the devter bunch that were prepared to risk everything to defend their boss, the hapless rancher who had been caught in the toils of chicane. But the consequences, of which the excited punchers did not think, were very clear to the



TO SAVE HIS BOSS! From the inside of his belt the Kid drew the leather pouch in which he kept his roll. From the pouch he jerked a roll of bills and counted out ten thousand dollars. "There's the money," he said, and flung it on the table in front of Files. (See Chapter 5.)

and his foxy eyes glittered at Santa Fe Sam and the Kid. But he did not speak. It was the sheriff who opened the proceedings

"Mornin', you 'uns!" he said gruffly. "Old Man Sampson to home?"

Barstow moved forward.

"Never mind Old Man Sampson," he answered curtly. "Afore you light down from that cayuse, sheriff, jest spill what you've come for."

The sheriff of Nuce made a gesture towards Files.

"Mr. Files came along yesterday, and was turned back by a puncher," he said. "He claimed protection to call on Mr. Sampson and serve him with a paper. That's why we're here!"

"I figured that it was that-a-way," assented Barstow. "I guess that coyote is hyer to collect ten thousand dollars that the Old Man don't owe him. Waal, I can tell him it won't be paid to-day. I guess the whole bunch is wise to that, and it ain't no secret. So you can ride back to Nuce and take Lawyer Files along."

"I demand to see Mr. Sampson!" snapped Files.

"He sure ain't to home at present," drawled the foreman. "Not bein' around, you can't see him!"

"Then the sheriff will leave two men

Kid's mind.

It was strange enough that the Kid, hunted by half the sheriffs of Texas, an outlaw, with a price on his head, should be the one to call for peace and obedience to the law. But the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande knew only too well the heavy price to be paid for defiance of the law, and his heart ached for the brave and reckless men who were bringing upon themselves the penalty of outlawry.

"I guess that kid's giving you good advice, fellers," said the sheriff of Nuce. "He's sure talking hoss-sense."

There was a growl of rage from the bunch.

"You pesky scallywag, if you ain't got any sand in your craw, slide out afore we burn powder!" shouted Jeff. "Quit chewing the rag and beat it!"

The Kid flushed crimson.

"I reckon it ain't that, feller," he said. "If you come to shooting, you'll sure find my gun barking with the rest. But it's a fool game, and the Old Man wouldn't stand for it!"

"You shet your yaup-trap and git!" snapped Barstow.

"I'll shut my yaup-trap, but I ain't gitting any," answered the Kid, and he ranged himself with the Sampson bunch, revolver in hand. "I'm with

this bunch, tooth and toenail, till the cows come home."

There was a clatter of hoofs, and Old Man Sampson came galloping up to the spot. His face was crimson with haste as he spurred on his horse, and he waved his hand excitedly to the bunch. Breathless, he dashed between the two contending parties.

"You loosed ginks, put up your guns!" he roared. "Sharp! Put up them shootin'-irons, you durned geeks! You figure you're going to fire on the sheriff, durn your pesky hides. Do you reckon I want to see this bunch hanged up in a row on the cottonwoods at Nuce? Put up them guns!"

"Look hyer, boss—" growled Barstow.

"Aw, can it!" snapped the rancher. "Put up them guns, I'm telling you!"

There was hesitation among the punchers. But the Kid was deeply relieved. He had seen the Old Man spurring up from the distance, and he had gained time for the rancher's arrival. The threatened bloodshed was postponed now, at least.

As the punchers growled and muttered, Old Man Sampson's anger faded out of his face, and he spoke more gently.

"Boys, this hyer ain't a matter for gun-play," he said quietly. "I been cinched by an ornery coyote, but the law's the law. No man hyer is goin' to buck agin the law. I ask you, boys, as a last favour, put up them guns, and go to the bunkhouse quiet. You ain't refusing the last thing I'm ever likely to ask, boys!"

Jeff Barstow shoved his gun back into its holster.

"It's your say-so, boss!" he grunted. And he strode away to the bunkhouse, and the punchers slowly followed him, with glares of defiance back at the horsemen from Nuce. But the Rio Kid did not follow.

#### THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Kid Works the Rifle!

OLD MAN SAMPSON turned to the sheriff.

"I reckon you don't want to be mad with the boys, sheriff," he said quietly. "They was sure a little on the prod. You can come into the house, Mr. Files; I guess it belongs to you from now on."

The "coyote" from Nuce smiled sourly as he slid from his saddle. The sheriff and his men stood by their horses as the man in black followed the rancher into the house. The Rio Kid stood for some moments in thought, and then he, too, went into the porch.

Mr. Files had sat down, already with an air of proprietorship. Old Man Sampson did not sit down. He stood facing the man from Nuce, with a grim

expression on his grizzled face. The lawyer had taken a bundie of papers from his pocket; but the old man waved them aside.

"I reckon it ain't no use chewing the rug, Files," he said. "You've come here for ten thousand dollars, and I guess you won't take half and renew."

"I guess not," said Mr. Files, showing his teeth in a smile.

"I reckoned that was the sort of ornery cuss you was," said the rancher. "You want the ranch, and you've got me fixed."

The Rio Kid stepped lightly into the room.

"I guess if you'll let a galoot born in, boss—" he said.

The rancher turned to him.

"Durn it!" he said. "You ain't no pes hyer, Carfax. I'm sure sorry your job here ain't likely to last; I guess you're a good man. But I reckon Files won't be keeping on the bunch."

"You're said it," assented the man from Nuce.

"This hyer ranch don't belong to that dog-goned coyote yet, boss," said the Rio Kid cheerfully, "and I reckon I can help you keep it out of his grip."

"Forget it," said the rancher. "Ain't I told you there ain't to be any gun-play? Quit!"

"Gun-play nothin'!" said the Kid. "You want ten thousand dollars to get clear of that buzzard, boss."

"You going to lend it to me, puncher?" asked Old Man Sampson, with a faint smile.

"Sure!" said the Kid coolly.

"What?"

The rancher spun round, and Lawyer Files' hair rose from his chair in alarm. But he sat down again with a contented smile.

"We're wasting time!" he snapped.

"I reckon that's so," said the rancher. "You git, Carfax; and don't talk foolish!"

The Kid smiled.

"Money talks!" he answered.

From the inside of his belt the Kid drew the leather pouch in which he packed his roll. From the pouch he jerked a roll of bills.

The rancher stared at him open-eyed, open-mouthed. Files sat as if glued to his chair, gasping.

One by one the Kid peeled bills from his roll; ten bills, one after another, each of the denomination of a thousand dollars.

"Carry me home to die!" murmured the astounded rancher.

Files sat as if stunned.

"Money talks!" said the Kid cheerfully. "I reckon, Mr. Sampson, that I want's exactly broke to the world when I asked you for a place on your payroll. I sure wanted to punch cows with

the bunch, seein' that I was bred to cows. But once I went fossicking for gold in Arizona, and I sure struck it rich; and when I hit the trail out of Arizona, feller, I took a hundred thousand dollars in my roll. I guess some of it's spread its ornery wings and flew; but there's sure a heap left." He turned to the man from Nuce. "Count them bills, you ornery gink, and give a receipt!"

The lawyer only gasped.

"I guess I'm dreamin' this," said Old Man Sampson, passing his hand across his brow. "I'm sure dreamin' this hyer."

"Dreamin' nothin'!" said the Kid. "Don't I keep on telling you that money talks?"

The rancher stared at the bills, and stared at the Kid. For a long minute he was silent.

"I guess I can't touch it, feller," he said at last.

"Aw, forget it!" said the Kid. "I sure know what this ranch is worth, and you'll pay it buck easy after the next round-up. I'll sure be glad to leave it in safe hands; you'll be doin' me a favour to take care of it, boss." And as the rancher still hesitated, the Kid went on: "Call it a cinch, or, by gum, I'll drill that ornery coyote there where he sits, and cinch it that-a-way!"

And the Kid whipped out a gun; and the man from Nuce started to his feet with a yell of terror.

"Is it a cinch, boss?" demanded the Kid, covering the lawyer with a gun.

The rancher grinned.

"It's a cinch," he said.

"Good enough!" drawled the Kid; and he holstered his gun and walked out.

He was humming a tune as he joined the bunch at the bunkhouse. The punchers glared at him.

"What makes you so durned spry, you gink?" snapped Jeff Barstow. "You figure that it's funny to see the Old Man sold up?"

"Sold up nothin'!" drawled the Kid. "The Old Man's fixed to square that coyote, and I'm telling you so. You watch out, and you'll see him beat it like a whipped dog!"

"You don't say!" exclaimed Santa Fe Sam.

"Watch out!" answered the Kid.

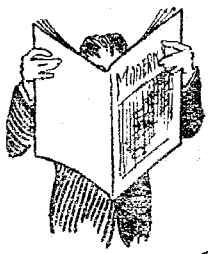
"By gum!"

Ten minutes later Lawyer Files, with a face that was white with rage and chagrin, was riding away with the sheriff's posse to Nuce. He had ten thousand dollars in his pocket, but he had lost his grip on the Sampson ranch, and lost it for ever.

And the bunch marvelled and rejoiced—and they marvelled still more a day or two later when they learned that Carfax, the new puncher, had become a partner in the ranch. So the Old Man had decided; and the Kid let him have his way. But, partner as he was, the bunch found no change in the Kid; still the same cheery comrade in the bunkhouse and on the range.

THE END.

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