

ANOTHER ROARING YARN OF WESTERN ADVENTURE!

# FIVE-HUNDRED-DOLLAR SMITH!

by RALPH REDWAY



A hunted man will always find a friend in the Rio Kid. But let him try to double-cross this young boy outlaw, and there is trouble.

## THE FIRST CHAPTER. Hunted Down!

**T**HE spattering of shots from the prairie startled the Rio Kid from his siesta. The boy outlaw of the Rio Grande lay deep in ferns, resting lazily in the heat of the Texan day. Overhead, the tangled boughs of the chaparral shut off the blaze of the sun that burned with tropical heat on the open prairie. The Kid lay at ease in the ferns, his head resting on his saddle. Near at hand the grey mustang cropped the herbage.

Save for the quiet crop, crop of the horse, and the chirrup of a cicada in the thicket, all was silent and still in the drowsy heat of midday.

The Kid had been thinking, half-dreaming, of old days on the Double-Bar Ranch; old days when he had ridden with the Double-Bar bunch before he had been outlawed and a price put on his head. But as that sudden spattering of shots broke the drowsy silence, the mustang raised his head from the grass and laid back his ears—and the Rio Kid leaped to his feet, his hand grasping a gun.

Thud, thud, thud!  
Faint from afar, then closer and louder came the hoof-strokes of a galloping horse.

"Shucks!" murmured the Kid, as he listened. "I guess the galoot that's riding that cayuse is sure riding it hard."

The Rio Kid had camped on the edge of the chaparral. A dozen steps, and he was looking out over the open prairie that stretched from the dusky wood, mile on mile, towards the distant Rio Pecos. Keeping in cover of the trees, tangled with masses of pendant Spaniard's beard, the Kid looked out

over the sunlit plain, wondering who was riding so hard in the blaze of the sun.

A horseman was spurring towards the chaparral. His broncho, thick with dust, soaked with sweat, was on the point of exhaustion—only the savage urging of whip and spur drove him on. The Kid's brows contracted as he looked. To save his life, the Kid would never have driven an exhausted horse so mercilessly.

But it was to save his life that the horseman was spurring. Over a grassy fold of the prairie behind three Stetson hats were bobbing. Three riders were on the track of the fugitive, and gaining on him at every leap of their horses, in spite of his savage spurring and lashing whip.

The Rio Kid looked on grimly. The fugitive had lost his hat in his wild flight. The blazing sun beat down on his face and tousled head. The Kid knew that dark, black-bearded face, the mouth that was like a gash, the hard, savage eyes set close together.

"Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith!" murmured the Kid. "Shucks! I guess them jaspers yonder will be raking in that five hundred. Sure thing!"

The fleeing broncho staggered, and seemed about to fall. A savage hand on the rein steadied him, and he panted on towards the chaparral. Bang, bang, bang! came from the riders behind. They were in full sight now, firing on the fugitive as they rode him down.

The Kid made no movement. Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith was making a desperate effort to reach the chaparral. Close as his pursuers were, he had a chance of escape once in the tangled woods and thickets. But he would never reach it—the Kid could see that. At every stride he expected to

see the over-strained broncho pitch over in the grass.

The Kid's look was dubious. For a hunted man he could feel sympathy; he had been hunted himself, and had known what it was to ride for his life with deadly foes spurring on his trail. But he had little feeling for the desperate bandit who was fleeing from the Sheriff of Plug Hat and his men.

All along the border Rube Smith was known for his desperate deeds—a gunman, a rustler, a cow-thief, a ruthless killer, with a reward of five hundred dollars on his head. Every cowman in Texas would have been glad to see Rube Smith swung up to the branch of a cottonwood, and the Rio Kid would not have been sorry.

Crash!  
Within a dozen yards of the spot where the Kid stood, screened by hanging lianas, on the edge of the chaparral, the over-driven mustang crashed suddenly to the earth.

The rider fell heavily. The Kid saw him strive to rise, and sink back again, helplessly. One leg was pinned under the fallen horse.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith lay at the mercy of his pursuers. There was a shout of triumph as the Plug Hat men rode on to secure him.

Then the Kid woke suddenly to action.

"Bad man" the outlaw was—the most lawless and desperate border ruffian in Texas. But the Kid felt a stirring of sympathy as the ruffian lay at the mercy of his foes. He would not see him taken.

From the green of the chaparral came a sudden blaze of firing as the Kid's walnut-butted .45's roared.

Bang, bang, bang!  
The Sheriff of Plug Hat riding a

few yards ahead of his men, gave a yell as the Stetson spun from his head. His followers reined in their horses as the lead whizzed by their ears.

Bang, bang!

For a second the three riders stared at the green wall of the chaparral, with the whizzing lead buzzing round their heads; and then they wheeled their horses and rode madly back the way they had come. Plying whip and spur, they dashed away over the prairie, riding for their lives.

The Kid grinned as he threw lead after them.

The bullets went close, grazing here an arm, there a shoulder or an ear. The Rio Kid could place his lead where he liked. Not one of the sheriff's men was hit; but every one of the three figured that he had had the closest call of his life as he rode frantically out of range of the hidden marksman.

They vanished across the grassy plain, nothing doubting that the fleeing bandit had led them into an ambush from which they had narrowly escaped.

The Kid, his smoking guns in his hand, stepped out of the trees and advanced towards the fallen bandit.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith had given up his efforts to drag his pinned leg loose. The horse did not stir. It was death-stricken as it fell, and it lay, an inert mass, its weight pinning the bandit's limb, crushing it into the earth. Lying on his side, raised on an elbow, the bandit dragged a six-gun from his belt, his eyes glaring over the barrel at the Rio Kid as he came out of the chaparral.

"Drop it, feller!" ordered the Kid. "You pesky jay, don't you savvy that I've jest saved your neck—though it sure wasn't worth saving! Drop it, hombre."

The Kid's gun looked full in the face of the panting bandit.

"The Rio Kid!" breathed Rube Smith.

"Sure!"

The bandit's savage eyes glared at him over the six-gun. But he knew—none better—that the Rio Kid's aim never failed. A glitter came into the Kid's eyes.

"Drop it, you durned coyote—"

The six-gun sagged into the grass.

"I guess it's your say-so, Kid," said Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith hoarsely; and he dropped the gun.

"You've said it," agreed the Rio Kid.

He picked up the bandit's revolver and, with a swing of his arm, tossed it away over the tree-tops into the chaparral.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

In Camp!

THE wattle jacal was built in the heart of the chaparral, by a little stream that flowed and rippled amid tangled mesquite and pecan and post-oak. It was a flimsy hut, but shelter enough for the Rio Kid. In these days the Kid was lying low.

Since the Kid had returned to his own country from Mexico foes had been hard on his trail. He had been cornered in the Mal Pais, and only his luck had saved him from the Texas Rangers. He was many a long mile now from the Mal Pais, and in the dense chaparrals of the Pecos valley his enemies were not likely to trail him down.

Still, the Kid was very wary, and for the time he was not anxious to draw attention to himself. The encounter with the sheriff's men from Plug Hat was not pleasing to him for that reason. Whether they had seen him or not,

as he fired on them from the chaparral, he did not know, but if they had they would spread the news that the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande was on hand. The Kid called himself a gink for having chipped in to save Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith from a well-deserved fate.

And he had the gunman on his hands now. Without a horse, with his leg hurt, and disarmed—the Kid had seen to that—the gunman was helpless. The Kid had brought him to the jacal where he camped, and the bandit lay now on a pile of skins in the little hut.

Night brooded over the chaparral.

It was densely dark, hardly a gleam of starlight penetrating the tangled vegetation. Outside the doorway of the jacal a low camp-fire burned on which the Kid had cooked his supper—and his guest's.

Little as he liked Rube Smith, and though he called himself a gink for having saved him, the Kid's hospitality was boundless. The hunted man was welcome to a share in the shelter of the jacal and to a share of the Kid's provender.

The Kid would be glad enough to see the last of him, and while he stayed he could not trust him an inch, but he was welcome to stay if he liked. He was a hunted man, hunted for his life, and that was enough for the Kid.

"Grub, feller!" called out the Kid cheerily, when the flap-jacks and bacon and beans were ready.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith crawled from the bed of skins.

His leg had been hurt where it had been pinned under the dead broncho; but the Kid had examined it and found that no bones were broken. It seemed to the Kid that the bandit was making much of a slight injury, though Rube Smith, strong and savage and desperate, was hardly the man to play the invalid.

He sat on one side of the little fire, and ate his supper with voracious appetite. While he ate he stared at the Kid in the ruddy gleam of the fire.

"You figure it's safe to light a fire hyer, Kid?" he asked.

"Sure! It won't be seen from the plains," answered the Kid. "I reckon I'll stamp it out, though, afore I turn into my blankets."

"I guess I never reckoned I'd meet up with you, Kid," said the bandit. "Last I heard of you, they had you cinched in the Mal Pais, down by the Rio Grande."

The Kid grinned.

"I guess they never got away with it," he answered. "But I allow it was a close call."

"Lucky for me you was around here," said Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith. "Them guys had me dead to rights when you horned in."

"They sure had."

"I guess I'm powerful obliged, Kid," said Rube Smith, his shifty eyes on the handsome, sunburnt face across the fire.

"But what's the big idea in taking my hardware off me, feller?"

"You're sure safer without it," said the Kid. "You might get a hunch to pull a gun if you had one, and that would mean sudden death for you, feller."

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith laughed uneasily.

"I guess I wouldn't pull a gun on you, Kid, arter you saved me," he said. "You can sure trust me for that."

The Kid smiled, and made no reply. He trusted Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith about as much as he trusted a rattlesnake.

"Well, I reckon I don't want a gun while I'm camping here," said Rube Smith. "You're sure a white man, Kid,

to stand by a guy like this. Say, what you doing in this country?"

"Lying doggo," the Kid answered briefly. "There's a lot of guys want to meet up with me, bad, but I ain't honing to see them. What you been doing on the Pecos, feller?"

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith did not answer that question. He ate bacon and beans in silence.

His supper finished, he half-rose, and sank back again with a faint gasp.

"My leg's sure bad!" he said.

"Mebbe you'll give me a hand back into the shebang, Kid."

"Sure!"

The Kid helped the ruffian back into the jacal, and Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith sank down on the bed of skins with a faint groan.

The Kid, in the shadows of the hut, looked at him curiously. Again it was borne in upon his mind that the bandit was making much of his injury, more than the hurt to his leg warranted.

The man's record was a black one, and the Kid knew that he was none too good for any treachery. He was unmounted now, and for the sake of the Kid's horse he would have been capable of repaying the boy outlaw's service with a bullet through the head. The Kid was quite aware of it.

He wondered whether it was the bandit's game to give him an impression of being helpless in order to make some attempt on him while he slept that night. Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith was none too good for it, and a stone or a billet of wood might have sufficed for dealing with a sleeping man.

The Kid smiled at the thought. He slept like a weasel, and if the bandit had any idea of taking him by surprise when he was in his blankets he was likely to meet with a surprise himself.

"You all right now, feller?" asked the Kid.

"I guess so. You turning in?"

"I reckon I'll let you have the shebang," said the Kid. "I'm taking my blankets into the chaparral."

"You sure don't trust a guy, Kid."

"Not a whole heap!" said the Kid coolly, and picking up his blankets and slicker, he left the jacal.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith's eyes gleamed after him in the gloom.

The Kid laid down in his blankets in the thickets, by the side of his mustang.

But he did not sleep.

The camp-fire died out, and all was dark, save here and there where a gleam of starlight came through the tangled branches.

Night, full of the strange, eerie sounds of the chaparral, lay like a dark cloak round the camp of the Rio Kid.

He had lain by the mustang more than an hour, when there was a faint sound from the jacal close at hand.

The Kid smiled in the darkness.

His hand was on the walnut butt of a six-gun. He had given the fugitive bandit help and shelter, and if Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith was meditating treachery the Kid was prepared to give him hot lead, with no more compunction than if he had been a prowling wolf.

Lying silent in the thicket the Kid listened. He heard the bandit leave the jacal, and there was no sound of the dragging of an injured leg. He smiled again. His judgment had been correct; Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith's leg was bruised, but it was not disabled. He was moving easily and freely enough now.

The Kid gripped his six-gun hard. He fully expected to detect the ruffian stealing towards him in the darkness with murderous intent.

But to his surprise there was no sound of the bandit's approach. For some minutes there was silence—he knew that the ruffian was listening. Then there were faint sounds receding, and the Kid realised that Rubo Smith was leaving the camp.

The Kid whistled under his breath. Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith, with infinite caution, was stealing away into the chaparral.

Why? There was no reason why he should not have left the Kid openly, at any moment he liked. Why had he affected to be disabled, and why was he stealing away softly in the darkness? The Kid reflected on that problem for a few moments. What it meant he did not know—except that it was more than likely that it meant treachery of some sort.

The Kid quietly leaving his blankets moved silently through the thickets; and as Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith picked his slow and cautious way through the gloom of the chaparral there was one that followed behind him, unseen, unheard, like a fitting phantom in the shadows of the night.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

#### Black Treachery!

**“YOU, Rubo!”**  
 “I guess so, Jake Saunders.”  
 “You’re dog-goned late.”  
 “You been waiting?”

“Since sundown!” growled the rough-bearded man who leaned on the trunk of the cottonwood, deep in shadow, the glow of his cigar indicating where he stood, to the eyes of the bandit who came creeping from the thickets.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith stopped under the shadowy branches of the tall cottonwood, half a mile from the jacal where the Rio Kid’s camp lay. Jake peered at him in the gloom.

“I been waiting since sundown,” he repeated. “I reckon I’d have hit the trail mighty soon, Rubo. You allowed you’d be here to meet up with me at dark.”

“I guess it was a chance whether I met up with you at all,” growled the bandit. “The sheriff of Plug Hat got track of me, and I had to ride for my life.”

Jake whistled.  
 “I guess they’d have cinched me,” went on Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith, “but the Rio Kid horned in—”  
 “The Rio Kid?” ejaculated Jake Saunders.  
 “Yep.”

“I reckoned he was down in the Mal Pais—the Rangers was arter him.”

“Well, he’s here, and be horned in, and threw lead at the Plug Hat guys, and I got away,” said Rubo Smith. “He’s fixed up in a jacal in the chaparral, lying doggo. He allows that there ain’t a chance of any galoot roping in the thousand dollars that’s offered for him.”

“Gee!” muttered the other.  
 “That’s why I kept you waiting,” went on the bandit. “I didn’t figure on letting the Kid know I had a pard meeting up with me here.”  
 “He ain’t wise to it?”

“Not by long chalks, he ain’t! I’ve left him in his blankets, and I guess he won’t open his eyes till sun-up.”  
 “He’s a spy galoot, that Kid! If he spotted you getting away—”

“He didn’t!” grinned Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith. “He took his blankets out into the chaparral; he reckoned he wasn’t safe too near me in the dark. He sure was right; I’ve got an old rouch agin him, and if he’d left me a run—”

He gritted his teeth.

“What’s the game, then?” asked the other. “I can sure fix you up with a gun; but you don’t want to go to gun-play with the Kid. He’s a bad man to crowd.”

“I ain’t crowding him, I guess.” The bandit paused a moment. “That Kid’s worth a thousand dollars, Jake. I sure can’t walk into Plug Hat or any other cow-town and tell them where to cinch him. I reckon it would be shooting on sight if I did.”

Jake chuckled.  
 “It sure would,” he assented. “I guess they’d rather have you than the Kid, Rubo.”

“That’s so. But they ain’t wise to you, Jake—no guy in this section knows that you work with me. You can walk into any cow-town on the Pecos; you wouldn’t be much use to my outfit if you couldn’t. All they know of you is that you’re a puncher on the Sunset Ranch. They ain’t wise to it that you’re in with my bunch—”

“If they was, I guess I shouldn’t be here chewing the rag with you,” grinned Jake. “I should sure be strung up on a limb.”

“You get me?” muttered Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith. “You hustle into Plug Hat, and put the sheriff wise that you know where to lay hands on the Rio Kid. He sure will jump at the chance of roping in that pesky firebug. Bring the sheriff and his men around hyer at dawn, and they’ll have the Kid jest where they want him. They can surround his camp and close in on him, and he won’t have a dog’s chance of getting clear, like he did in the Mal Pais. You get me?”

“Sure!”  
 “It’s a thousand dollars,” muttered the bandit. “You rope in the dollars, Jake—easy as falling off a log. We divide afterwards.”

“Looks a sure thing,” said Jake.  
 “It’s jest pie,” said Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith hoarsely. “The Kid ain’t got a suspicion. He don’t trust me any, but he ain’t wise to it that I’ve got a pard here—and a pard that can show up in any cow-town without being known as one of my outfit. It’s jest pie.”

“You’ve said it!” agreed Jake.  
 There was an eager muttering of voices as the bandit gave his confederate the description of the spot where the jacal was built by the little stream.

“I guess I know the place,” said Jake Saunders. “I been all through this chaparral. I reckon I could find it with my eyes shut now you’ve put me wise. You sure the Kid will be there?”  
 “It’s a cinch! He won’t miss me till dawn—and then, if he does, how’s he to get wise to this racket? He knows I daren’t show up in any town in Texas. He don’t know about you.”

“You ain’t going back?”  
 Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith chuckled hoarsely.  
 “Not by a jugful! I reckon the Kid might get suspicious when the Plug Hat guys come around, and he might let me have the first bullet. And I sure don’t want the Plug Hat galoots to find me along with the Kid—they’d be powerful pleased to string me up on the same branch, I reckon. Nope—I ain’t going back. You hit for Plug Hat now, jest as fast as your cayuse can raise the dust, and you’ll get the sheriff by dawn. I’ll see you agin to-morrow at sundown. I guess I can camp here safe; it’s more’n half a mile from the Kid’s camp, and they’ll come to it from the other way, with you guiding them.”

“Sure!” assented Jake.  
 “Lend me a six-gun, and beat it.”

A few minutes later there was the sound of a horse pushing through the thickets, followed by the ringing of distant hoofs when Jake Saunders reached the open plain and galloped for the cow-town.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith stood under the cottonwood, smoking a cigarette, and holding in his hand the six-gun Saunders had given him. His grip was hard on the butt of the Colt, and a savage light burned in his eyes. His thoughts were of the Rio Kid, and the temptation was on him to return to the jacal, now that he had a weapon in his hand, and give the boy outlaw “his.” His grouch against the Kid was an ancient one, and the Kid saving his life had made no difference to it.

“Dead or alive!” muttered the bandit aloud. “They want him dead or alive—and I guess Jake would cinch the reward if they found him dead. And they’d be surer of finding him—with a bullet through his heart, dog-gone him! I’ve sure a hunch to go back—”

But the bandit shook his head. No doubt the Rio Kid would be securely roped in when the jacal was surrounded by the sheriff of Plug Hat and a score of determined men. But gun-play, single-handed, was another matter.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith shook his head, and thrust the six-gun into his belt. With such black treachery afoot, it was not healthy to return to the Rio Kid’s camp. Safer to camp where he was, skulking in hiding till the boy outlaw was a prisoner in hands that were not likely to loosen him once they had fastened their grip on him. It was an easy thousand dollars, the bandit reflected.

Something that stirred in the shadows made the bandit start and drop his hand again to the gun—he had thrust into his belt. But before he could draw it a rim of steel was pressing against his neck, and a soft, pleasant voice said in his ear:

“Forget it, feller! You draw that gun and you’re a dead coyote!”

The heart of the bandit missed a beat as he heard the voice of the Rio Kid.

### THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

#### In His Own Snare!

**T**HE Rio Kid smiled pleasantly in the shadows of the cottonwood branches at the startled, scared face of Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith.

The bandit eyed him desperately.  
 The Kid, whom he had deemed sleeping in his camp half a mile away, was there. The Kid had trailed him when he left the jacal. How much did he know?

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith’s fingers closed convulsively on the butt of the six-gun. But it was death to draw it, and he did not venture. The Kid, with his left hand, relieved him of the gun and tossed it away in the darkness. His face was still smiling, but it was a grim and deadly smile.

“You—you trailed me?” muttered Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith hoarsely.

“You’ve said it.”  
 The Kid laughed softly.  
 “I allowed you was a pizen coyote, Rubo Smith! I sure reckoned I was some gink to get you away from the sheriff of Plug Hat. Say, you’re going to take a little pasear with me. We’re going back to camp.”

“Why?” hissed Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith, between his teeth.

“I sure ain’t so tired of your company, feller, as you are of mine,” smiled the Kid. “I reckon I’ll take a cinch on your paws before we start, and, if you

raise any objections, Rube, you want to remember that this six-gun is mighty likely to go off sudden!"

The ruffian stood still while the Kid tied his hands behind his back. In the gloom he could see the smile on the Kid's face, and the boy outlaw's tone was pleasantly mocking. But the fear of death was in the heart of the bandit who had sought to sell the Kid to his enemies in return for the saving of his life.

Taking the ruffian by one bound arm, the Kid led him away through the chaparral, in the direction of the jacal.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith stumbled on by his side.

"Your laig's sure a whole lot better'n it was," said the Kid, with gentle sarcasm. "Say, you was sure fooling me, Rube! But I guess I wasn't quite so fooled as you allowed!"

The bandit panted.

"You're wise to it, Kid—I know that. You heard me chewing the rag with Jake Saunders!"

"Every word," drawled the Kid. "You poor fish! I wasn't six feet from you all the time!"

"Then you know—"

"I guess you ain't got a lot more to tell me," admitted the Kid.

"Dog-gone you!" hissed Rube Smith. "What are you taking me back to your camp for? If you're going to drill me, you gol-darned cuss—"

"Who's going to drill you?" said the Kid, in a tone of mild surprise. "This infant sure ain't?"

"You ain't?" breathed Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith.

"Sure not."

"Then what's your game?"

"I guess you'll be wise to that, pronto."

The Kid led his prisoner on by tangled paths. Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith tramped and stumbled by his side, powerless in his hands, savagely surmising what his fate was to be. As soon as he knew that the Kid was wise to his treachery, he had expected to be shot out of hand. But the Kid did not intend to use his gun. What, then, did he intend?

The Kid did not choose to explain. In silence, he led the bandit through the gloomy chaparral, and they reached the jacal by the little stream. There was a stirring in the thicket, and Side-Kicker looked out at his master. The Kid paused to pat the glossy neck of his mustang.

"I guess we'll be hittin' the trail mighty soon, old hoss," said the Kid. "You, Rube Smith, you hump it into the shebang."

**THE KID'S PRISONER!** With a grasp on the bandit's shoulder, the Kid drove him into the wattled hut. There, with a length cut from his trail-ropes, he bound the outlaw's feet fast together. (See Chapter 4.)



Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith stopped, and faced the Kid with a desperate light in his eyes.

"Look here, Kid!"

"Get into the shebang, I'm telling you."

"You dog-goned cuss!"

"I guess I ain't got a whole lot of time to chew the rag with you, Rube Smith," said the Kid amiably. "I got to hit the horizon afore the sheriff of Plug Hat horns in with his posse. You get inside."

With a grasp on the bandit's shoulder, the Kid drove him into the wattled hut. There, with a length cut from his trail-ropes, he bound the outlaw's feet fast together.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith lay on the earth, staring up at the Rio Kid with eyes that scintillated like a snake's.

The Kid bent over him and examined his bonds carefully, and rose, as if satisfied. Then, from the doorway of the jacal, the Kid looked up at the stars through an opening of the tangled branches.

"Two hours to dawn," he remarked. "I guess I ain't got a whole lot of time. But Side-Kicker can sure cover a lot of ground in two hours. The sheriff of Plug Hat is going to be some disappointed when he horns in here with your pard, feller. You give him the Rio Kid's respects, and tell him he's welcome to follow on my trail if he likes, if he's longing for Plug Hat to get a new sheriff. You get me?"

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith panted.

He understood now.

As the Kid stepped out of the jacal,

a torrent of savage oaths from the bandit followed him.

He glanced back, amused.

"You sure can cuss some, Rube," he said. "Say! Ain't you honing to enjoy that little surprise party you fixed up for me? Gee-whiz! I guess I'll tell the world you can cuss some! This here talk ain't good for Side-Kicker to hear, it sure ain't! I'm hitting the trail, and if cussing makes you feel better, feller, you can sure cuss all you want!"

The Kid saddled and packed his mustang, and led Side-Kicker away through the chaparral. The brushing and rustling died in the distance; and Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith, breathing curses, struggled with his ropes in the jacal. Far away on the edge of the chaparral the Rio Kid mounted the grey mustang and rode away under the stars that were paling at the approach of dawn.

## THE FIFTH CHAPTER. The Sheriff's Prisoner!

**N**OT a word, you guys," breathed Long Bill Haines, sheriff of Plug Hat.

Dawn was glimmering in the chaparral by the banks of the Rio Pecos. A faint light spread amid tangled branches and dusky bushes; faint, but enough to light the Plug Hat men on their way. Ten armed men, guns in hand, were with Long Bill Haines, closing in on the camp of the Rio Kid. With them came Jake Saunders, the puncher who worked in

"cahoots" with Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith as the bandit's spy on the ranches. Silent, grim, determined, the men of Plug Hat closed in round the jacob by the little stream.

Glad enough had Long Bill been to leave his bed and call up his posse on the news that the Rio Kid was at hand. The previous day, Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith had escaped him; but the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande was a more valuable prize.

Every man in the sheriff's outfit was keen and eager to get a cinch on the outlaw puncher, who had so long defied all the sheriffs in Texas, and whose escape from the Mal Pais, where the rangers had had him cornered, was the talk of every cow-town and camp along the Pecos and the Rio Grande.

"Not a word!" breathed the sheriff. And, in deep silence, they trod cautiously on.

The Kid might be sleeping; but the Rio Kid was well known to sleep with one eye open. Every instant the men of Plug Hat expected to hear the crack of a six-gun, telling them that the boy outlaw was wise to their coming. And they knew well that if they heard the crack of the Kid's gun there would be one of the bunch who would never ride back to town.

But there was no stirring, no sound of alarm, as they crept through the thickets, searching every inch of ground as they advanced, in the rising light of dawn, and at last reached the lonely jacob by the stream.

The little wattle building was surrounded, and before the doorway the sheriff paused. From within, he heard the sound of a movement—the man he sought was there.

Jake Saunders had told him that the Kid was camping in his blankets outside the hut; but he had not been found outside, and within the jacob something stirred. The chill of night had driven him into the shelter of the hut, no doubt.

Long Bill Haines paused, gasping his six-gun. No shot came from the jacob, and it looked as if the Kid still slept, with his foes closing in to seize him.

With a gesture to his men to follow, the sheriff strode into the jacob, gun raised, finger on trigger.

"Put 'em up, Kid!" he rapped. It was deeply dusky inside the jacob. In sheer amazement the sheriff of Plug Hat stared at a figure on the floor—a figure that wrenched madly at ropes that bound his limbs. Even in the dim light he could see that the rough-bearded ruffian was not the handsome Kid.

A swift glance showed that there was no one else in the jacob.

"Hyer, you, Jake Saunders!" exclaimed the sheriff. "What you giving me? This here galoot ain't the Kid."

Jake Saunders stared into the jacob. What he saw made his jaw drop in surprise and alarm. For an instant he stared, dumbfounded, at the bound figure on the earth. Then he backed away, plunged into the thickets, and disappeared. If Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith was taken, he was more likely than not to betray an associate.

"I guess I don't get on to this!" growled the sheriff of Plug Hat. "This hyer galoot ain't the Kid—and he's sure tied up like an ornery steer. Get him into the light."

Two or three pairs of hands grasped the bound man, and rolled him out of the jacob into the clearer light outside.

Then the sheriff of Plug Hat gave a roar.

"Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith!" A panting curse answered him. Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith, sweating, exhausted from his long and unavailing struggle with the ropes, lay and panted, and glared at the posse from Plug Hat. They gathered round him in amazement. Long Bill Haines stared at him blankly.

"Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith!" he repeated. "The dog-goned firebug that got away from us yesterday! I should smile! That galoot Saunders allowed we ain't cinch the Kid here; but the Kid sure ain't around. But I guess we ain't had our trouble for nothing! Gee!" The sheriff and his men rode out of the chaparral without the prize they had come to seek. But they rode in a mood of considerable satisfaction, with Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith bound to a broncho in their midst.

If they had missed the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande, they had roped in the most dangerous bandit in the Pecos country, and they had reason to rejoice in their success.

They rode back to Plug Hat with Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith a prisoner; but where the Rio Kid was they did not know, and never know. Far away over the grassy prairie the grey mustang was galloping, and the Rio Kid, free as the wind that blew in his careless face, still snapped his fingers at his foes.

THE END.

[Look out for another powerful long tale of the Rio Kid in next week's issue, entitled: "THE PUNCHER OF BLUE BIRD RANCH!"]

## IN THE HANDS OF THE SHEIK!

(Continued from page 12.)

"There are other ways." "Ha!" The Spahi looked up, and caught Johnny Bull's glance, as the junior looked down over the parapet. "Vous etes la! But I wait for the door to be opened, mes enfants."

He laughed mockingly. Scoundrel and blackguard as the Spahi was, there seemed nothing like fear in him.

"I have found you," he went on, in the same mocking tone. "Peste! I came to hunt for gazelle in the hills, and I have found sheep. Ha, ha!"

The juniors understood then. Wharton whispered to his comrades, while the Spahi's mocking laugh rang below.

"We've got to get him—without a shot, if possible!"

"But how?" "Keep him in talk, if you can." Wharton held up a long camel-ropes he had brought up to the roof. "You come with me, Bob. You others stay here. Keep him in talk if you can, but if he tries to mount his horse, shoot him dead!"

"Right!" Frank Nugent and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh joined Johnny Bull at the parapet over the doorway.

Wharton and Bob Cherry crossed the flat roof to the back. The end of the rope was fastened quickly to the flag-staff that stood on the roof. Quietly the long rope was let down at the back of the little square building.

Silently, but in haste, Harry Wharton swung himself over, and slid down the

rope, his rifle on his back. As swiftly, Bob Cherry followed him. In a very few minutes they stood on the earth, the building between them and the Spahi.

Meanwhile Bou Saoud was calling up to the three juniors whom he could see on the roof.

"You will not descend and let me in? Mais, allons, done! It is inhospitable, n'est-ce-pas? I welcome you to the desert, mes amis!"

"Where is Ibrahim?" asked Nugent, rather to gain time than in expectation of answer.

The Spahi laughed again. "In the camp of Mustapha, my father," he answered. "Have you bribed him with a great sum? He came to us and lied. He told us that the five Roumis were dead in the desert, and that the hyenas had picked their bones! Ibrahim will pay for deceiving the sheik."

He grinned. At the same moment Harry Wharton appeared at the corner of the building, and the Spahi started as he saw him. He threw up his rifle to a level, aiming at the captain of the Remove.

There was a crash, as Johnny Bull flung his rifle from the roof. It crashed on the Spahi's burnoused head, and Bou Saoud reeled with a sharp cry.

In an instant Wharton was rushing upon him.

"Quick, Bob!" panted Wharton. Bob Cherry, only a few seconds behind his comrade, rushed on the Spahi.

A savage curse in Arabic broke from Bou Saoud, as he struggled in the grasp of the two juniors.

His rifle lay on the ground, but there was a long knife in his girdle, and he clutched at it.

The three juniors on the roof rushed

frantically down the steps into the building. They tore open the barred door and rushed out to join in the fray.

Wharton and Bob Cherry were both sturdy and strong, but the powerful Arab was like a tiger in their hands. Wharton seized his wrist and dragged his grasp away from the knife, but Bou Saoud tore it loose again.

It was then that the door of the Bordj flew open, and Nugent, Bull, and the nabob rushed out. They hurled themselves on the Spahi.

The knife was gleaming in the air as they reached him, aiming at Bob Cherry. Johnny Bull's heavy fist reached the Spahi in time, crashing on his jaw, and Bou Saoud rolled over on the earth.

A loud and terrible cry rang out and awoke the echoes of the hills. The Famous Five, closing in on the sprawling Arab, paused. His burnous was drenched with blood, the fierce, dusky face had gone grey, the savage black eyes rolled with fear and agony. Bou Saoud, the Spahi, had fallen on his own knife as he rolled over under Johnny Bull's blow, and the blade was buried almost to the hilt in his body.

Bou Saoud was dead!

The blazing sun rose higher over the Sahara. A score of yards from the gate of the lonely Bordj a heap of sand hid for ever the savage Spahi. On the roof, Harry Wharton & Co. watched, with anxious hearts, for Ibrahim.

THE END.

("IN DEADLY PERIL!" is the title of next week's gripping long complete story of the adventures of the Famous Five in the Sahara Desert.)

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



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

#### THE FIRST CHAPTER. Red Harris!

**T**HE blows of the quirt came to the Rio Kid's ears, like the cracking of successive pistol-shots, and at every sounding crack, his brow grew blacker and blacker, and his eyes glinted more ominously.

Yet he did not stir.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The PUNCHER of BLUE BIRD RANCH!

RALPH REDWAY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mind your own business, darn your hide."

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

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

The man's hand crept towards his gun again.

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

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

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

Crack!

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

The Kid smiled.

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

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

The Kid grinned, and holstered his gun.

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

He picked up the quirt the ruffian had dropped.

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

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

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

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

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

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

Then the Kid carelessly tossed the quirt away.

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

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

THE SECOND CHAPTER

The Good Samaritan!

"SEARCH me!" murmured the Rio Kid.

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

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

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

And he was wondering.

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

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

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

"Search me!" said the Kid again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The Rio Kid!" he muttered. Evidently the ranch-man knew the boy outlaw by sight.

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

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

The puncher stared at him.

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

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

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

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

Then he stared again at the Kid, in wonder.

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

"Forget it!" snapped the Kid.

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

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

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

The puncher nodded.

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

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

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

The Kid grinned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Say!" breathed the puncher.

"Shoot!" said the Kid.

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

"Jest that identical galoot."

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

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

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

### THE THIRD CHAPTER. Red Harris' Revenge!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

It was a faint voice from within the stockman's hut.

The Kid turned back into the hut, with a smiling face and a cheery voice. "You awake, feller?"

The white, wan face looked at him from the bunk. Rube Wilkins had been through the valley of the shadow of death, but the Kid was pulling him through.

"Oh, I ain't worrying any," said the Kid, with a smile. "After shooting up a Blue Bird puncher, I guess he won't hang on this range, longer'n it takes to hoof off'n it."

"I dunno," said Rube. "He allowed that he had fixed me for keeps—he knowed I was alone on this range, and he never reckoned I'd get help. I'd have ptered out suro as thunder, if you hadn't horned in, Kid. That guy reckons I'm dead as George Washington, he does, and so he ain't nothing to fear that he knows of. If he savvies you're the Kid, he might want to get back on you for that quirting."

"I ain't worrying," said the Kid reassuringly.

He felt the wounded man sinking into a placid sleep, a little later, and went

the night they had not closed, and it was now late in the day, and the Kid was weary.

In the shimmering heat, he slept. He dreamed in his sleep, of old days on the Double-Bar ranch, when he had punched cows and never fancied what



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

"Say, Kid, I'm sure feeling better," said the puncher. "I reckon I could peck some."

"And I've sure got your grub ready, feller," said the Kid.

He propped the sick man up in the bunk, and brought him his meal. So weak was the man that the Kid had to help him to feed. And he helped him with an almost womanly tenderness.

The puncher grinned at him whimsically.

"Say, who'd believe that it was the Rio Kid, nussin' a guy this-a-way," he said. "I guess when I tell them, in the bunk-house at the Blue Bird, they'll allow I've been dreaming some. They sure will! The bunch have heard a lot about you, Kid, that I guess now ain't k'rect."

"I reckon," assented the Kid. "I'll put them wise after this," said Rube earnestly. "But say, did that red-bearded galoot you quirted, know that you was the Rio Kid?"

"Like enough." "You ain't feared that he'll bring a sheriff's bunch down on you here?" asked the puncher.

out into the hot sunshine before the hut. As a matter of fact, lightly as he talked of it to the wounded puncher, the Kid had been thinking about Red Harris. It was all Texas to a Mexican dollar, as the Kid put it, that the red-bearded guy had knowa who he was, and the Kid knew in what mood the ruffian had gone. Revenge was his for the asking—he had only to carry the news to any sheriff, or to any ranch outfit, that the Kid was in the vicinity. Believing that Rube Wilkins was dead, Red Harris would not fear to go to the Blue Bird Ranch itself, for help to deal with the Kid. And there was the reward, too—that would tempt the ruffian.

But there was no help for it. Leaving Rube was impossible, except if he was to be left to die, and that was not in the Kid's thoughts. The Kid had to take a chance, as often he had done before.

Within the stockman's hut, Rube was sleeping soundly, peacefully. The Kid sat down where the corral fence cast a shadow, and leaned on the pine poles, and closed his tired eyes. All through

the future held in store for him. In his dreams, the Kid was riding onco more with the old bunch, he could hear the clattering of hoofs, the jangling of spur and stirrup and bridle.

But it was not all a dream.

From deep sleep, the Kid came to wakefulness, and the tramping and the jingling were still in his ears. He started up, and his hand flew to a gun.

But he did not draw the gun. For three or four levelled revolvers were looking him in the face, with grim bronzed faces behind them, and a gruff voice rapped out tensely:

"Hands up, Kid!"

"Gee!" murmured the Kid, and his fingers relinquished the butt of his gun.

"Put 'em up! Thunder, it's the Kid, and we've got him! Up with 'ein, Kid, or you get yours."

And the Kid, with a bitter smile, put his hands up over his head. Six brawny punchers were round him, every man with a gun in his hand, and every gun aimed at the Kid. And behind them, grinning with revengeful malice and

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

**THE FOURTH CHAPTER.**  
The Luck of the Kid!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The red-bearded ruffian swore savagely.

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

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

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

Red Harris laughed savagely.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Kid's eyes danced.

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

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

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

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

Savage faces surrounded the Kid now.

The Kid smiled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Buck made a gesture towards the Kid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But Red Harris did not ride.

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

THE END.

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