

## The Rio Kid's Close Call!



THE RIO KID, sitting in the saddle, stared over the corral bar, and grinned. For several minutes he had sat there, on the back of the black-muzzled mustang, looking into the corral, and grinning. The man in the corral did not glance in his direction—did not see him. He was too busy. What the Kid saw going on in the corral, was more than enough to make any cow-puncher grin. The Kid had seen some unhandy guys before, in his time: but never had he seen a guy so unhandy with a rope, as the man who was chasing the broncho in the corral. Thrice, while the Kid watched amused, he had cast the riata: and each time the loop had missed the tossing head. That bronc was not going to be roped in, if he could help it: and it looked as if he could. And the man with the rope was getting madder and madder, his hard dark face inflamed with fury, as the broncho escaped him again and again. He panted for breath and perspiration clotted his face, in the hot blaze of the Texas sun, as he coiled the rope, and dashed again after the elusive bronc to get within roping distance.

The Kid was amused: but he was puzzled too.

The man at the range hut would be, he figured, one of the Circle-Star bunch. That hut and corral were on the Circle-Star ranch, though a good fifteen miles

from the ranch-house. A puncher who could not handle a rope was a new one on the Kid. The Kid reckoned that if he was boss of the Circle-Star, a guy who could not handle a rope would be fired so quick that it would make his head swim. And his own cayuse, too—it must be his own cayuse, in that corral.

The Kid sat and watched, with amusement and contempt. True it was no easy matter to rope in a restive broncho determined not to be caught. But the Kid, with one swing of his arm, could have done it, as could any man back on the old Double-Bar. If this guy was a specimen of the Circle-Star outfit, the Kid reckoned that it must be a poor bunch.

Again the lasso flew. This time it grazed the tossing head: but did not catch. It slipped and dropped, and the broncho, throwing up his heels, dashed away again across the corral. A fierce oath pealed to the Kid's ears, as the man dragged in the forty-foot rope again, for another cast.

"Aw! Shucks!" murmured the Kid, in disgust.

The Rio Kid had ridden far and fast that day. The Texas Rangers had hunted him in the rocky gulches and draws of the Mal Pais: and he reckoned that they were still trailing him there, unaware that he had left the hills behind him, and taken to the prairie. Thirty miles, at least now lay between the Rangers and the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. From sun-up till noon the Kid had ridden, and he had no doubt that he was through with the Rangers. And in the semi-tropical blaze of the Texas noon, he wanted a rest and Side Kleker, his mustang, wanted a rest: for which reason the Kid had stopped at the lonely range-hut. If the range-rider stationed there, to look after out-lying herds, was at home, the Kid reckoned on receiving the open-hearted hospitality of the ranges—unless, of course, the puncher recognized him as the outlaw whose picture was posted up in half the cow-towns in Texas. But the Kid hoped not. On his looks, in his Stetson hat and goatskin chaps, he was a cow-puncher, as indeed he had been, not so very long ago, on the old Double-Bar ranch. But likely enough, the range-rider would be out with the herds, and the Kid would find the hut untenanted: and would be free to make himself at home, in the free-and-easy manner of the ranges. It was as he rode up to the hut that his attention was drawn to what was going on in the corral: and instead of riding on to the little building, he halted and gazed over the corral bar at the chase of the elusive broncho. And as he watched the clumsy efforts of the dark-faced man with the lasso, the Kid wondered.

Likely enough, the range-rider was absent, out on the plains, and had left a spare horse in the corral. That, now he thought of it, seemed likely to the Kid. The man he was watching was no puncher. More likely a horse-thief, taking advantage of the range rider's absence. He looked a hard case, with his dark bearded face, and a knife-cut across one dark cheek. A guy without a cayuse of his own, picking up an unguarded broncho—was that it? The grin faded from the Rio Kid's face as that surmise came into his mind. The Kid was an outlaw—a hard fate had made him one against his own will—but he was still a

puncher at heart, and had all a puncher's hatred for a horse-thief. If it was that—! He wondered, as he watched.

Again the lasso flew.

This time it struck a whisking tail: a worse cast than ever.

"Aw, carry me home to die!" murmured the Kid. "That galoot sure does not know one end of a rope from the other! He's no puncher—more like a bulldozer that hangs around the saloons in the cow-camps I reckon. He sure won't cinch that bronc till the cows come home!"

It seemed that the dark-faced man with the scar came to the same conclusion. He halted, and did not coil the lasso again. He stood panting for breath, glaring at the broncho with deadly rage in his scarred face. Still he did not look in the Kid's direction. His attention was concentrated on the horse, and it looked as if he had been driven to give up the attempt to rope him in. For a long minute he stood panting, and then, to the Kid's surprise and horror, he dragged out the six-gun from his holster at his belt.

"Dog-gone you!" His savage voice came almost in a roar. "Dog-gone your hide! I guess if I can't get you with a rope, I'll sure get you with a gat!"

"Search me!" gasped the Kid.

It was almost unbelievable, to a puncher. But it was plain enough. The enraged man could not catch the horse, and in his rage he was going to shoot it down. Under the Kid's astonished and horrified eyes, he raised the six-gun to fire, his eyes blazing fury at the broncho. That he was no puncher, that it was not his own cayuse, was clear, at that moment: his action verified the Kid's suspicion that he was nothing but a horse-thief.

The Rio Kid was quick on the draw.

His hand shot to a walnut-buited gun.

Bang!

It was not the scarred man in the corral who fired. He was taking aim, as the Kid's gun roared. A scream of pain and rage rang through the corral, as the six-gun was shot from the savage hand. Shattered by the Kid's bullet, the gun went to the ground, and the scarred man clasped his right hand, streaming with blood, with his left, yelling.

"You pizen skunk!" shouted the Kid. He kicked aside the corral bar, and rode in. The scarred man stared at him, still howling with pain. For the moment he had fancied that his hand had been shot away with his gun. But it was only a strip of skin that was gone. He stared at the Kid, stared at his streaming hand, and then stared at the Kid again. Recognition came into his face as he stared.

"The Rio Kid!" he panted.

The Kid knitted his brows. The man, whoever he was, knew him: he had seen the pictures of the Kid, posted up with a reward of a thousand dollars for the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. Almost forgetting the pain in his hand in his fear, the scarred man backed away.

"You pesky coyote!" said the Kid. "I guess I don't know why I didn't throw the lead through your cabeza! You'd shoot that bronc, would you, you pizen lobo-wolf, because you can't handle a rope! I guess you was stealing that hoss, you scum, and what you want is a rope and a branch. You sure do make me sick."

"And you the Rio Kid!" snarled the scarred man. "The fire-bug that's wanted by half the sheriffs in Texas."

"Mebbe!" said the Kid. "Mebbe! But I sure ain't no use for a horse-thief. You was stealing that hoss!"

"You ain't never lifted a bronc—and you the Rio Kid!"

"Feller," said the Kid. "I ain't never lifted a bronc, and all I got for a horse-thief is a quirt! Beat it, you scum—beat it—get out of this dump as fast as you know how, and I got a quirt to help you burn the wind."

The Kid had holstered his gun: his quirt was in his hand now. The thong lashed on the horse-thief, with all the force of the Kid's arm. A horse-thief, to the Kid, was poison: and a man who would shoot a horse in his rage, was lower



*"The Rio Kid, he parted."*

down in his esteem than a coyote or a rattlesnake. For all the wild tales that were told of him, the Kid was no man to shoot to kill, if he could help it: but he was the man to give the ruffian his due, and he gave it. The heavy quirt lashed, and lashed again and again, and the scarred man, yelling with pain and fury, ran for the corral gate. After him rode the Rio Kid, still lashing with the quirt, driving him headlong out of the corral, and for a rope's length beyond. Then, at length, the quirt ceased to crack, as the scarred man fled across the prairie, running like a deer. He vanished in the distance, the Kid staring after him with a dark brow.

He dismounted, and turned the mustang into the corral. Then he tramped along the corral fence, towards the range-hut. He was done with that horse-thief, he reckoned, and he gave him no further thought. He counted on finding the range-hut unoccupied: for if the range-rider was at home, he would scarcely have remained quiet in the hut while the scarred bulldozer was stealing a horse from the corral. The Kid expected to find the hut vacant, and to camp down there, cook his bacon and beans, and take a much-needed rest till the blazing heat of the day was over, and he would feel like riding again. But it was the unexpected that awaited the Rio Kid in that lonely hut on the Texan grass-lands.

## II

"JUMPING gophers!" ejaculated the Rio Kid.

He started, stared, and stopped dead in his tracks.

The door of the range-hut, swinging on its leather hinges, was open. The Kid stepped in, and pitched down his slicker pack: and then, halting in his tracks, he stared at a figure that lay stretched on the earthen floor. He stared at it blankly. Not for a moment had he figured that the range-rider was at home in his hut, quiet while a horse-thief was stealing a horse within a few ropes' lengths of him. But the Circle-Star puncher was at home: and the Kid saw now why he had been quiet. He lay on his back, his face colourless and set, his eyes closed, and blood welling over his shirt, in which there was a bullet-hole—insensible or dead! And the Kid, as he stared understood, and the rage that came into his heart made his eyes blaze like fire. He swung back to the open doorway, his gun in his hand now, and stared over the grassy plain. If the fleeing horse-thief had been still in sight—

But the scarred man had vanished. To spring upon Side-Kicker, and ride him down, and shoot him up, was the first thought in the Kid's mind. For he knew now what had happened at the lonely hut on the ranges. The puncher in charge had been shot down—and he had been lying there, unseen in the hut, while the Kid, never dreaming of what had happened, was watching the border

ruffian's attempts to lasso the horse in the corral. The Kid had driven that bulldozer away with his quirt, and he was sorry for it now—it was a gun, not quirt, that was wanted to deal with him. The Kid made a step out.

But he stopped again.

The man who lay in his blood in the hut claimed his first attention. The horse-thief had left him for dead, that was clear; and if he was dead, there was nothing to stop the Kid riding in pursuit and hunting down the ruffian who has done the deed. And that the boy outlaw would have done, if Captain Hall and his rangers had been within one mile instead of thirty miles. But he had to make sure first whether anything could be done for the Circle-Star puncher.

He stepped back into the hut.

He dropped on his knees beside the motionless form. And the next moment he was glad that he had not yielded to that first fierce impulse to ride after the gun-man. For the puncher was breathing—it was a living man who lay senseless in the hut.

"So!" murmured the Kid.

A woman's hands could not have been gentler, as he opened the blood-stained shirt and examined the wound that had laid the Circle-Star puncher low. And he was deeply relieved by what he discovered. A bullet had passed clean through the puncher's shoulder, leaving a clean wound. The wound was serious, but it was not fatal if the man had care and attention—and he had both now that the Rio Kid was on hand. Had he been left, as that lobo-wolf had left him, uncared-for, he must have perished where he lay. But he was going to be cared for now.

The wild life of the sierra and the llano had taught the Kid something of a rough surgery. With gentle care he washed the wound clean, and bound it up with the puncher's own neck-scarf, torn in strips. Then he lifted the wounded man into the wooden bunk in the corner of the hut. The Circle-Star man was big and heavy; but the Kid, strong and sinewy, lifted him, and laid him in the bunk, and made him as comfortable as he could. The flicker of an eyelid showed that the man was slowly coming to his senses.

The Kid sat on a stool by the bunk, and watched him.

He forgot that he was fatigued from a long wild ride. He forgot the beans and bacon in his slicker pack. Men in the cow-camps who talked of the Rio Kid as a fire-bug, a two-gun desperado, would have been surprised to see him now, watching by the side of the wounded puncher.

The heavy eyes opened. The Circle Star puncher stared wildly round him, and his eyes fixed on the Rio Kid. And from the look that came into them, the Kid knew that his face was known. The man in the bunk knew that he was looking at the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande.

"You!" came a faint mutter from white lips.

"Me, feller!" smiled the Kid.

"The Rio Kid!"

"You said it."

"I seen your pictures in the camps, Kid! You got me! Shoot and be durned to you!" muttered the puncher. He made a slight movement, as if to grope in his belt for a weapon. But his hand fell helpless.

The Kid winced.

He was an outlaw, it was true. Old Man Dawney on the Double-Bar Ranch, believing that he had done what the Kid had never dreamed of doing, had driven him outside the law. Outside the law, his horse and his guns were the Kid's only defence: yet, with all the wild tales that were told of him, he had never pulled trigger unless he was badly crowded. His picture was up in the cow-camps, with a reward of a thousand dollars on his head, dead or alive; and the notches on the walnut-butted guns told what had befallen foes who had sought to earn that reward. Men who talked of him in the cow-town saloons and at the round-ups, could never have believed that he was still, at heart, the kid puncher of the old Double-Bar. He knew it, and shrugged his shoulders over it: but it gave him a pang to see the man in the bunk look at him as he did, and to hear him speak as he did. But there was no anger in his heart: and he answered softly:

"You don't want to worry any, feller. Sure it's the Rio Kid that's tending you, and sure you want tending, a few. You won't want your gun, feller, even if you could handle it seeing how you're fixed. Forget it."

"You're the Kid!"

"Sure!"

"The dog-goned fire-bug that's shot up more guys than he's got fingers and toes—"

The Kid laughed.

"Forget it, feller! I guess I never seen half the guys that they say I've shot up. Me I'm a peaceable galoot, and only want to be left alone."

"Sez you!"

"I guess I'll prove it up!" grinned the Kid. "Who do you think found you here, and bandaged you up, and put you in your little bunk, and is going to see you through, and get word to the Circle-Star for your pardners to come and look after you."

The puncher stared at him blankly.

There was a long, long pause, while the Circle-Star man assimilated it. The Kid watched him with a smiling face. The puncher spoke at last.

"You mean all that!"

"Surest thing you know!" said the Kid.

"You're a white man, Kid! I guess they blow off their mouths about you a whole lot, in the cow camps, but I ain't believing all I hear, arter this. Say, I've got it bad?"

"You got it bad, but you're worth a whole remuda of dead men, yet," said the Kid cheerfully. "You'd sure have passed in your checks if I hadn't

found you, feller: but I've fixed you up good and fine and you're going to pull through."

"You've saved my life."

"Sure."

"And you the Rio Kid!" muttered the puncher. "Say, you get word to the Circle-Star that Posy Pete has been shot up by a gun-man, and I guess they won't lose time in toting me home. But you want to watch out—I guess guns will be pulled at the sight of you on any ranch in Texas."

"Don't I know it?" said the Kid. "But I'll get word, all the same, somehow, when you're fixed so I can leave you. Say, I reckon it was a guy as dark as a Greaser, with a knife-cut on his face, that shot you up?"

"You seen him?"

"I sure seen him, and I sure quirted him a few, seeing that I found him stealing your cayuse," answered the Kid. "But if I'd knowed you was fixed like this, Posy Pete, I'd have made it last sickness for that guy. But I guess he won't forget that quirting in a hurry. I sure did lay it on that galoot, and he lit out across the prairie like he was pressed for time. You know that guy?"

"Sure! Black Parkiss ain't no stranger in this section. I knowed his ugly face when he put it in at that door, and I sure heaved a can at his cabeza, as a warning that he wasn't wanted around. He pulled a gun when it hit him, and I guess he thought I'd got my ticket for soup—and I sure had, if you hadn't moseyed in, Kid."

"And I had him under my gun, and let him skip!" sighed the Kid. "But I guess it ain't good for you to chew the rag, feller—you want to lie still and rest. You got to watch out, with that hole in your shoulder. If you ain't no objection, I guess I'll get some eats—I've ridden a long trail this morning."

Posy Pete grinned faintly.

"Make yourself at home, Kid! I'm sure powerful glad to have you around."

"And that's what I don't hear often!" grinned the Kid.

The Kid stacked the rusty iron stove with chips, and set the fire going, and cooked his bacon and beans, the puncher watching him from the bunk, with a strange expression on his pale tanned face. But Posy Pete's eyelids drooped, and he sank into unconsciousness again. The Kid gave him a keen and anxious glance: but he nodded, satisfied. The man would mend, he was sure of that! He required care, watchful care, and that the Kid was prepared to give him. Later, when the puncher could be left alone, the Kid could somehow get word to the ranch: though, as Pete had warned him, that was a matter needing caution, for guns were wont to leap from their holsters at a word that the Rio Kid was around. But the Kid reckoned that he would work the rifle somehow, when the time came. In the meantime, he was bedding down at the range-hut, with an invalid on his hands: a strange experience for the Kid, and yet like him.



He finished his meal, and washed it down with water from the can. He gave the man in the bunk a last long look, before he left the hut. Posy Pete was sunk in a deep sleep, but his pallid face was calm, and his breathing regular. The Kid, easy in his mind, moved across to the doorway, and stepped out into the blazing Texas sunshine. And then—!

## III

"HANDS UP, Kid!"

"By thunder, we've got you!"

"Hands up, you god-durned fire-bug, or you get yours!"

It was not often that the Rio Kid was taken by surprise. But danger, at the moment, was not in his thoughts. He had dropped the Rangers thirty miles away: there was no peril from that quarter. And his mind was full of the wounded man in the bunk, and he was going along to the corral to give Side-Kicker the comb-down he needed: and there had not been a sound to warn him that foes were at hand. A hoof-beat on the prairie would have been warning enough: but there had been no hoof-beat: and no man went on foot on the Texas grasslands. For once, the Kid was taken off his guard: and there was no guy in Texas more surprised than the Rio Kid, when, as he stepped out into the blaze of the sun, figures in Stetsons and chaps surrounded him, and guns were levelled, and rough voices rapped in his ears.

"Up with them, Kid!"

"We sure got you!"

"That guy Purkiss sure was giving us the goods! It's the Rio Kid, and we've got him by the short hairs".

The Kid drew one deep, deep breath. He did not seek to touch the walnut-butted guns in the low-slung holsters. Six guns were looking him in the face, and it was sudden death if he did. The Kid was as quick on the draw as any guy in the Lone Star State: but he knew when he was beaten to it. Slowly, his hands went up above his head, and he looked at his surrounding enemies with a bitter smile on his handsome sunburnt face.

Four cow-punchers, in Stetsons and chaps, were round him. Further back was a face he knew—a dark face with the scar of a knife-cut—the face of the man he had quitted out of the corral. Black Purkiss watched him with a savage grin. The Kid had never reckoned that the horse-thief would return for more trouble: he had looked as if he had had enough, and more than enough when he had burned the wind across the plains a couple of hours since. Neither, he knew, would the ruffian have returned alone: he had returned with a bunch of punchers to deal with the man who had quitted him. The punchers did not know what the Kid knew: they would have strung up a horse-thief out of hand,

if they had known. The Kid gave the grinning gun-man one contemptuous glance, and faced up to the punchers who covered him with their revolvers.

Punchers from the Circle-Star he reckoned they were: men after his own heart, if ill-fortune had not driven him into outlawry. He would have been reluctant to pull a gun on them, if he had had a chance. But he had no chance. Only his hands over his head saved him from being riddled with bullets.

"Say fellers, you sure got me, if you want me!" drawled the Kid. Four six-guns looking him in the face did not shake his nerve. If this was the end of his wild trail, the Kid had the courage to face it. "Did that pizen skunk skulking there tell you where to find me?"

"He sure did, Kid!" It was the leader of the bunch, a big red-bearded puncher, who answered, with his six-gun jammed fairly in the Kid's sunburnt face.

"And who'd you be, when you're to home?" asked the Kid, pleasantly.

"I guess I'm Jeff Bristow, foreman of the Circle Star, if you want to know before you go up on a branch!" grunted the red-bearded puncher. "Keep him covered, boys! He's lightning on the draw."

The Kid laughed.



"Up with them, Kid."

"Don't you worry any, feller," he said. "I ain't pulling a gun."

"You sure ain't!" said Bristow. "Take his hardware off him, you Yuba."

The Kid breathed hard, as Yuba, leaving three guns to cover him, reached for the holsters, and drew away the two walnut-butted guns. He was disarmed now, if he had calculated on taking a desperate chance. But the Circle Star punchers were giving him no chances. They knew the reputation of the Rio Kid too well for that.

The Kid stood very still, his hands above his head. Within the hut, out of sight, lay the man he had tended—asleep or unconscious. He had lingered there for a stranger's sake, to tend a wounded man; and given that lobo-wolf Purkiss a chance for his revenge. But the game was not up yet.

"By the great horned toad! We got the Rio Kid!" said the foreman of the Circle Star. "We sure got that firebug that half the sheriffs in Texas ain't been able to rope in nobow. That guy Purkiss was giving us the straight goods, when he allowed that he was around. We sure got him!"

"And you sure got the gold-darndest bonthead in Texas!" said the Kid, bitterly. "What you punchers doing a-walking? Aint you never learned to ride on the Circle Star."

"You'd sure have heard us coming, you firebug," answered the foreman of the Circle Star. "We left our cayuses, and come on foot, to cinch you if you was in the hut. I didn't half believe Purkiss—but we wasn't taking no chances with the Rio Kid—he sure is too sudden on the shoot."

The Kid understood. Black Purkiss, in his flight, had fallen in with the bunch of punchers, and told his tale. They had ridden for the range-hut: but they had not ridden up to it, with the possibility that the deadliest shot in all Texas was within. They had left their horses at a distance, and stoden forward on foot, to take him by surprise if he was there. And they had taken him by surprise—the Kid had to pass that up to them. He had walked out of the hut right into their hands. Four to one was long odds, but the Rio Kid would not have feared twice the odds, if he had heard them coming.

"I sure should have made it last sickness for that pizen skunk Purkiss," said the Kid, regretfully. "And I sure would if I'd known how pizen he was when I let him skip. He told you I was here—did he tell you that I quirted him out of the corral when he was stealing a horse?"

"He sure did not!" said Jeff Bristow. "I wouldn't put it past him—Purkiss has got a bad name around here. But that ain't our mutton! You're our mutton, Kid, and you're roped in dead to rights."

"You said it," agreed the Kid. "You figure you're going to tote me along to a sheriff?"

Bristow jutted his bearded jaw.

"Mebbe," he said, "and mebbe not! That guy Purkiss allows that you've shot up the puncher on this range, Posy Pete."

"What?" yelled the Kid.

"I wouldn't take the word of that pesky gink agin a coyote," said Bristow. "But we're going to know. If Posy Pete's O.K. we're going to tote you to a sheriff, to be tried and strung up according to law. But if you've shot up Pete, as that geek allows, we're going to string you up on that cotton-wood yonder at the end of a rope. That's what you've got coming."

"Sure!" growled the other three punchers, in a deep chorus.

The Kid breathed hard.

"That guy Purkiss sure is pizen," he said. "He ain't told you that he was stealing Pete's horse, and I quirted him for it: and he sure ain't told you that he shot up Posy Pete in that hut—"

"It's a lie!" shouted Purkiss. "Boys, I'm telling you that that firebug shot up Posy Pete, and I seen him: and he sure would have shot me up if I hadn't lit out pronto. Look in that hut, and you'll find Posy Pete laid out cold like I allowed, dead as Abe Lincoln, with that firebug's bullet through him."

The Kid's eyes glinted at the gunman. But he smiled grimly. Purkiss, evidently, believed that he had left a dead man in the range-hut. In that belief, and in the belief that he could fasten his own crime on the Rio Kid, he had led the Circle Star bunch there. But Posy Pete was not a dead man. He was living: and if he could speak—! On that the Rio Kid's life depended: and it hung on a thread.

Bristow gave the gunman a stare, and then his eyes fixed again on the Rio Kid, with a deadly glint in them.

"Pete's been shot up?" he breathed.

"He sure has—!"

"Then you go up on a branch! You Yuba, look in the hut, and see what's come to Pete. If he's been shot up, I'll say we don't want to ask who burned powder on him, with that firebug from Rio around."

"I'll say we don't!" growled Yuba. He tramped into the doorway of the range-hut.

The scarred man's eyes gleamed gloatingly at the Rio Kid. He had howled and yelled and fled like a coyote under the Kid's quirt: but he reckoned that the Texas firebug was going to pay full tally for it. It was prize luck, he reckoned, that he had fallen in with the Circle Star bunch on the prairie, and brought them to the range-hut, before the boy outlaw had mounted and gone. Had he gone the punchers, finding Posy Pete shot up, would have ridden on his trail for vengeance. But he had not gone: he was here, and he was cinched, and he was going up on a rope. Nothing could save him but the truth of what had happened in the lonely hut: and that could never be known, for dead men could tell no tales! The Circle Star men would not believe his denials: the word of an outlaw wanted all over Texas for gun-play. Black Purkiss showed his teeth in a savage triumphant grin. This was meat and drink to the horse-thief who had howled under the Kid's quirt.

The Kid's heart was beating fast. Posy Pete was not dead, as the man who

had shot him up believed: but could he speak? It was less than a minute before Yuba's voice was heard from the range-hut. But it was a long minute to the boy outlaw.

"Say, you-uns," came Yuba's shout. "Hyer's Pete, in his bunk all shot up, and he sure looks like he got his."

From the three cattlemen round the Kid, came a deep growl of rage.

"That cinches it!" said Jeff Bristow. "You Purkiss, hump it back to the hosses, and get the riata from my saddle. We want a rope hyer."

"Sure!" grinned the scarred man.

He hurried away to the spot where the bunch had left their horses when they crept silently up to the hut. He cast one look back at the Rio Kid, as he went: a look of gloating hate. Then he hurried off, eager to return with the rope.

"You lift a finger, you firebug, and we'll fill you with lead afore we string you up on that cotton-wood!" growled Bristow.

"I ain't lifting a finger, feller," said the Kid quietly. "But I'm asking you to let a guy speak—"

"Aw, quit chewing the rag."

"I'm telling you—"

"Telling us nix!" growled Bristow.

"You pesky bonehead," exclaimed the Kid. "You're going to string up a guy for what that pizen polecat Purkiss done—"

"Can it!"

"I'm telling you that Pete ain't dead, like that pizen skunk allows!" shouted the Kid. "I'm telling you that skunk left him for dead, and sure reckons that he's got his for keeps—but he ain't no more than I am, and if you look at him in his bunk, you'll find that he's bandaged up good and fine, and do you figure that I'd bandage him up after throwing lead at him?"

Yuba came back out of the hut.

"Say, Jeff, what the guy allows is the goods," he said. "Pete's all bandaged up, and he ain't dead by long chalks. That guy Purkiss allowed that he saw the Kid shoot him up, dead as mutton: but he sure ain't dead, though he looks purty far gone. I guess he could give us the rights of it if he could talk."

The Circle Star foreman gave a snort.

"Bandaged or not, we know the galoot that shot him up!" he growled. "Hyer's that dog-goned outlaw, camped in the hut: and I reckon he had to shoot up Pete afore he could camp down in his quarters."

"I guess I camped down here to tend him, him being wounded—"

"Aw, pack it up!" snapped Bristow. "You the Rio Kid—you the firebug that's shot Rangers and sheriffs' deputies, you the outlaw with a thousand dollars reward on your head—you camped here to tend a puncher? Don't make me laugh. But we got to wait a minute afore that gink Purkiss gets back with the rope—bring that firebug along, and we'll give Pete the once-over."

Two of the cattlemen grasped the Kid's arms, and with Jeff Bristow's gun still covering him, they walked him into the range-but, where all eyes fixed on the pallid face of the man who lay inert in the bunk. Most eagerly of all the Kid's eyes fixed on him. If he could speak but a word— They did not believe him—even the fact, which they could see with their own eyes, that Posy Pete was bandaged, did not make them believe him—the reputation of the Rio Kid, the wild name that he had never earned by his own deeds, was enough for them. The Kid was cinched, and his life hung on a thin thread—whether the unconscious man lying in the bunk could speak, before Purkiss came back with the rope.

## IV

THE Kid's heart almost missed a beat. Posy Pete's eyelids flickered, and his eyes slowly opened. He stared dizzily, at the Kid, and at the Circle Star punchers. He smiled faintly at the Kid. And the Rio Kid drew a deep, deep breath. From a distance, came a sound of running feet. Black Purkiss was losing no time in returning with the rope. But the puncher in the bunk was conscious, and there was yet time, even, if it could be counted in seconds.

"Say, you'uns, how come you got here?" It was a faint voice from the wounded man in the bunk. "The Kid got word to you so soon?"

"The Kid?" repeated Jeff Bristow.

"Let him speak!" said the Kid, quietly. "Posy Pete, old-timer, tell these guys who it was that shot you up in this hut. Tell them afore they put a rope round the neck of the guy what tended you."

"Who shot you up, Pete?" asked Bristow. He asked the question, but his look had changed, and his gun no longer covered the Kid.

"Black Purkiss!" muttered the man in the bunk. "I heaved a can at his cabera, and he pulled a gun and shot me up, and I reckon I never knowed any more till I found the Kid tending me."

"Black Purkiss shot you up?"

"He sure did!"

"And what's this outlaw doing around?"

"I guess he was tending me like he was a guy's side-pardner, Jeff. I'd have bled to death on the floor if he hadn't found me, and fixed me up this-a-way. Say, you don't want to crowd that Kid. I'm telling you he saved my life, if I pull through this. The Kid is a white man, Jeff, for all the tall talk in the cow-camps. He sure is the whitest man I ever struck."

The grasping hands had dropped from the Kid's arms. He stood a free man. The punchers looked at him, and looked at the man in the bunk, and looked at the Kid again. Thudding footsteps and panting breath were heard outside. Posy Pete had spoken only in time. But he had spoken: and the Kid

smiled grimly as he heard the gunman returning. Black Purkiss still believed that the man he had shot up was a dead man, and that the rope he carried was for the Rio Kid's neck.

Jeff Bristow breathed hard.

"I guess we got the rights of it now," he said slowly. "Give that guy back his guns, Yuba. I guess we ain't no call to do sheriff's work for them, when the Kid's saved the life of a guy in our outfit. I allow you're a white man, Kid, outlaw or no outlaw, and there ain't a galoot here who'll stop you riding. But that pizen polecat that shot up a Circle Star puncher—by the great horned toad, that pizen skunk has got his coming to him! By thunder—"

The breathless gunman came tramping in at the door, with the rope over his arm. For the moment he did not notice the man that lay in the bunk.

"Say, you'uns, here's the rope," he panted. "And I guess the sooner we string that outlaw up to a branch—"

He broke off, as his eyes fell on Posy Pete, staring at him from the bunk. For a moment, he was paralysed. His eyes bulged at the wounded puncher.

"You pesky coyote!" roared Jeff Bristow. "You pizen lobo-wolf, we're sure wise now to the galoot that shot up Pete. I'll say we came near stringing up the wrong guy, Purkiss, but by thunder, we're going to string up the right guy now—and you're that guy! It's you—"

The scarred man made one desperate bound to escape. But he made only one. Rough hands were laid on him, on all sides, and he was dragged headlong out of the range-but, and the rope he had brought for the Kid was thrown over a branch of the cotton-wood. Black Purkiss had played a cunning game: but fortune's wheel had turned against him at the last moment; and it was not the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande who swung from the cotton-wood in the wind of the prairie. But it had been a close call for the Rio Kid.

THE END