

**A SHADOW OF THE PAST!**

Just when the Rio Kid is beginning to settle down happily to his new life on the Sampson Ranch, and to forge that he is an outlaw, a shadow from the past rolls up to darken his horizon in the shape of—

# The MAN from FRIO!

by **RALPH REDWAY**

A ROUSING LONG COMPLETE WESTERN YARN, FEATURING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW FROM TEXAS!



**THE FIRST CHAPTER.**  
The Cow-Thief!

"**B**RAND-BLOTTIN!" said Santa Fe Sam.

The Rio Kid nodded. The two punchers, ranging riding on the Sampson Ranch, had drawn rein on a high, grassy ridge.

Ahead of them the rolling prairie stretched, mile on mile, billow on billow of waving grass, backed in the far distance by a dark belt of chaparral, which barred the horizon to the west.

From a dry coulee between the halted riders and the distant chaparral, a thin column of smoke rose against the sky.

Deep in the hollow, hidden from sight, a fire was burning, only that wisp of smoke floating away to the blue sky betraying it. Only the keen eyes of the punchers, accustomed to vast distances, would have detected that thin wisp of smoke. But to the Rio Kid and Santa Fe Sam it told its own tale at a glance.

"The darned scallywag!" said Sam wrathfully. "He's got Sampson cows in that coulee, changin' the brand. Gettin' them ready to drive down to San Pedro I reckon."

"Jest that?" agreed the Kid. "I reckon we've got the pesky cow-thief dead to rights!" said Santa Fe Sam. "Ride on, Kid!"

He gave his reins a shake. "Hold in your hosses a piece, feller!" said the Kid, still watching the distant wisp of smoke. "I guess we want to make sure of roundin' up that cuss. We want the cows, and we want the galoot that's blottin' the Sampson brand. He's nearer the chaparral than he is to us, feller; and I guess if he sees us coming he will hit for cover like he was sent for, and we shall lose him."

Santa Fe Sam drew in his broncho again.

"We've got to get him, Kid!" he said. "Old Man Sampson has been lovin' cows a whole heap and I guess you're losin'

'em too, now that you're the Old Man's partner. We got to rope that galoot in."

"We sure have!" agreed the Kid. "But we shan't rope him in by showin' up and givin' him a chance to beat it for the cover of the chaparral. I'm goin' to ride round and cut him off from cover, while you wait here a piece, Sam. Once I'm between him and the timber he can't vamoose—not without walking over my gun."

Santa Fe Sam nodded. "Beat it, then!" he said.

He dismounted, and sank into the grass with his broncho, lest a watchful eye should be on the look out in the distant coulee. The Rio Kid struck off at right angles from the trail the punchers had been following, and rode to the northward.

The black-muzzled mustang covered the ground at a rapid gallop. Two miles to the north the Kid rode at top speed, and then he swung to the west, and galloped towards the chaparral.

The grass flew under the racing hoofs. Within half a mile of the chaparral the Kid wheeled southward, and rode as rapidly as before.

He drew in his horse at last, between the coulee and the chaparral, cutting off the retreat of the brand-blotter hidden in the hollow.

From the coulee the thin streak of smoke was still rising, showing that the fire was still burning, and the man with the running-iron still at work there.

The Rio Kid had halted on a high knoll, and now he drew his rifle from its leather case, and hoisted his Stetson hat on the muzzle, lifting it high into the air, as a signal to Santa Fe Sam on the other side of the coulee.

That the signal was picked up was soon clear; for Santa Fe Sam remounted his horse and came riding down towards the coulee.

The Kid put his Stetson back on his handsome head, and grinned.

The man in the coulee was fairly caught now.

Santa Fe Sam was riding down on him from the east, and the Rio Kid sat his horse on the western side, cutting him off from retreat to the shadows and tangled paths of the chaparral.

North and south of the coulee stretched the open prairie, for countless miles, and in either direction, if the brand-blotter made a break, he would be in full sight, without a chance of cover; and his capture would only be a matter of hard riding. And any where on the open prairie he might ride into members of the Sampson bunch, out riding the ranges.

"I guess we got him!" murmured the Kid; and, with his rifle under his arm, he rode slowly towards the coulee.

Santa Fe Sam reached the hollow first, and disappeared into it, on its eastern side. But only a minute later the Kid was riding down on its western side. Between them rose a column of smoke from the bottom of the hollow, denser now that they were closer to it. Fringes of mesquite hid the unseen cow-thief and the cows till they drew nearer; but suddenly, through an opening of the mesquite, the Kid had a view of him and his work.

A small fire burned on the earth; and near it were three cows, tied up safely with riatas. A man in a blue shirt and a Stetson hat was in the act of replacing an iron in the fire to re-heat. It was a running-iron, the usual iron used by a cow-thief to change the brand on a cow. Had the Kid been nearer he would have seen that already, on two of the cows, the big S which was the Sampson brand, had been changed by additional marks into an 8, preceded by a bar, so that the cows bore now the brand of Bar-8. Of the three cows roped in by the thief, two had already been re-branded—and he was beating the iron across for the third when the two punchers closed in on him from either end of the coulee.

The Kid smiled grimly. The man drew the iron from the fire, and bent over the wriggling, numbing cow, and began to trace the false marking. So deeply occupied was he with his work that he did not even glance round him, or he must have seen the punchers, who were now in full sight had he looked up or down the coulee. But in that lonely hollow, fifteen miles from the Sampson ranch, on the borders

of the wild chapparal, no doubt the brand-blotter belonged there safe from discovery. Such he would have been, but for the keen eyes that had caught the wisp of smoke trailing skyward.

The Kid was near enough now to pick up the brand the thief was placing on the stolen cows. His smile grew grimace.

"Bar!" he murmured. "Easy work—but different enough to show a cattle-biter that tacca cows never came from the Sampson ranch. The darned thief! I guess this year is his last brand-blottin' year in this ranch."

The Kid's eyes glittered.

In the Frio country, and along the banks of the Frio and the Rio Grande, the Kid was known as an outlaw; and upon his head was a reward of a thousand dollars. But in his wildest days the Kid had never dreamed of rustling a cow; and the sight of a brand-blotter at work got his goat. And it was a personal matter with the Kid, too; for Kid Cartax was now a partner of Old Man Sampson, with an interest in all the numerous herds of the Sampson ranch; and he was already beginning to forget those old wild days of outlawry in the Frio country, three hundred miles away. In this remote corner of Texas, no one knew the Rio Kid—few had heard of him; and the Kid had realized, at last, his old desire to ride with a ranch outfit and punch cows, and say a long farewell to the chapparal and the alarm.

"Gee-whizz!" ejaculated the Kid suddenly.

The brand blotter had taken the alarm; he had leaped away from the cow he was branding, and stood staring up the coulee, towards Santa Fe Sam. A puff of white smoke streamed from his hip, and Sam's broncho pitched forward, shot through the head, throwing the rider. The next instant the brand-blotter had dragged a horse from the mesquite, leaped upon its back, and was riding out of the coulee to the west—abandoning the stolen cows, seeking only escape to the chapparal. And but for the Kid's manœuvre, the way would have been open for him.

But now the Kid was between him and safety; and as the man came dashing up the coulee the Kid's rifle leaped to his shoulder.

"Halt! Heads up!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

An Old Acquaintance!

"HANDS UP!" shouted the Kid. The brand blotter dragged in his riding horse.

The Kid sat his mustang directly before him, the rifle to his shoulder, his eye gleaming along the barrel.

For an instant the cow-thief seemed about to lift the gun, still smoking in his hand, and take a chance.

But there was no chance, and the instant realization of it kept his hand at his side.

"Drop that gun, and put up your hands!"

The revolver crashed to the ground. The cow-thief's hands went up over his head, just in time.

The Rio Kid rode closer. His eyes were keenly on the man. There was something familiar to him in the tanned, savage cow-thief. That the Kid's face was familiar to the brand-blotter was shown at once by the look of astonishment that spread over his face.

"The Kid?" he ejaculated. His eyes fixed in amazement on the The Puncher—No. 512.

handsome, sunburnt face of the boy puncher.

"The Rio Kid?"

The Kid's brow grew dark. He guessed that he had seen this galoot somewhere before, and now that he was a rancher, a partner of Old Man Sampson, the Kid was not anxious to see pugrins whom he had known in other parts of Texas. He did not want the Sampson bunch to learn that Kid Cartax was the outlaw of the Rio Grande, with a price on his head.

The cow-thief's look of astonishment changed to a grin.

"Dog-gone my boots!" he said, punching his horse a little noisier. "You boys, Kid! Was you liffin' a gun on me? Dog-damn' out dog!"

"You gold-rimmed pecky thief!" growled the Kid. "Keep them paws up, if you don't want daylight light through your catern!"

The man grinned. "I guess I remember how you shoves the Kid, and I ain't arguing any," he answered. "But what's this yer game? You arter cows here, since as me?"

The Kid's brow grew black.

"If you've had my pard yander, you dog-goned thief, you get yours!" he said.

"That puncher your pard?"

"Y-ep!"

"Oh, come off!" said the cow-thief incredulously. "He ain't hurt none. I just got his hoss, and he sure took a tumble. I guess he'll be along in a shake. But what you don't hear, Kid? You ain't punching cows, I reckon. Fat a galoot who. I ain't got any grouch agin you, Kid. Dog-damn' out dog! You don't want to lift a gun on Cactus Pete. Forget it, Kid."

"Cactus Pete!" repeated the Kid.

He recalled the man now. In the old days, when the Kid had ridden with the Double-Bar bunch at Arico, he had seen Cactus Pete ridden out of town on a rail, on suspicion of horse-stealing. Cactus Pete had been lucky to escape being strung up to the branch of a cottonwood, for there was not much doubt that he was a horse-thief, as the Kid knew him to be a cow-thief. And he knew the Kid!

The Kid's eyes gleamed over the levelled rifle. The man knew him, knew that he was the Rio Kid, the outlaw of the Rio Grande. He came from the Kid's own country, and knew his history—the history that was not even suspected at the Sampson Ranch. The temptation assailed the Kid to drive a bullet through the grinning rascal, and the look on his face drove the grin from Cactus Pete's hard, stubbly features, and his eyes dilated with fear.

"Kid, you wouldn't shoot a man with his hands up!" he gasped.

The Kid gritted his teeth. "If you've winged my pard, you get yours!" he said savagely; and he looked past the man, up the coulee.

But Santa Fe Sam, already recovered from his tumble, was on his feet, running down into the coulee revolver in hand, towards the fire.

The Kid hesitated.

He could not shoot down a man with his hands up—a man who had dropped his gun and surrendered. It was impossible to guard his secret by such a deed. But if he roped in the brand-blotter, and toted him off to the ranch he would talk and tell all he knew. The Sampson bunch would learn from him that Kid Cartax, the Old Man's partner, was the Rio Kid, the hunted outlaw of the Frio country.

The Rio Kid lowered his rifle at last. "Rise on," he muttered,

Cactus Pete gasped with relief.

"I reckon you wouldn't play it low down, Kid," he panted. "We're two of a kind—"

"You dog-goned cow-thief!" snapped the Kid. "I'm giving you a chance to beat it out of this country. Hit the chapparal and ride your hardest. I guess the whole bunch will soon be looking for you. Beat it!"

"Kid—"

"If you ain't in cover in that chapparal, pronto, you got yours," said the Kid. "I'm giving you a chance, but I ain't waiting."

Cactus Pete wasted no more time in words. He dashed the spurs into his horse's flanks, and galloped out of the coulee to the west, heading for the shades of the chapparal. The Kid cast a dark glance after him, and rode down into the coulee to meet Santa Fe Sam.

Sam had reached the fire and the tied cows when the Kid arrived there. He was panting and breathless from his run, unaccustomed, like all cowboys, to going on foot.

"You got him, Kid?" he panted.

"Noppe!"

"Jumpin' mules!" ejaculated Sam. "You let him vamoose, Kid?" He stared in amazement at the Kid.

The Kid averted his eyes.

"I reckon he's lit out for the chapparal," he said. "We've got the cows and the brandin' irons, and I sure allow that galoot won't try to work the Sampson Ranch again in a hurry."

"Waal, carry me home to die," said the puncher. "I reckon I can't figure how he got past you. Why, you was right in his way!"

The Kid dismounted without replying. It was not easy to explain the escape of the brand-blotter without repeating the facts, which the Kid assuredly did not intend to do. He proceeded to untie the roped cows.

"You didn't even draw a bead on him," said Santa Fe Sam. "You could have drilled that galoot as easy as easy, Kid!"

The Kid could not explain that he had not drawn a bead on the brand-blotter, because the rascal had put up his hands and surrendered. For in that case Sam would have wanted to know why the man was not roped in, a prisoner.

"Well, this sure gets my goat," said the puncher discontentedly. "Arter you rode round the coulee, and kept me waiting, just to fix him—to let him vamoose under your ornery nose! You sure must be loco, Kid!"

"Sure," said the Kid. "Let it go at that, Sam. I guess this galoot won't mosy along this-a-way any more!"

"I guess if he does, he won't get away so easy," grumbled the puncher. "Did you see what he was like, Kid? I never got a look at his face."

The Kid was glad to hear that. The less the Sampson bunch saw or knew of the man from Frio the better the Kid was pleased.

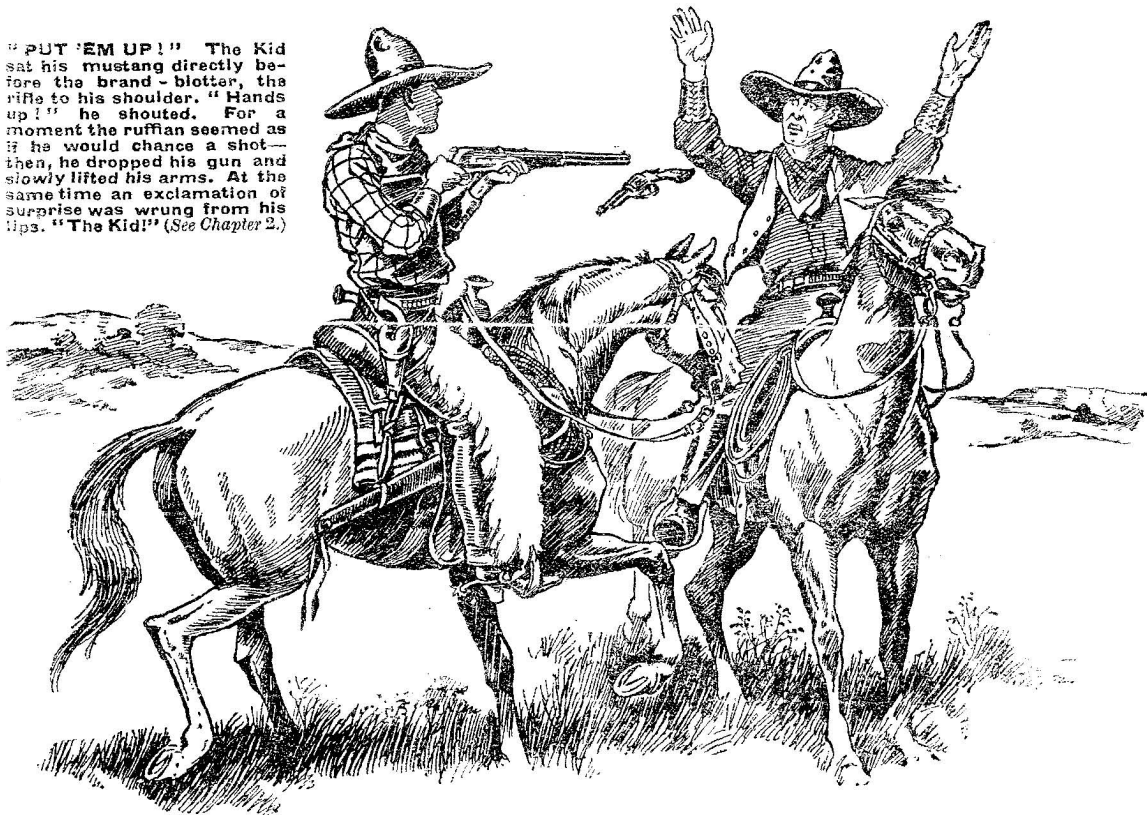
"Oh, jest like any other low-down, cow-thieving son of a gun!" answered the Kid carelessly.

"You'd know him agin?"

"I'd sure know him agin," agreed the Kid. "But I keep on telling you that the ornery cuss will ride clear of this ranch. I reckon we better get these yer cows back to the ranch, Sam, seeing as they're branded with a false brand now."

"I guess so," agreed Sam. "Take the runnin' iron; it'll be evidence against that scallywag if he's roped in some time. Look hyer, Kid, what's the matter with beating the chapparal for him? We might get him yet!"

"PUT 'EM UP!" The Kid sat his mustang directly before the brand-blotter, the rifle to his shoulder. "Hands up!" he shouted. For a moment the ruffian seemed as if he would chance a shot—then, he dropped his gun and slowly lifted his arms. At the same time an exclamation of surprise was wrung from his lips. "The Kid!" (See Chapter 2.)



"I guess he's clean levanted by this time," said the Kid. "We might beat the chaparral for a month of Sundays and never start him."

Santa Fe Sam grunted. He could not understand the Kid's lack of keenness in such a matter as brand-blotting.

"Waal, hump it to the ranch with them cows," he said. "He's killed my cayuse, and I reckon we'll have to ride double."

"The hoss'll carry us, feller," said the Kid cheerfully. "He's good for that distance with a double load."

The punchers headed for the Sampson ranch-house, Santa Fe Sam grumbling most of the way over the inexplicable escape of the cow-thief.

The Rio Kid was silent.

He was thinking; and his thoughts were dark. Cactus Pete, he had no doubt, was riding at great speed out of the San Pedro country, and would never be seen there again. But the incident had shown the Kid upon how frail a reed he was leaning. Three hundred miles from the Frio country, he had felt himself safe from recognition, safe from his past. The man from Frio had known him; but he was a brand-blotter, now riding hard for liberty and life. But there might be others—the Kid realized it.

Life was sunny to him, riding with the Sampson bunch, partner of the Old Man. But he had a hunch now that he had been living in a fool's paradise; and that trouble, which had so long dogged his trail, was only holding off for a time. His face was thoughtful and gloomy.

Near the ranch-house, Santa Fe Sam slipped from the mustang's back. He glanced up at the Kid's clouded face, and grinned.

"Say, Kid, you ain't mad, are you?" he asked. "I sure blew off my mouth a piece about that darned scallywag gettin' away. Forget it."

The Kid forced a smile.

"I ain't mad about that feller!" he answered. "I guess I ought to have stopped him—and I sure do wish that he'd pulled a gun on me, and I'd have let him have his, pronto. I guess I'll take them cows in to the Old Man."

And the Kid rode on to the ranch.

His face was still clouded, though he tried to smile his usual cheery smile when he came into the bunkhouse that evening. His hunch was strong that trouble, which had let him alone for so long, was at hand; as if that evil-faced cow-thief from Frio had brought him bad luck. That evening all the bunch could see that Kid Carfax had a frown, though they were far from guessing the cause of it.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

#### Cactus Pete Horns In!

"**B**EAT it!" It was Old Man Sampson's voice.

The Rio Kid, combing down his mustang at the gate of the corral, heard it, and smiled.

It was a week since the episode of the brand-blotter, and the Kid had almost recovered from his frown, and to all eyes he seemed his old cheery self again.

The Old Man's voice, that morning, made him smile. Old Man Sampson was not a measurer of words, when he said a thing, he said it emphatically. Now he was talking to a man who had ridden in at the gate—and he was talking with his usual emphasis.

"Put you on my pay-roll!" continued the Old Man. "I reckon, not! I do surely reckon not! You got the face of a coyote, hombre, and I guess there's cow-thief writ all over you. Beat it!"

The Kid glanced round, rather curious to see the man whom Mr. Sampson, at a glance, decided was a cow-thief on his looks.

He started.

The man was standing at a distance, and his face was turned away from the Kid. But the Kid knew him.

It was Cactus Pete.

For a second or two the Kid's head swam. He had taken it for granted that the brand-blotter had ridden fast and far. He had had a hunch that trouble was going to hit him again; but he had not figured on the return of the man who had been caught blotting brands. The Kid had only to denounce him, and he would be seized at once, and taken to Nuce for trial and prison. But it flashed into the Kid's mind that that was a game at which two could play. He could denounce the brand-blotter; and Cactus Pete could denounce the outlaw of the Rio Grande.

The Kid shut his teeth hard.

"Beat it!" went on the Old Man. "I tell you, a galoot of your looks ain't wanted on this hyer ranch. Lift the trail, pronto."

"I guess your pardner'll put in a word for me!" said the newcomer.

Old Man Sampson laughed scornfully.

"I guess not!" he said. "Kid Carfax's more likely to boot you off the ranch, on your looks. I'll sure ask him; and if he puts in a word for you, I guess I'll take you on."

The Old Man glanced round.

"Hyer you, Carfax!" he shouted. "You hump it this way a piece. Hyer's a cernery galoot says you'll speak a word for him."

The Rio Kid turned his mustang into the corral, and came slowly towards the ranch-house. Under its tan, his face was white. There was a glint of fire in his eyes.

Cactus Pete eyed him as he came up. There was a subdued grin of insouciance on his stubbly face.

But his manner was civil as he addressed the Kid.

"Mr. Carfax," he said, "you'll put in a word for me, I reckon. I've sure been in San Pedro, where I heard about you, and they let on you was Mr. Sampson's partner in this here ranch. So I nipped this-a-way to ask you for a job. You remember me in the Frio country?"

"I guess I remember you," said the Kid.

"Jumping gophers!" shouted the Old Man. "Carfax, you ain't letting on that that pirated gink is any friend of yours?"

"He sure ain't!" said the Kid. "I reckoned he wasn't! Now, you vamoose the ranch, you geeck, afore you get a boat to help you go!" said the rancher.

Cactus Pete set his teeth. "If Mr. Carfax ain't putting in a word for me, I reckon I'm ready to beat it!" he said. "You'll mebbe put me right on the way to Nuco? I got some business with the sheriff there."

The hidden meaning of his words was lost on the Old Man, though not on the Rio Kid.

"I guess more like the sheriff will have business with you!" snapped the Old Man contemptuously. "I guess there's a good many sheeps in Texas that would like to see you, you ornery galoot!"

The Rio Kid breathed hard. Cactus Pete was already turning to his horse. If he rode on to Nuco it would be to inform the sheriff that the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande was at the Sampson Ranch, partner of Old Man Sampson. The Nuco sheriff might not—very likely would not—believe such a startling story; but assuredly he would investigate, and investigation could only prove the truth of it. Not that the Kid had any fear for himself.

A dozen Texas sheriffs had hunted him; but the reward of a thousand dollars for him had never been earned. The Kid had no fear that any man in Texas would ever rope in that reward.

But he shrank from letting the Sampson bunch, and Old Man Sampson, learn the truth. What would they say if they knew?

The white-browed old rancher, with his fiery temper and his fierce flow of language, was straight as a die; the bunch were the whitest bunch the Kid had ever struck since the old days on the Double-Bar. And they would know that he had been an outlaw; worse than that, for common report laid to the Kid's charge many a desperate deed of which he had scarcely heard—cow-kills and hold-ups and reckless swootings were all ascribed to the Kid—and who was to disentangle the false from the true?

"Hold on!"

The Kid spoke quietly. Cactus Pete, with a foot in his stirrup, turned his head. There was a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"You say so, Mr. Carfax?" he said. The Kid turned to the staring rancher.

"I guess I know this galoot, once, a long piece from here," he said. "I guess he can bed down for the night, if you ain't any objection, Mr. Sampson."

Mr. Sampson was a good judge of faces; but it hardly needed a good judge to read Cactus Pete's character in his face. The reckless rascality of the cow-thief showed in every feature, in every line. Thief and gun-man were 'wair large' on the man from Frio.

"You're sure a soft jasper, Carfax!" said the Old Man discomfitedly. "But what you say goes! Let him bed down in me rikes!"

And Old Man Sampson stamped back into the ranch-house, evidently surprised and displeased by his partner putting in a word for the stranger.

Cactus Pete looked at the Kid, with a glimmer in his eyes.

"I'm sure powerful obliged to you, Mr. Carfax," he said.

There was an infection of mockery in his voice.

The Kid breathed hard. But there were several ears within hearing, and he merely nodded, and turned away, without speaking in words.

Cactus Pete grinned, and walked his horse away to the corral, and turned it in. Then he slouched over to the chuckhouse, where Beans, the cook, eyes him with suspicious hostility, but provided him with a meal. After that Cactus stretched himself on a bench outside the bunkhouse and smoked. A little later Jeff Barstow, the foreman of the ranch, rode in from the range, and stared, as his eyes lighted on the stranger. He handed his horse to the wrangler, came over to the bunkhouse, and stropped in front of Cactus, eyeing him grimly.

"What's brought you along?" he asked.

"I guess I'm fixing this hyer outfit."

"Guess agin!" snapped Barstow. "This hyer outfit ain't roping in your sort."

"You can ask Mr. Carfax." "Mean to say Kid Carfax has took you on?" demanded the foreman.

"Sure." Jeff strode away in search of the Kid.

"Kid, there's an ornery ass settin' by the bunkhouse allows you've took him into the bunch," he said. "If he ain't a badman from Bad'own, I'll sure eat my Stetson. The ornariest galoot I ever set eyes on!"

"I guess I've told him he can bed down for the night, Jeff."

"Like enough there'll be a loss missing in the morning if he does," grunted the foreman. "But it's your say-so; you're the Old Man's partner, I guess."

Cactus Pete bedded down that night in the bunkhouse; but in the morning Jeff had to acknowledge that his suspicions were unfounded. He was not missing in the morning; neither was a horse missing. If the man was not a horse-thief, a cow-thief, a gunman, and a badman, Jeff did not know that kind of galoot when he saw one. But whatever he was, he was there to stay—if he could.

#### THE FOURTH CHAPTER. Quitted Off!

"NOW I reckon we'll talk turkey!" The Kid's voice was low and clear.

Cactus Pete, lounging on the bench outside the bunkhouse in the morning sunlight, with a Mexican cheroot between his blackened teeth, grinned. The bunch were out on the ranges; only the horse-wrangler visible in the corral, and Beans, the cook, blinking pots and pans in the chuckhouse. But the Kid, for once, was not in the saddle with the bunch. He had been glad to see the punchers clear off and leave him a chance of speaking with the man who had drifted down from Frio.

He stood before the lounging ruffian, his handsome, sunburnt face set and

grin, a glint in his eyes that warned Cactus to ride herd over his insolence. He had the whip hand of the Kid, knowing what he knew; but he was playing a desperate game, and he knew it. The Kid was not the man to draw trigger on a galoot without good cause given; but Cactus could guess that he longed for a pretext to pull a gun.

Cactus was a gunman, and the butt of his Colt bore seven notches, each commemorating the death of a man; but he knew that he was of no use with the Rio Kid, and he did not want any gunplay. Gunplay would suit the Kid, as matters stood; but it would not suit the man from Frio.

"I let you off, after that dirty trick of blotting brands," went on the Kid quietly. "Now you've horned in hyer and claimed acquaintance. I guess I want to know, Cactus."

The quietness of his tone did not tempt Cactus to open insolence. He knew the Kid was most dangerous when he was quiet.

"I guess it's plain enough, Kid," he answered. "I've heered all about you in San Pedro. I reckon I got wise after we met on the prairie; I was sure honing to know what you was up to hyer. I guess there ain't a galoot in this country knows you're the Rio Kid, with a thousand dollars on your head."

"Correct!" said the Kid quietly. "And you aim to put them wise, feller?"

"Nix! I ain't let on a word, have I?" said the cow-thief. "Seems as you're going in for ranching hyer, and giving up the trails. I reckon I've made the Frio country too hot for me, same as you have, Kid; and I'm lying low, same as you are. I ain't here to steal your cows."

"What are you here for, then?"

"Punching cows," said Cactus, "same as you, feller. Brand-blottin' ain't a payin' game these days; I want a chance to throw it down and work with a bunch on a ranch. I'm as good a puncher as any galoot in this hyer bunch; and I'll sure be worth my pay. What's the matter with that?"

The Rio Kid stood silent, eyeing the man.

"You mean that?" he asked at last.

"Sure!"

"You figure that I'll keep it dark about your brand blotting on this ranch?"

"I guess one good turn deserves another," said Cactus. "I ain't saying a word about the Rio Kid."

There was another pause.

"You've horned in hyer," said the Kid at last. "You can get the nearest sheriff down on me, and I guess I don't care about that. You can give me away to the bunch here and that's what I don't want. I'm sure powerful tempted to drive a bullet through your ornery carcass."

"I guess you won't do that," said Cactus Pete. "I ain't pulling a gun on you, Kid; and I reckon the bunch wouldn't stand for shooting a man down in cold blood. Forget it."

"I guess I'd like you to pull a gun, Cactus!" said the Kid. "I'd sure be mighty glad if you'd do it!"

Cactus Pete laughed.

"I ain't pulling any gun, Kid," he said. "I've come here peaceful, looking for a job punching cows. Give a galoot a chance. If you allow you've given up the trails, you can believe I've throwed down that game, too."

"No need to pick this ranch," granted the Kid.

Cactus grinned.

"I guess no other ranch would take

me on, on my looks and my record," he answered. "I got a friend to speak for me here."

The Rio Kid stood silent, thinking. If the claim was true, he was not this man to refuse him a chance; though he hated to see him on the Sampson ranch. But the evil, cunning face did not look as if Cactus was turning over a new leaf.

"I guess," said the Kid at last, "that if you're square, Cactus, I'll put it to the Old Man, and get him to give you a trial hyer. I'd sure rather see the last of you; but I allow you ain't got a dog's chance of horning into any honest bunch. But if you spill a word about the Rio Kid—"

"I ain't spilling nothing, so long as you don't."

"That's a cinch," said the Kid. "If you mean straight, you've got a chance. But if you join this bunch you got to work and ride like any other galoot, and earn your pay. And if you begin any shenanigan game, look out for

afore I'll stand for it! Get off that bench!"

Cactus breathed hard and deep. The Kid's hand went to the gun in his belt, and his eyes blazed. Slowly the man from Rio rose from the bench.

But his eyes burned at the Kid.

"You want to keep your horns in, Kid," he muttered. "You know what's yours if the sheriff of Nuce gets news of you. And jest chew on this—you won't make all safe by gunplay; I guess I writ it down, and left it with the town marshal down at San Pedro. And if I got shot up, darn you, the marshal will open that letter, and he'll be arter that thousand dollars reward so quick you won't see his heels for dust! You got that?"

"I got it," assented the Kid. "Now you get me. You'll have a chance to punch cows on this ranch, so long as you keep square, and mind your step. First time you throw off your mouth at me, after this, I give you a quiting that will take the skin off'n you, and boot you off the ranch, to go and do

The Kid pointed to it. "Saddle up!" he said briefly. "I reckon—"

"You want to do as you're told on this ranch, Cactus, though you ain't here long," said the Kid. "I got a quirt here that says so."

"Gold-darn your hide!" hissed the ruffian. "You darned outlaw—"

He broke off with a yell, as the Kid's quirt sang in the air, and came down across his shoulders with a crash.

"Pronto!" snapped the Kid. Cactus Pete's hand flew to his gun. But he checked the movement in time. The Kid wanted to see him draw; he knew how much the Kid wanted that. For his life he dared not.

Trembling with rage, he saddled and bridled the horse. Under the Kid's gleaming eye he mounted.

"Now hit the trail," said the Kid. "You reckoned you could crowd me, you cow-thief; you reckoned you'd get me scared, and I'd shut my mouth and let you loaf around, and draw the Old Man's pay for nothin', and steal cows

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bad trouble. If there's any brand bloatin' on his hyer ranch or any cow littin', I guess I shall know where to look for the nigger in the woodpile!"

Cactus Pete's eyes gleamed for a moment. But he nodded.

He lighted another cheroot.

The Kid gave him a grim look.

"If you're in this bunch, Cactus, you ain't sitting there loafing," he said.

"You got to earn your keep. Git your cayuse."

Cactus Pete did not stir. In spite of his lurking fear of the Rio Kid, and his swiftness with a gun, there was resistance in the sullen face.

"I guess you can make things kinder easy for me, if you like," he answered.

The Kid smiled grimly.

"Now I reckon we're getting down to it," he said. "You're showing your hand, are you, you ornery cuss! You reckon you're going to loaf around this ranch, and I'm going to see you through, for fear that you spill what you know of me in the Rio country. You've sure roped in the wrong cayuse if that's your game, Cactus. Why, you darned pesky gink, you can shout out all you know for all Texas to hear

what you darned well like. Chew on that, and don't give me any back-talk! Now go and get your cayuse an' ride!"

"I guess—"

"You're a puncher in this bunch, and I'm your boss' pardner," said the Kid.

"You reckon you've hit this bunch to loaf around and look for a chance of stealing cows, and you figure that I ain't spilling anything, and letting you do it, because you can spill the beans for me hyer!" The Kid breathed hard, and his eyes glittered. "You darned, low-down, cow-thief! You sure have got hold of the wrong cayuse!"

The ruffian set his teeth.

"If you don't stand for that, Kid, you'll stand for being roped in by the sheriff of Nuce, and toted back to Rio!" he said savagely.

The Rio Kid laughed.

"We got it plain now," he said. "Now I reckon I'll let on how much you scare me!"

He turned his head and shouted to the wrangler:

"Here, you Mesquite, you turn out this hobo's cayuse, pronto!"

"Sure!" called back the wrangler. Cactus Pete's horse trotted out.

and blot brands when there wasn't an eye on you. I guess I'm wise to your game; and I guess that'll show you just how much I'm scared of you, you low-down hobo!"

Crack!

Full across the lowering, scowling face of the ruffian came the Kid's quirt. He yelled wildly as the horse plunged.

"Now hit the trail!" shouted the Kid fiercely. "By the great horned toad, if you ain't out of range, pronto. I'll fan you with bullets to put a move in you!"

A gun was in the Kid's hand now. Cactus Pete rode for the gate, leaped it on his horse, and dashed away down the trail in a cloud of dust. It was not till he was out of effective range that he turned in the saddle to shake his fist back at the ranch. Then he galloped on again, and disappeared in whirling dust in the direction of San Pedro.

THE END.

"ROPED IN!" is the title of next week's rearing Western yarn, featuring the Rio Kid, boy outlaw of Texas.

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