

Thrills! Thrills! Thrills!
In our complete Western
Yarn, starring the Rio
Kid, Boy Outlaw!

RANCHER OR OUTLAW?

BY

RALPH REDWAY.



With a ranch of his own, and a bunch of punchers who he knows are willing to follow him to the death, the Rio Kid settles down to enjoy himself and forget the outlaw life he has lived so long. But Fate ordains otherwise for the kid-rancher!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Let Up!

"PUT 'em up!"

The Rio Kid's voice was low—scarce above a whisper. But in that whisper in the shadowy darkness there was a world of menace.

It was midnight; and silence and slumber lay on the Lazy O ranch.

In the ranch-house six Texas Rangers were sleeping, rolled in their blankets, and from somewhere in the house came the rumbling snore of Diego, the Mexican chore-man.

The room occupied by "Mister Fairfax," the new boss of the ranch, was dark, save for a faint glimmer of starlight from the open window shutter.

In that room Mister Fairfax—alias the Rio Kid—had not been sleeping. The Rio Kid was not likely to close his eyes while Texas Rangers were in the ranch-house.

Wakeful in the darkness, the Kid had waited and listened and watched, wondering what would be the outcome of this strange situation.

Strange enough it was for Jim Hall and his rangers to be camped in the ranch, never knowing that Mister Fairfax, the boss of the ranch, was the boy outlaw of whom they were in search.

On the morrow they were to ride on their way without—if the Kid could help it—having seen Mister Fairfax and never guessing that they were leaving behind the outlaw they were hunting.

But the Kid had doubted; and when

Mule-Kick Hall had stepped in quietly at the window in the darkness, he realized that he was not going to get away with it as he had hoped.

Jim Hall knew—or suspected; and he had come to the rancher's room to make sure. He could not know—he could only suspect—or it was not thus that he would have come. But that cut no ice—for one glance at Mister Fairfax would have resolved his suspicion into certainty. And the Kid acted promptly.

The muzzle of his revolver was grinding into the chest of the ranger over his throbbing heart, and the Kid's finger was on the trigger. And Jim Hall, nearer to death than he had ever been, stood silent, peering in the gloom at the shadowy figure before him. The Rio Kid's whisper went on:

"Put 'em up! Jest you give one yaup to call your galoots and you're buzzards' meat, you dog-goned geck! Put 'em up and keep your can shut! You get me!"

Slowly the ranger raised his hands over his head.

The slightest pressure of the Kid's finger and he was a dead man. One call would have brought the rangers to their feet—would have brought them rushing to the room, gun in hand—would have circled the Kid with deadly foes, thrown hopeless odds against him. But they would not have found their leader alive.

Mule-Kick Hall did not fear death. He had faced it too often and too recklessly for that. But he did not figure

on throwing his life away. With the Kid's gun pressing over his heart he put up his hands and stood quiet—his eyes glinting at the Kid.

"That's better!" The Kid drew away the ranger's gun, and tossed it on the bed. "I guess you won't be wanting your hardware, feller." He ran his hand quickly over the ranger for concealed weapons, but there was none. "Now you can put down your paws if you want; but don't yaup above a whisper if you ain't honing to hit Jordan all of a sudden!"

In grim silence the ranger lowered his hands.

"I guess I needn't ask you if you know me?" said the Kid softly.

"Not any!" answered Hall, speaking for the first time and carefully subduing his voice. He did not intend, if he could help it, to let this encounter end to the Kid's advantage; but for the present he was in a cleft stick, and he knew it.

"How'd you get wise to it?"

"I wasn't wise to it when I humped in hyer, or I reckon I'd have come a-shooting!" said Hall. "I jest stepped in for a look-see. I guess it wasn't easy to cotton to the idea that the Rio Kid was playing rancher; that sure wasn't the game I guessed you'd be at, Kid Carfax."

"Sit on that bed, and I'm goin' to talk turkey to you, Jim Hall!" said the Kid quietly.

Hall obeyed.

The Rio Kid sat on a bench, facing

him. His revolver no longer touched the ranger. It rested lightly on his knee. But it made no difference, for Hall knew that it was ready for instant use.

The Kid's face was dark and thoughtful as he looked at the dim visage of the ranger.

It was some moments before he spoke again.

"I guess we're both cinched, Jim Hall, in a way," he said at last. "You got six men within call—and I ain't banking that the Lazy O bunch would stand for me if they knowed I was the Rio Kid. Anyhow, my game's up here if the Packsaddle country tumbles to it that Mister Fairfax is Kid Carfax from Frio. But I got you, Jim Hall!"

"You got me!" said Hall calmly. "I guess it's time to talk turkey," said the Kid. "I'm goin' to put it to you like a white man, Hall. You been after me a long time, and you allow that you never fail to get your man. You cornered me in the Mal Pais, but I got away. I guess it was luck, running me down here—jest luck and chance."

"Jest that!" assented Hall. "You're a hard man, Hall, and you got a bite like a bulldog," said the Kid. "But I guess you're a white man. You're after me because I'm an outlaw—because I've pulled my gun on galoots who reckoned they could rope me in—because—"

"Because you're the Rio Kid, wanted by half the sheriffs in Texas!" said Hall curtly.

"You've said it! But I'm goin' to put you wise," said the Kid, and there was a note of deep earnestness in his voice. "I never honed to be an outlaw, Hall. I was boosted into it. I punched cows on the old Double Bar Ranch at Frio, till Old Man Dawney suspecioned me, and I had to hit the horizon. He owned up afterwards that he was wrong, and that I never did what was laid to me. But that came too late. I was an outlaw and wanted for other things—most of them things that I'd never done, I'm telling you. I ain't denying that I've pulled my gun to keep my neck out of a rope, more'n once. But most of them shootings and hold-ups that they lay to me are jest hot air."

"You can tell that to the judge!" remarked Hall.

The Kid laughed softly.

"I guess I'm a cowman and never had no truck with lawyers," he answered. "I know what would happen if I stood for that. I was boosted outside the law, agin my will; but there's plenty true enough to cook my goose at a trial. I ain't monkeying with any judges, so long as I've got a gun in my hand. Forget that!"

Hall sat silent and grim.

"You've found me here," resumed the Kid. "What have you found? Did you find me holding up the Pecos Bend back, or shooting up Packsaddle, or running off cows? You did not! You found me on a ranch that I've bought with my own money."

Hall gave a shrug.

"You ain't taking that?" asked the Kid. "I tell you I made that money in the gold mines of Arizona, and earned every cent of it fossicking."

"Mebbe," said Hall. "That ain't my business."

"I'm here to run this ranch," said the Kid. "I'm telling you that I bought it with my own money. I've had trouble with the bunch. That pesky foreman, Barney Baker, was running the ranch, and figured on getting his new boss shot up. But I've made the grade. I've

made good here, Jim Hall. Let alone and I'm a rancher—and never riding an outlaw trail again. You was after an outlaw—well, the Rio Kid ain't any outlaw now—he's Mister Fairfax, boss of the Lazy O ranch. He don't ask anything better than to be let alone to raise cattle and keep inside the law. You get me?"

Hall made no reply.

"I'm puttin' it to you fair and square!" urged the Kid. "If I wanted to keep on the outlaw trail, what's to prevent me from shootin' you up, here and now, stepping out of that window, and getting on a cayuse and hitting the horizon?"

"Nothing!" said Hall.

"Then can't you take a galoot's word and let up?" asked the Kid. "Leave me alone, and the Rio Kid is as dead as if he was riddled with rangers' bullets, or strung up on the limb of a cottonwood. Dead and buried, Jim Hall! Mister Fairfax is alive in his place—a law-abidin' rancher, raisin' cattle fair an' square, and giving every man a fair deal. Ain't that good enough for you?"

"I guess," said Hall slowly, "that if I didn't stand for the law, Kid, it would be good enough for me. But it ain't good enough for a captain of the Texas Rangers specially commissioned to rope in the Rio Kid."

There was a silence.

"It ain't a cinch, then?" asked the Kid at last.

"It ain't."

The Rio Kid's face hardened. "What you aim to do, then?" he asked. "You don't reckon you're goin' to get me, and you with your hardware out of reach, and my gun looking at you?"

"Shoot, if you like!" rejoined Hall laconically. "I guess my men will round you up."

He paused.

"There's nothing to it, Kid," he said quietly. "I got my duty to do. I been after you a long time. I nearly had you in the Mal Pais. But for that cloud-burst, you was cinched there. I ain't denying that you saved my life in the flood, and let me hit the trail when you had a gun on me. But it cuts no ice. I got to get you. I've hunted you all through Texas, and you beat me to it." Hall's eyes glowed.

"I never guessed you was setting up as a rancher, though I sure knowed you was on some new game, when I found you'd parted with your horse. I got your cayuse. I found him where you'd left him, with a half-breed down the Pecos, for feed. I've got that mustang along with my outfit here. I reckoned he might help in trailing down his master. I guess it would have worked, too, if you hadn't played sick, and kept out of sight, when we hit this ranch."

"Sure!" assented the Kid. "I guess Side-Kicker would have given it away at once that he knowed Mister Fairfax."

Hall breathed hard.

"I took a chance, coming in here to look at you," he said. "I couldn't rightly reckon that there was anything to it. But I guess I was a gink to take a chance. A galoot can't afford to take chances with the Rio Kid."

"He sure can't!" said the Kid.

"You got me," said Hall. "You can shoot me up, if you want, jump out of that window, and get hold of your old cayuse, and hit the horizon. I ain't got no kick coming. But the shot will wake my men, and they'll be on your trail, and that's good enough for me. Get to it, and be darned to you!"

The Kid's revolver was lifted again.

"You're too good a man to throw away your life this-a-way, Jim Hall," he said. "Let up, old man!"

"Not by a jugful!"

The Rio Kid's eyes gleamed over the levelled revolver. Mule Kick Hall was looking at death, but he did not falter. Coldly and grimly he stared at the outlaw, whom he had hunted down, and who held his life in the hollow of his hand.

In that moment the ranger tasted all the bitterness of death. But there was only grim, hard resolution in his face.

The Kid's finger trembled on the trigger.

Then he lowered the gun.

"I guess I can't do it," he said slowly. "I ain't never pulled trigger on a guy without giving him an even break. You're a hard man, Jim Hall—a pesky hard cuss, but you're a white man, and I ain't wiping you out like you was a rattler!"

The Kid rose to his feet, and thrust the revolver back into the holster at his belt.

Then—watched by Hall's wondering stare—he stepped to the door, pushed back the wooden button, and threw the door open.

"Git!" he said curtly.

Hall rose to his feet, staring at him.

"I guess—" he began, in sheer wonder.

The Kid pointed to the open door. "Git!" he repeated. "I got you by the short hairs, Jim Hall, and I'm letting up on you! Git! Call your men, and tell them that the boss of this ranch is the Rio Kid, the man they're hunting, and begin the circus as soon as you like! Git, afore I change my mind, and let lead through you, you darned lobo-wolf!"

The ranger stared at him blankly for a long moment. Then, in silence, he stepped from the room—a free man, unharmed!

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Nothing to It!

BARNEY BAKER, in the bunkhouse on the Lazy O, watched the daylight grow clearer and clearer at the window, with sleepless eyes. Hardly once had the foreman of the Lazy O closed his eyes through the night. He lay in his bunk, in his bandages, unresting. In the bunks punchers were sleeping. Barney was the only man awake. Black and bitter thoughts, hope and fear, kept him from rest.

But in the light of dawn the punchers turned out. Barney watched them with bitter eyes. Long had the Lazy O bunch stood by him, backing him up against boss after boss who had bought the ranch, and for years the Lazy O had remained in Barney's hands. But his long reign had ended with the coming of the new boss. Excepting for Coyote Jensen, there was not a man in the bunch who would stand by him now against Mister Fairfax; and Jensen, with his gun-arm in a sling, was of no account. And Barney himself was "fired," and only stayed till his wound had mended sufficiently for him to sit a broncho and hit the trail. One gleam of hope had come to him in the coming of the Texas Rangers to the ranch. And that hope was failing him.

A day or two more, at the most, and he would have to go, leaving Mister Fairfax in possession, with the bunch devoted to him. His game was up at the Lazy O, unless fortune turned up the cards in his favour at the eleventh hour.

Some of the punchers gave him a

"Mornin', Barney!" before they went out of the bunkhouse; others did not heed him at all. Barney Baker was a fallen man, and no one sympathized with his grouch against the new boss. The bunch reckoned that a good man had come to the Lazy O—a man they were proud to ride with. They were, as Barney put it bitterly, feeding from his hand. Only the Coyote lingered beside his bunk.

"Nothing's happened?" asked Barney.

"Nix!"

"I put Jim Hall wise last night!" muttered Barney. "I told him I figured that Mister Fairfax was a man the sheriffs wanted."

The coyote grinned.

"I guess it's your grouch ag'in him, Barney," he said. "Jim Hall don't care a continental red cent who Mister Fairfax is. He's riding the Packsaddle country looking for that fire-bug from the Rio Grande—the galoot they call the Rio Kid. He ain't arter any other game!"

"He allowed he would see Mister Fairfax before he left the Lazy O," said Barney.

"Mister Fairfax is took sick, and keeping to his room," said the Coyote. "Hall won't see him any."

Barney gritted his teeth.

"Took sick, jest when the rangers was hitting the ranch," he said. "What does it look like?"

"Mebbe Mister Fairfax is a guy that don't want to meet up with any rangers," admitted the Coyote. "There's a heap of guys in the Pack-saddle country of the same heft. But I'll tell the world, Barney, the boys won't like it if he's a galoot that's seen trouble and you put the rangers on to him."

Barney snapped his fingers.

"That for the boys!" he growled. "I tell you, Coyote, that guy Fairfax is a man that the sheriffs want. I feel it in my bones. I've seen him somewhere afore he came to Packsaddle, though I can't place him. I tell you, he's skipped into Packsaddle to get away from trouble, and, like as not, Hall knows him, if he set eyes on him!"

"Aw, forget it!" grunted the Coyote.

"There's some sheriffs I don't want to see myself, and I guess there's some places in Texas that you're careful to keep clear of, Barney. Half Pack-saddle would want to lynch you if they knowed you was setting the rangers on to a guy."

And the Coyote lounged out of the bunkhouse, with another grunt.

Barney Baker was left alone, with his black thoughts.

Was there anything in his suspicion of Mister Fairfax, or was it only born of his hatred and longing for vengeance? Barney hardly knew himself.

But he was sure of one thing—that he had seen Mister Fairfax before he came to Packsaddle—somewhere he had seen him, and under quite different circumstances. That much he was sure of.

He had searched his memory, bitterly, savagely, but somehow the recollection escaped him. There was some change in Mister Fairfax since that time—some change he could not trace. That was why he could not place him. But he had seen him—when he was not called Fairfax. He was sure of it.

There were plenty of men in Pack-saddle who had come to that lawless section, where sheriffs did not care to ride, because they had had trouble with the law. And Mister Fairfax was one of them, Barney felt sure. His vague

suspicions had crystallized when he learned that Mister Fairfax had "took sick," and was keeping to his room, when the rangers camped at the Lazy O. Instantly Barney jumped to it that the rancher was aiming to keep out of the sight of eyes that might have known him in the past.

But if Jim Hall saw him—and he had said that he would sure see him before he left the Lazy O—Jim Hall was a man of his word; and though it was the Rio Kid he was hunting he would not lose a chance of roping in any other man who was wanted by the law.

Barney crawled out of his bunk and dressed himself, and went to the doorway to look out. He was almost mended now; his confinement to his bunk was chiefly a pretence, an excuse for remaining at the Lazy O. Not till he was driven would Barney Baker leave the ranch that he still hoped to get back into his hands. But now he was too anxious and eager, to keep up his malingering. He stood in the doorway of the bunkhouse, staring out in the sunny morning.

The daily life of the ranch was beginning. The punchers had had their early breakfast from the chuckhouse, and some of them were already riding out on the plains. Long Bill, the horse-wrangler, was at the corral, where the rangers were taking out their horses. Apparently the rangers were preparing for the trail; but Barney did not see Jim Hall among them.

Jim Hall was a man of his word—he would not go without having seen Mister Fairfax. Was he seeing him now? There was no sound or sign of trouble at the ranch.

Barney Baker gritted his teeth. Was his hope, after all, founded on nothing but hatred and revengeful malice? He called to one of the rangers, who led his horse near the bunkhouse.

"Say, where's Jim Hall?"

The ranger looked round.

"I guess he ain't around," he answered.

"Is he in the ranchhouse?"

"He sure ain't," said the ranger.

"I guess he rode out afore dawn—he ain't come in yet. We're sure waiting till he horns in ag'in."

The man passed on, leaving Barney staring. Jim Hall had ridden out on the plains before dawn? Why? If he was going to see Mister Fairfax, as he had told Barney, why was he not seeing him?

That Hall's absence puzzled others, as well as the foreman, was soon clear. The rangers, with their horses saddled for the trail, stood in a group by the gate, looking out over the plains and talking in low tones. They were waiting for their leader, and did not know why he was keeping them waiting. Barney Baker limped to the corral, and called to the horse-wrangler.

"Say, Bill! You savvy where Jim Hall is?"

"Nope!"

"Where's Mister Fairfax?"

The wrangler looked round at him.

"I guess he's in his room, Barney. He was took sick last night. It was the Dago's cooking, I guess—he allowed that that greaser's frijoles gave him a pain."

"He's still in the ranch, then?" asked Barney.

"Sure! Why shouldn't he be?" asked Long Bill, in surprise.

"Has Hall seen him?"

"I guess not—him being sick," answered the wrangler. "Hall's gone out on a pascor on his lonesome. His guys are waiting for him to come in, to hit the trail. I guess they won't be seeing Mister Fairfax, him being sick."

"Sick?" jeered Barney Baker savagely. "Playing possum, you mean, because he's a guy that's skipped from the law, and he ain't honing for Texas Rangers to see him."

Long Bill stared at the foreman.

"You reckon?" he asked slowly.

"Yep, for sure."

The wrangler came a stride nearer to Barney. His hand was very close to the gun that swung at his side.

"Mebbe," he said. "I guess I was plumb s'prised to hear that Mister Fairfax had took sick. Mebbe! Plenty of galoots in Packsaddle have got secrets



JUST THE PRESSURE OF HIS FINGER, AND— The Rio Kid's eyes, gleamed over the levelled revolver. Mule-Kick Hall was looking at death; but he did not falter. Coldly and grimly he stared at the outlaw, whom he had hunted down at last, and who held his life in the hollow of his hand. (See Chapter 1.)

to keep, I reckon. You, Barney Baker, you don't want to put them rangers wise to it, if you're right. You get me? I'm telling you that this bunch would string you up over the corral gate, if you gave a guy away to the rangers."

Barney eyed him fiercely.

"And I'm telling you—" he began.

"Forget it," interrupted Long Bill.

"I guess I seen trouble myself, afore I hit Packsaddle—and so's half the bunch. We ain't tin angels on this here ranch, nobow. Why, durn your hide, don't every guy here know that you had to skip the San Antonio country years ago? You say a word agin Mister Fairfax and look out for what's coming to you, Barney Baker."

Barney opened his lips and shut them again. The wrangler was staring at him hard, his hand on his gun now. Never had Barney realised so clearly, how utterly he had lost his hold on the Lazy O bunch. They were standing for Mister Fairfax, and that was a cinch. But Barney, had his mind been less warped by hatred, would have figured that nothing could have discredited him more with the bunch than a suggestion

of giving up a man who had run from trouble. For half the Lazy O bunch had run from trouble in their time.

He turned slowly away, and Long Bill, with a grunt, let go his gun. He had warned Barney what would come to him if he betrayed the boss of the Lazy O, but the word had been already said. All that Barney could say had been already poured into the ears of the captain of rangers. And Barney was thankful to remember that only the Coyote knew it; and Coyote Jensen was still his man.

He limped away towards the ranch-house. At an open window a handsome sunburnt face looked out into the sunny morning. Barney stared with black malvolence at Mister Fairfax.

The Kid sighted him and nodded coolly.

He dismounted at the gate and strode towards the ranch. Barney looked at him, and looked at Mister Fairfax. The captain of rangers strode direct to the open window where the boy rancher was standing, and Mister Fairfax smiled as he came. And with a bitter oath Barney Baker turned away and tramped back to the bunk-house, sick with rage and disappointment.

THE THIRD CHAPTER. A White Man's Way!

MULE-KICK HALL stood before the Rio Kid—a thick-set, grim, bcw-legged figure, with lowering brows and sour eyes. The Kid looked at him quietly. What was in the ranger's mind he could not tell.

He had let up on Jim Hall, let him live, in the full expectation that gun-play would follow, that guns would be roaring, and blood flowing freely, before the night was many minutes older. But it had not come to pass. The Kid had waited tensely, a gun in either hand, ready for the most desperate fight of his wild life. But only silence had followed. And for once the keen mind of the Kid was at a loss.

Was Mule-Kick Hall waiting for morning before he came a-shooting? Was he giving the outlaw a chance of escape, as return for the sparing of his life? Or was he calculating on the Kid seeking escape, and laying a snare for him outside the ranch-house? The Kid could not tell. He could only surmise—with watchful eyes and guns handy—but he did not think of quitting. The odds against him were terribly heavy, if it came to a pinch, but the Rio Kid was a bad man to

crowd. He waited, while night gave place to morning—wondering more and more what was in the mind of the grim-faced, iron-willed captain of rangers. What was coming to him the Kid could not guess; but whatever it proved to be he was ready for it.

From his window he had watched the rangers preparing to take the trail. Obviously Hall had told his men nothing, so far. And where was Hall? The Kid was mystified.

And now the grim-featured ranger stood before him, as he looked from the window—grimmer than ever, but with no weapon in his hand. The Kid waited for him to speak.

"You still hyer?" said Hall at last.

"Sure!"

"I guessed you'd have beat it."

"I ain't beating it a whole lot," said the Kid coolly. "I'm boss of this here ranch, and I'm staying boss."

Hall bit his lip hard.

"You gave me my life," he said. "I gave you a chance to beat it, Kid. I figured that you'd get out and corral that mustang of yours and hit the horizon like blazes!"

"That ain't the programme," said the Kid quietly. "I put you wise, Jim Hall, that I'd quit outlaw trails. I ain't going back to them unless I'm driven. Call on your bunch, if you like, and begin the circus; I guess there won't be a lot of them left to carry the news home when we're through. I'm a rancher now, Jim Hall, and no outlaw; and if you make me an outlaw ag'in, that's on you." The Kid's eyes flashed. "I ain't taking a step from this ranch—not while I can handle a gun! Chew on that!"

Hall stood silent, looking at him.

"If you'd gone, I reckon I'd have been on your trail at sun-up!" he said at length. "But—"

"I ain't gone!" said the Kid.

Hall breathed hard.

"I never let up on a man afore when I was on his trail," he said. "I never reckoned I'd let up on the Rio Kid, least of any. But—"

He paused again, and the Kid looked curiously at the hard, sour face. There were signs in it of stress of thought, of anxious pondering. The hours that had passed, since the Kid had spared his life, had been hours of anxious and bitter reflection to Mule-Kick Hall.

"I guess," he said at last, speaking slowly—"I guess you was giving it to me straight, Kid, when you talked turkey to me last night. You sure acted like a white man. You had me cinched; and you could have shot me up and make your get-away easy."

"I sure could!" said the Kid.

"I'm making a bargain with you," said Hall. "I believe what you allowed when you was chewing the rag in that room—you've quit outlaw trails, and you're ranching, fair and square. I guess it's my duty to rope you in, all the same; but I'm sure letting it slip. I'm riding away from this ranch with my mouth shut."

The Kid drew a quick breath.

"You're sure spilling a whole hatful, Hall!" he said softly.

"You keep to a straight trail, and I keep my mouth shut," said Hall. "I'm riding away this morning—out of Pack-saddle country. I've quit hunting you, Kid. You've got to take your chance of another hombre spotting you—but I've quit."

"That's heap good talk," said the Kid.

"But you got to ride straight," said Hall. "So long's you're ranching, fair and square, I guess I'm going to forget you. But"—his jaw set square—"but if I get the news that the Rio Kid is on the rampage again, then you look out for yourself, Kid—I'll take your trail again, and never quit till you're strung up. You got your chance—if you mean business, you'll never see Jim Hall ag'in. Break out, just once, and I'll get you, if I have to track you from Texas to Alaska."

"It's a cinch!" said the Kid.

"That's the lot!" said Hall, and he was turning away. But an impulse moved him, and he turned back and held out a brown hand. "Shake, Kid! We part friends—though if we meet ag'in, we meet as enemies."

The Kid grasped the rough hand.

"It's a cinch!" he repeated.

The ranger strode away. Five minutes later he was mounted, and riding away from the Lazy O at the head of his men. The Kid went out on the porch, and stood looking after them. His face was thoughtful. Long Bill came up to the porch, leading a grey mustang.



"Say, you're up, Barney?" he greeted. "I guess I'm glad to see you on your pins! You'll ride to-day."

Barney stared at him. The rancher stood at the open window, as if he feared nothing, least of all being seen by the rangers. Had he deceived himself all along the line?

In an access of hatred and rage the foreman reached for a gun. Like magic a Colt appeared in the Kid's hand.

"Don't!" he said quietly. "You're mending, Barney, but you won't mend if I pull trigger on you, you pizen polecat!"

Bang!

The gun came out of the foreman's belt, and the Kid fired. There was a yell of rage and pain from Barney Baker, as the revolver was shot from his hand.

It spun away and crashed on the ground, leaving Barney nursing a numbed hand, and cursing.

"Beat it!" snapped the Kid. "You dog-goned geck, beat it—or the next hits you where you live."

Barney backed away, mouching curses. From the plains a horseman came in at a gallop. It was Mule-Kick Hall.

"Mister Fairfax, sir—" He broke off, as the mustang gave a joyous whinny, and muzzled his glossy head under the Kid's arm. "Carry me home to die, if the critter don't seem to know you, boss!"

"Looks like!" agreed the Kid, caressing his steed, his face glowing. "He sure does seem to take to me!"

"Sure!" said the astonished wrangler. "Say, Captain Hall handed that cayuse over to me, Mister Fairfax, sir, and told me to bring him to you—he said he hadn't no use for the critter now, and he was making you a present of him. I guess that's sure handsome."

"Mule-Kick Hall is sure a white man," said the Kid. "I reckon I'll freeze to that cayuse."

Long Bill grinned.

"He was the Rio Kid's cayuse, boss, afore Captain Hall cinched him. I guess if the Kid knowed you had him you'd have trouble with that fire-bug." "I'll sure chance that!" chuckled the Kid.

"They say the Kid thought more of that cayuse than of his own self, boss," said the wrangler. "My idea is that the Kid is dead, or Side-Kicker wouldn't be running on another guy's rope."

"I guess the Kid is dead," murmured Mister Fairfax, after the wrangler had gone. "He sure is—and he'll stay dead if folks will let him. Say, old boss, you glad to see your master agin? Shucks! I guess the sight of you is good for sore eyes, old cayuse. You and me, old boss, is going to have one daisy time on this here ranch, and I'm telling you so!"

The Kid's face was bright.

Mule-Kick Hall and his men had ridden into the horizon, and were gone. Side-Kicker was with his old master, to ride peaceful trails together. The future was rosy for the Kid. The peril had come and it had passed, leaving him safe to lead his new life; and Side-Kicker had come back to him in a way that could bring no suspicion on Mister Fairfax.

Yes, the Rio Kid was dead, and was going to stay dead—so Mister Fairfax figured. The boss of the Lazy O was going to forget that such a fire-bug ever had ridden Texas trails. Life was going to be good, the Kid figured, as he saddled the grey mustang for a ride, longing to feel his old mount under him again—life was going to be very good.

So the Kid figured, never knowing that Fate—which he believed he had baffled—had another kick coming.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

At Last!

"YOU can bring my cayuse round to the bunkhouse, coyote!" said Barney Baker hoarsely.

The coyote gave him a look.

"Quitting?" he asked.

"Yep!"

"I guess you're wise," said the coyote. "There ain't nothing to it, Barney; the jig's up here. Mister Fairfax has got the ranch and he's got the bunch; and I reckon he ain't nothing to fear from Mule-Kick Hall, like you reckoned. They sure parted friends, and Hall's given him the Rio Kid's cayuse. Nothing to it, old-timer. And I reckon it's time to quit; and I'm riding, too. I done finished with this bunch."

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And the coyote lounged away to the corral for the horses.

In the doorway of the bunkhouse Barney Baker stood taking his last survey of the ranch of which he had so long been master.

The jig was up, as the coyote said. Barney realised it. Cunning and treachery, plotting and lawless violence had done all they could, and left him at the wrong end of the rope. His last hope had failed him when the ranger captain rode away with his men after talking to Mister Fairfax face to face. The jig was up, and all that remained to the foreman of the Lazy O was to ride.

He looked over the ranch, over the wide grasslands where he had ridden as master, over the corrals that had been his; he looked at the punchers who had so long backed him, and who backed him no longer. All was lost; and he had to go. Black and bitter was his

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brow, black and bitter were his thoughts as he looked from the bunkhouse.

There was a clatter of hoofs, and Mister Fairfax, mounted on the grey mustang with the black patch, rode down to the gate.

Barney's eyes followed him.

The boy rancher was riding Side-Kicker, the Rio Kid's horse. Barney knew that the grey mustang had been brought to the Lazy O by the rangers. Why Hall had left it there as a gift to the rancher he did not know, but he had given that no thought till now.

Now a gleam shot into his eyes. He almost staggered with the glare of sudden illumination that came into his mind.

"Search me!" whispered Barney to himself. "Search me!"

He leaned on the doorpost, his face white, his eyes, shining, fixed on the graceful rider. He watched the Kid lift Side-Kicker to the leap at the gate, and his eyes blazed.

The chord of remembrance was touched; the missing memory came back with a rush as he saw the Kid riding Side-Kicker. He had seen Mister Fairfax before, he knew; and now he knew where and when. The sight of Side-Kicker had supplied the clue. The galoot hadn't sported a moustache when Barney had seen him last; that had beaten his recollection, or helped; and there were other little changes. But he knew him now—he knew him as he lifted Side-Kicker to the leap. If he'd seen him on that cayuse before he'd have known him before; and he knew him now—knew him.

He panted with the knowledge, with the consciousness that what he knew was enough to feed fat his bitter revenge.

He knew him—knew him now that he was riding the grey mustang with the black patch. For Mister Fairfax had been riding the grey mustang with the black patch when Barney had seen him, long ago, in a street at White Pine—riding for his life, with roaring guns, and a maddened crowd round him and after him.

Back in Barney's memory with photographic clearness now came the scene—White Pine in a roar with the news that the Rio Kid was shooting up the town; men running and riding, buckling on revolvers as they ran, shouting, cursing, firing; and in the midst of the mad mob the Rio Kid on the grey mustang, spurring, a gun in either hand, shooting right and left as he rode for his life.

Barney saw it all again. He had drawn a gun himself and taken a pot-shot at the wild rider. He remembered it now. Back to his mind came the shooting-up of White Pine—one of the wildest of the Rio Kid's wild doings. And he knew!

Coyote Jenson came back with the horses. He stared in surprise at Barney's fixed, white face, and, following his gaze, saw Mister Fairfax riding Side-Kicker down the trail. Then he looked at Barney again.

"What's got you?" he asked. "Hyer's the cayuses, Barney. But what's got you? Ain't you riding?"

Barney panted.

"I ain't!" He grasped the coyote by the arm convulsively. "Nope, I ain't riding to-day—I ain't going to ride. Not any! That guy— You see that guy—that dog-goned galoot that calls himself Mister Fairfax? I got him now—I placed him now! And, by thunder, I'm going to put the rope round his neck! Boss of the Lazy O!" Barney laughed discordantly. "Outlaw and fire-bug—with a rope waiting for him! And it's me that's telling you!"

"You gone loco?" asked the amazed coyote.

"I tell you I know him now!" Barney sank his voice to a husky whisper. "The Rio Kid! The fire-bug that's wanted by half the sheriffs in Texas! The galoot I saw shooting-up White Pine! The outlaw of the Rio Grande!" Barney Baker laughed gloatingly. "I got him now! And I guess I'll be running the Lazy O Ranch after the Rio Kid's gone up with a riata round his neck!"

THE END.

(It's a black outlook for the Rio Kid with Barney Baker holding the whip hand. Order your POPULAR now to ensure reading next Tuesday's enthralling complete story, entitled: "THE LUCK OF THE RIO KID!")