

The Rio Kid's Close Call!



—By *Frank Brower*—

THE RIO KID, riding in the saddle, stared over the corral fence and ground. For several minutes he had sat there, on the back of the black-crowned steed, looking into the corral, and glancing. 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 cross-purder's eye. The Kid had seen some solitary guys before, in his time; but never had he seen a guy so unhandy with a rope, as the man who was chasing the broncos in the corral. There, while the Kid watched amazed, he had cast the rope; and each time the loop had missed the running team. This time was not going to be any less, if he could help it; and if he could not, he would. And the man with the rope was getting madder and madder, his hard-stark face reddened with fury, as the broncos escaped him again and again. He ground his teeth and perspiration dotted his face, in the hot May of the Texas sun, as he coiled the rope, and dashed again after the shifty teams to get within roping distance.

The Kid was amazed; too he was puzzled too.

The man at the rope line would be, in typical, one of the Circle-Six bunch. That had and would give you the Circle-Six 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 reflected that if he was boss of the Circle-Star, a guy who could not handle a rope would be bound to quit; that it would make his head swim. And his own saying, too—it must be his own saying, in that regard.

The Kid sat and watched, with amusement and curiosity. True it was no easy matter to rope in a rustic 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 stock, the Kid reckoned that it must be a poor bunch.

Again the horse flew. This time it grazed its leading head, but did not catch. It stopped and dropped, and the broncho, moving up his front, dashed away again across the corral. A deep path pointed to the Kid's ears, as the man dropped 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 tracked him to the rocky gulches and draws of the Mal Paso; and he reckoned that they were still tracking 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 hay country of the Rio Grande. From end-up till now the Kid had ridden, and he had no doubt that he was through with the Rangers. And, in the time-squand hour of the Texas river, he wanted a rest and Solo Kicker, his mounting, wanted a rest; for which reason the Kid had stopped at the lonely range-hut. If the range-rider stationed there, to look after outlying herds, was at home, the Kid intended on making the open-hearted hospitality of the range-herds, of course, the puncher recognized him as the cattle whom-punter was pointed up in half the cow-towns in Texas. But the Kid hoped not. On his look, in his flannel hat and gaiter 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 unattended; and would be free to make himself at home, in the free-and-easy manner of the range. 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 fence at the chase of the chive bronchos. And as he watched the clumsy efforts of the duck-faced men with the lassos, 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 men's absence. He looked a hard case, with his thick bearded face, and a knifed-on green and dark cloak. A guy without a cypress of his own, picking up an unscrubbed broncho—was that it? The gun factor from the Rio Kid's face as that surprise-came into his mind. The Kid was an outlaw—a hard fair had made him one against his own will—but he was still a

puncher at heart, and had of a puncher's build for a horse thief. (He was that—) He roared, as he waited.

Again the laser flew.

This time it struck a whirling tail a horse was fling over.

"Aw, carry me down to die!" screamed the Kid. "That guess you don't get loose one end of a rope from the other! He's no puncher—more like a bulldozer that bumps around the subjects in the cow-camps I reckon. He sure won't stick that beam till the cows come home!"

It seemed that the dark-faced man with the hair past to the same conclusion. He halted, and did not cut the beam again. He stood panting for breath, glaring at the broncho with deadly rage in his narrowed eyes. And 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.

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

"Search me!" gasped the Kid.

It was almost unbelievable, in a puncher. But it was plain enough. The cerebral 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 very nature, 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 wheel-barred gun.

Bang!

It was not the scurred man in the corral who died. He was taking aim, as the Kid's gun roared. A scream of pain and rage came through the corral, as the six-gun was shot down the average head. Shattered by the Kid's bullet, the gun went to the ground, and the scurred man dropped his right hand, streaming with blood, with his left, sitting.

"You plain skunk!" cursed the Kid. He looked aside the corral bar, and rode in. The scurred man glared at him, and howling with pain. For the moment he had believed that his hand had been shot away with his gun. But it was only a strip of skin that was gone. He roared at the Kid, stared at his streaming hand, and then roared at the Kid again. His fingers came into his face as he roared.

"The Rio Kid!" he roared.

The Kid lifted his brows. The man, whom he saw, some days he had seen the prisoners of the Kid, peered up with a crowd of a thousand dollars in the low outline of the Rio Grande. Almost forgetting the pain in his hand or his feet, the scurred man backed away.

"You pretty cussed?" said the Kid. "I guess I don't know why I didn't throw the lead through your salient! You'd shoot that bronc, would you, you guess? Well, well, because you can't handle a rope! I guess you was smoking that law, you seem, and what you want is a rope and a branch. You ever do make me sick."

"And you the Rio Kid?" scouted the starrer man. "The livery that's wanted by half the starrers in Texas."

"Maybe!" said the Kid. "Maybe that I can get an end for a horse-shod. You was standing that law!"

"You ain't never liked a bronc—and you the Rio Kid?"

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

The Kid had instigated his quirt, his quirt was in his hand now. The starrer looked on the horse-shod, with all the force of the Kid's arm. A horse-shod, to the Kid, was power; and a man who would shoot a horse in his rear, was lower



The Rio Kid is power.

down in his system than a copse or a cardoon. 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 quiet lasted, and lasted again and again, and the scarred man, yelling with pain and fury, ran for the coral gate. After him rode the Red Kid, still looking with the quiet, driving him breaking out of the coral, and for a rope's length beyond. Then, at length, the quiet ceased to crack, as the scarred man fled across the prairie, running like a deer. He vanished in the distance, the Kid sitting after him with a dark frown.

He dismounted, and turned the morning into the coral. Then he tramped along the coral fence, towards the range-rod. He was done with that horse-rod, he reckoned, and he gave him no further thought. He counted on finding the range-rod unoccupied; but if the range-rod was at home, he would surely have remained quiet in the lot while the scarred buildier was making a haul from the coral. The Kid expected to find the lot vacant, and to camp 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 Red Kid in that lonely lot on the Texas prairie-lands.

II

"*Jumped-powder!*" exclaimed the Red Kid.

His started, started, 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 sickle pack; and then, falling 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-rod was at home in his lot, quiet while a horse-dief was making a horse-riding a few rope-lengths of him. But the Circle-Star powder was at home; and the Kid saw now why he had been quiet. He lay on his back, his face crimson and set, his eyes closed, and blood welling over his shirt, in which there was a bullet-hole—immense or dead? And the Kid, as he stared underfoot, and the rain that came into his heart made his eyes blue like ice. He swung back on the open doorway, his gun in his hand now, and stared over the gray plain. If the fleeing horse-dief had been still in sight—

But the scarred man had vanished. To spring upon Slim-Kicker, and take him down, and shoot him off, was the first thought in the Kid's mind. For he knew now what had happened at the lonely lot on the prairie. The powder in charge had been shot down—and he had been lying there, motion in the lot, while the Kid, never dreaming of what had happened, was watching the border

ponies' attempts to leave the horse in the corral. The Kid had sworn that whatever away with his quilt, and he was sorry for it now—it was a gem, the very best that was located to deal with him. The Kid made a cry out.

"He's not stopped upon."

The man who lay in his blood in the tent claimed his first conviction. 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 had done his deed. And that the boy might 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 ponies.

He crept back just the rest.

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 ruffian was breathing—it was a living man who lay senseless in the tent.

"Go!" 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 ponies low. And he was deeply relieved by what he discovered. A bullet had passed clean through the ponies' shoulder, leaving a clean wound. The wound was serious, but it was not fatal if the man had care and attention—and he had found now that the Rio Kid was on hand. Had he been left, as that fellow had left him, unaided, he would have perished where he lay. But he was going to be cared for now.

The wild life of the seras and the boys had taught the Kid something of a rough surgery. With gentle care he washed the wound clean, and bound it up with the ponies' own neck-scarf, torn in strips. Then he lifted the wounded man into the wooden bunk in the corner of the tent. The Circle-Star tent was big and heavy; but the Kid, strong and sure, 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 hours and hours in the sliver pack. Men in the cow-camps who talked of the Rio Kid as a freighting, a three-year drifter, would have been surprised to see him unwavering by the side of the wounded ponies.

The heavy eyes opened. The Circle-Star ponies 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?—come a fast runner from white eyes."

"Me, s'ber," smiled the Kid.

"The Rio Kid."

"You said it."

"I saw your picture in the camps, Kid! You got me! Shoun said he'd tried to you!" muttered the powder. He made a slight movement, as if to grope in his belt for a weapon. But his hand fell helplessly.

The Kid smiled.

He was an outlaw, it was true. Old Man Dawsey 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 defense; 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 wretches on the walnut-buttled guns told what had happened first when they sought to reap that reward. Men who talked of him in the cow-towns solemnly and at the round-ups, could never have believed that he was still, at heart, the kid powder of the old Double-Bar. He knew it, and shrugged his shoulders over it; but it gave him a going to see the man in the black look of him as he did, and to hear him speak at his best. But there was no anger in his heart; and he answered only.

"You don't want to worry any, Jimmy. Sure it's the Red Kid that's troubling you, and sure you want trouble, a little. You see I want just you, Jimmy, and if you could handle it some how you're fixed. Forget it."

"You're the Kid?"

"Sure!"

"The dog-goned breaking that's done up more guys than he's got fingers and toes—"

The Kid laughed.

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

"Get you?"

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

The powder stared at him blankly.

There was a long, long pause, while the Circle-Bar man accommodated. The Kid watched him with a smiling face. The powder spoke at last.

"You mean all that?"

"Surest thing you know!" said the Kid.

"You're a whole man, Kid! I guess they blew off their mouths about you a while bit, in the cow-camps, but I ain't believing all I hear, after this. Say, I've got it bad!"

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

"found you, kid!" but I've found you up good and found you're going to pull through."

"You've saved my life?"

"Yes."

"And you the Big Kid?" muttered the rancher. "Say, you get word in the Circle-Star that Frey Pete has been shot up by a gun-ner, and I guess they won't be long in taking me home. But you want to watch out—I guess you will be pulled at the sight of you on any beach in Texas."

"Don't I know it?" said the Kid. "But I'll get word, all the same, somehow, when you're dead or I can blame you. Say, I reckon it was a gun as thick as a Cigar, with a ball-head on its feet, that did you up?"

"You sure kin?"

"I sure sure kin, and I sure quitted him a few, seeing that I found him making your cactus," answered the Kid. "But if I'd knowned you was dead like this, Frey Pete, I'd have made it last sickness for that gun. But I guess he won't forget that getting in a hurry. I sure did lay it on that galoot, and he lit out across the prairie like he was scared for home. You know that?"

"Sure! Black Purkin ain't no stranger in this section. I knowed his ugly face when he put it in at that door, and I sure knowed a case at his elbow, as I noticed that he wasn't worried around. He pulled a gun when it hit him, and I guess he thought I'd got my ticket for soap—and I sure had, if you hadn't rescued us, kid."

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

Frey Pete ground faintly.

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

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

The Kid stacked the rusty iron stove with chips, and on the fire going, and cooked his beans and beans, the puncher watching him from the bunk, with a strange expression on his pale human face. But Frey Pete's eyelids drooped, and he sank into unconsciousness again. The Kid gave him a look and groans plenty, but he couldn't, watched. The man would move, he was sure of that! He required very wonderful 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 keep from their habits at a word that the Big Kid was around. But the Kid reckoned that he would work the rifle cautiously, when the time came. In the meantime, he was holding down a cleavage-bud, with an iron nail on his hands, a strange expression for the Kid, and yet like him.

He finished his meal, and washed it down with water from the cist. He gave the man in the bunk a last long look, before he left the flat. Patsy Pete was sunk in a deep sleep, but his pallid face was white, and his breathing regular. The Kid, only in his mind, moved across to the doorway, and stepped out into the strong Texas sunlight. And then—

III

"HOLD UP, KID!"

"By thunder, we've got you!"

"Hands up, you god-damned 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 Slick-Kicker the comb-down he needed; and there had just been a word to warn him that fire was at hand. A head-hunt on the prairie would have been warning enough; but there had been no head-hunt; and no man west of first on the Texas grandstands. 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 opened the door the blow of the sun, square in Stetson and chair, surrounded him, and pain was levelled, and rough voices moved in his ears.

"Up with them, Kid!"

"We sure got you."

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

The Kid drew one deep, deep breath. He did not seek to touch the wretched, hatted, pain in the fire-shiny lockers. Six guys were looking him in the face, and it was sudden death if he did. The Kid was in quick on the draw as any guy in the Lone Star State; but he knew where he was beaten to it. Swiftly, his hands went up above his head, and he looked at his surrounding enemies with a heavy smile on his handsome, unshaven face.

Four cow-punchers, in Stetsons and chairs, were round him. Further back was a face he knew—a dark face with the nose of a horn-cut—the face of the man he had spared out of the corral. Slick Parkins watched him with a strange grin. The Kid had never reckoned that the horn-dial would return for more trouble; he had looked as if he had had enough, and more than enough when he had turned 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 hot-wild out of hand,

if they had known. The kid gave the grinning gun-man and contemptuous glances, and faced up to the punchers who surrounded him with their revolvers.

Punchers from the Circle Star he reckoned they were; none 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 choice. But he had no choice. Only his hands, over his head saved him from being straddled with bullets.

"Say fellows, you've got me, if you want me," drawled the kid. Four slugs 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 place drink anything there till you were to find me?"

"We sure did, kid!" It was the leader of the bunch, a big red-headed puncher, who answered, with his six-gun jammed fairly in the kid's waistband face.

"And what'd you be, when you're at home?" asked the kid, pleasantly.

"I guess I'm Jeff Bristol, foreman of the Circle Star, if you want to know before you get up on a branch!" growled the red-headed puncher. "Keep him covered, boys! He's lighting on the stove!"

The kid laughed.



"Up with them, kid!"

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

"You sure ain't!" said Whelan. "Take her handkerchief off him, you Yuba."

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

The Kid stood very still, his hands above his head. Within the last, out of sight, by the man he had touched—wounded or unconscious. He had slipped there for a stranger's sake, to tend a wounded man; and given that labor-well Perkins a chance for his revenge. But the game was not up yet.

"By the great horrid tool! We got the Rio Kid!" said the foreman of the Circle Star. "We sure got this brother that had the sherrif in Texas ain't been able to rope in before. That guy Perkins was going on the straight goods, when he allowed that he was around. We sure got him."

"And you sure got the gold-banded horribled in Texas?" said the Kid, bitterly. "What you punchers doing a-working? Are you ever heard to talk on the Circle Star?"

"You'd sure have heard us coming, you brother," answered the foreman of the Circle Star. "We left our weapons, and come on foot, to catch you if you was in the hot. I didn't half believe Perkins—but we wasn't taking no chances with the Rio Kid—by sure it was sudden on the short."

The Kid understood. Black Perkins, in his flight, had fallen in with the bunch of punchers, and told his tale. They had ridden for the range-hot; but they had not ridden up to it, with the possibility that the doublet shot in all Texas was within. They had left their horses at a distance, and stolen 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 hot right into their hands. Four to one was long odds, but the Rio Kid would not have flinched before the odds, if he had heard them coming.

"I sure should have made it hot sixteen for that piece drunk Perkins," said the Kid, regretfully. "And I sure would if I'd known how soon he was when I let him slip. He told you I was here—did he tell you that I quartered him out of the moral when he was stealing a horse?"

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

"You said it," agreed the Kid. "You think you're going to try me along in a short?"

Brown jotted his handkerchief.

"Mebbe," he said, "and mebbe not! That guy Perkins allows that you've shot up the puncher on the range, long fire."

"What?" yelled the Kid.

"I wouldn't take the word of that janky gut-soft 'n' wimpy" had written: "But we're going to know— if Pooey Pete's O.K., it's going to tell you to a shanty in its trail and drag you down to law. But if you're shot up Pete, as that punk asserts, we're going to bring you up on that cotton-wood plank at the end of a rope. That's what you'll get coming."

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

The Kid scratched hard.

"That guy Perkins sure is pique," he said. "My son's told you that he was sending Pete's horse, and I quarled him for it— and he sure ain't told you that he shot up Pooey Pete in that hat—"

"It's a lie!" shouted Perkins. "Bore, I'm telling you that that braying oleb up Pooey Pete, and I saw him, and he sure would have shot me up if I hadn't fit out quick. Look in that hat, and you'll find Pooey Pete told me cold like I allowed, dead as Ah! Lincoln, with that braying's halter through him."

The Kid's eyes glared at the punter. But he cooled greatly. Perkins evidently believed that he had left a dead man in the range-hat. It had belief, and in the belief that he could locate his own victim on the Rio Kid, he had led the Circle Star bunch there. But Pooey Pete was not a dead man. He was living, and if he could speak—? Or was the Rio Kid's life dependent and it hung on a thread?

Believe gave the punter a stare, and then his eyes fixed upon the Rio Kid, with a dimly glint in them.

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

"He sure has—"

"Then you got up on a bunch? You Yaho, look to the boss, and see what's come to Pete. If he's horse shot up, I'll say we don't want to ask who hauled powder on him, with that braying from Rio around."

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

The scarred man's eyes glared dimly at the Rio Kid. He had looked and yelled and had like a coyote under the Kid's quart: but he reckoned that the Texas braying was going to pay full toll for it. It was plain talk, 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 under had mounted and gone. Had he gone the punters, finding Pooey Pete shot up, would have ridden on his trail for vengeance. But he had not gone: he was here, and he was dimpled, and he was going up on a rope. Nothing could save him but the truth of what had happened in the lonely hat: and that could come to know, for dead men could tell no tales! The Circle Star men would not believe his denial: the word of an outlaw wanted all over Texas for gun-play. Black Perkins showed his teeth in a savage triumphant grin. This was most odd drink to the horn-thief who had howled under the Kid's quart.

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

had that hair up forever: but could he speak? It was too close a subject before Yaku's voice was heard from the stage-box. But it was a long minute in the boy's silence.

"Say, mister," came Yaku's shout. "Hyer's Pete, in his look all shot up, and he sure looks like he got hit."

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

"That yacker it!" said Jeff Brown. "You Perkins, hang it back to the beams, and get the rize-fryer out o' saddle. We want a rope here."

"Sure!" growled the accused man.

He hurried away to the spot where the bunch had left their horses when they crept slowly up to the box. He cast out that back of the Blue Kid, as he went, a look of glowing hate. Then he hurried off, eager to return with the rope.

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

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

"Ah, you checking the rig."

"I'm telling you—"

"Telling us so!" growled Brown.

"You really hounded," exclaimed the Kid. "You're going to string up a guy for what that poor politer Perkins done—"

"Oh it!"

"I'm telling you that five ain't dead, till that poor death allows!" shouted the Kid. "I'm telling you that death left him for dead, and you reckon that he's got his five kapps—but he ain't no more than I am, and if you look at him in his back, you'll find that he's hounded up good and fine, and do you figure that I'd hang him up after throwing lead at him?"

Yaku came back out of the box.

"Say, Jeff, what the gas allows is the goods," he said. "That's all hanged up, and he ain't dead by long chalks. That poor Perkins allowed that he saw the Kid shoot him up, dead as matter; but he sure ain't dead, though he looks pretty for gone. I guess he could give us the rights of it if he could talk."

The Circle Six freemen gave a cheer.

"Hanged or not, we know the galoot that shot him up!" he growled. "Hyer's that dog-gone outlaw, copped in the bar; and I reckon he had in string up Pete afore he could swing down in his garters."

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

"Aw, speak it up!" snapped Brown. "You the Red Kid—you the lyingest that's shot Rangers and sheriff's deputies, you the outlaw with a thousand dollars reward on your head—you copped here to send a messenger? Don't make me laugh. But we got to wait a minute afore that pink Perkins gets back with the rope—bring that feeling along, and we'll give Pete the come-over."

Two of the customers grasped the Kid's arms, and with Jeff Bryson's gun still covering him, they walked him into the restaurant, where all eyes fixed on the pallid face of the man who lay inert in the tank. More loudly of all the Kid's eyes fixed on him. If he could speak but a word— Then the men believe him—even the fact, which they could see with their own eyes, that Pogy Pete had been drunk, did not make them believe him—the expression of the Red Kid, the wild color that he had never earned by his own deeds, was enough for them. The Kid was standing, and his life being on a thin thread—whatever the passengers near him in the tank could speak, before Perkins came back with the rope.

IV

THE Kid's heart almost ceased a beat. Pogy Pete's eyelids fluttered, and his eyes slowly opened. He stared directly at the Kid, and at the Curly that pushed him. He smiled faintly at the Kid. And the Red Kid drew a deep, deep breath. From a distance, came a sound of rattling feet. Black Perkins was looking on time or retreating with the rope. But the passenger in the tank was conscious, and there was yet time, even, if it would be assumed in seconds.

"Say, you're, how come you got here?" It was a faint voice from the wounded man in the tank. "The Kid got word to you or vice?"

"The Kid?" repeated Jeff Bryson.

"Let him speak," said the Kid, quickly. "Pogy Pete, old-timer, tell those guys who it was that shot you up in the boat. Tell them where they put a rope around the neck of the guy that wrecked you."

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

"Black Perkins!" answered the man in the tank. "I heard a run of his orders, and he pulled a gun and shot me up, and I reckon I never learned any more till I found the Kid tending me."

"Black Perkins shot you up?"

"He sure did!"

"And what's this fellow doing around?"

"I guess he was treating me like he was a guy's last-partner. Jeff, I'd have had to drink 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, I'll tell you the full call in the meantime. He sure is the white man I ever struck."

The groping hands had dropped from the Kid's arms. He stood a free man. The partners looked at him, and looked at the man in the tank, and looked at the Kid again. Thinking footsteps and passing breath were heard outside. Pogy Pete had spoken only in time. But he had spoken, and the Kid

walked grimly as he heard the gunner starting. Black Perkins 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 Brewster trembled hard.

"I guess we got the rights of it now," he said slowly. "Give that guy back his gun, 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, Kel, outlaw or no outlaw, and there ain't a galoot here who'll stop you riding. But that pipe-pistol that shot up a Circle Star puncher—by the great horned devil, that pipe-stick has got to come to him!" By thunder—

The breathless gunner 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 Froy Pete, staring at him from the bunk. For a moment, he was paralyzed. His eyes bulged at the wounded puncher.

"You yanky coyote!" roared Jeff Brewster. "You plumb late-wolf, we're sure wise now to the galoot that shot up Pete. I'll say we ought near stringing up the wrong guy, Perkins, but by thunder, we're going to string up the right guy now—and you're that guy! It's you—"

The scared 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 camp-hut, and the rope he had brought for the Kid was thrown over a branch of the cotton-wood. Black Perkins 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 midst of the prairie. But it had been a close call for the Rio Kid!

THE END