ADVENTURE IN SOUTHERN TEXAS! McCann, the cattle-dealer, had imagined it to be a simple matter to double-cross the Rio Kid. But there he made the greatest mistake of his life!

The Rio Kid!

By Ralph Redway

OUR POPULAR WESTERN TALES, STARRING AN AMAZING CHARACTER, THE RIO KID!

THIS WEEK: "A DEAL IN COWS!"

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Cows to Sell!

"MAVERICKS*?" asked McCann, eyeing the Kid dubiously.

The Rio Kid laughed.

"Do I look like a maverick-hunter?" he queried banteringly.

"Well, I guess not," the cattle-dealer admitted. "But you sure tell me that you didn't rustle them cows."

"I've never rustled a cow, feller," said the Rio Kid, in his quiet, drawling tones, but with a glint in his eyes.

McCann, who knew the tales that were told of the Rio Kid all the way from the Gulf to the Staked Plain, did not suppose that the Kid was sensitive on the topic of rustling cows. He did not want to hurt the Kid's feelings. A fellow who packed two guns, and was like lightning when he drew them, was not a fellow to be lightly offended. But in point of fact, the Kid was very sensitive to such a suggestion. He was a cowman, born and bred, and whatever else he might have done—and he had done many things—he would not have rustled a cow from his bitterest enemy.

*Term given to cattle that have been stolen.

McCann drummed on the bare wooden desk.

"Well, whose cows are they, Kid?" asked McCann bluntly.

"Mine," said the Kid.

He laughed again.

"I guess you're welcome to know how I came by that bunch," he said. "You won't believe me, but I'll tell you. I got them out of Mexico. They belonged to a feller who had to get out for his health in such a hurry that he left his cows behind. I cut out the bunch for him and got them across the border, and we divided the bunch—half to the Greaser, half to me, for my trouble. Savvy?"

McCann gave him an admiring look.

"You sure cap the stack, Kid," he said. "I've heard every kind of a yarn from galoots that come to Blue Pine to sell me cows. Mostly they're mavericks, but they give you every kind of a yarn. But I've never heard that one before."

The Rio Kid smiled grimly.

He had told McCann the simple truth. He had come honestly by that bunch of cows, risking his life a score of times in getting them across the Rio Grande. But he did not expect McCann to believe him. It was seldom or never that a man who honestly owned his cows came to Blue Pine to sell them to Hank McCann. McCann's prices were low because he asked few questions.

"It's true, feller," said the Kid lightly. "But let it go. Do you want to buy the bunch?"

"I sure do, if they're like your description," answered McCann. "But a galoot has to be careful. If they don't carry the brand of any ranch within ten miles of Blue Pine——"

"They carry a Mexican brand."

"Then they're from over the border?"

"Haven't I told you so, you galoot?" McCann laughed.

"Sure you've told me so. I've been told a heap of things in this office, Kid. Look here, I'd rather know how you got hold of that bunch. Did you rustle them from some Mexican ranchero who drove them across to sell them in Texas, or what?"

He broke off suddenly with a yell.

"Hyer, what's the game, Kid?"

A six-gun was looking the cattle-dealer in the face, and the Kid's blue eyes glinted over it.

McCann stared at him in terror.

The slightest pressure of the Kid's finger, and the most unscrupulous cow-thief and brand-blotter in Texas would have reached a sudden end of his rascally career.

A gun lay on the desk before the cattle dealer; he always kept a gun handy when he was dealing with men who came to sell him bunches of cows, mysteriously acquired.

But he did not venture to touch the gun.

His fingers were within an inch of the butt; but the inch might as well have been a mile. Before his fingers could have gripped the gun the Kid would have riddled him with lead.

He glared at the Kid in rage and terror.

"By Jerusalem!" he panted hoarsely. "Is this a hold-up? You durned young galoot, you'll never get away with it. There's twenty men on the street that

will blow holes through you if you burn powder in this office."

"It's not a hold-up," drawled the Kid. "But if it were, feller, I reckon I'd make you hand over your roll and get away, for all that Blue Pine could do to stop me. I'm asking you ten dollars a cow for that bunch—that's fifteen hundred dollars for the bunch—and dirt cheap, as you know better than I do. But I want you to believe that I never rustled the cows, feller."

McCann was a good deal of a gun-man himself, as had been discovered by more than one rustler who had sought to bulldoze him in his own office. But he did not claim to equal the Rio Kid in that line; and the steady gun in the Kid's hand sent a cold shiver down his spine. But his terror was not so deep as his rage. McCann was a power in Blue Pine. A score or more of rough and reckless cattlemen were ready to carry out his lightest order, even to shooting. To be held up in his own office, to have the fear of death put into the very marrow of his bones by this fellow, who was little more than a boy, evoked his deepest fury. Almost he was tempted to clutch at the gun that lay on the desk before him and try his chance at gun-play with the Rio Kid.

"Now, stop chewing the rag and listen to a galoot," went on the Kid quietly. "I got that bunch from a Greaser, honest, for saving his cows for him. I'm selling them to you for next to nothing because the Rio Kid can't walk into a cattle market with cows to sell. I guess there would be gun-play the minute I showed up in any town that wasn't a camp of cattle-thieves and brand-blotters, like Blue Pine. I'm selling them to you because you're a darned rogue, Mister McCann, and that's the sort of hombre that I can't help but deal with. All the same, feller, I never rustled that bunch, and I've never rustled a cow since I was hoofed off the Double Bar, in the Frio country. You want to believe that, Mister McCann. You get me?"

The cattle-dealer stared at him with glinting eyes.

"You're sure touchy, Kid," he grated. "You—that's wanted for half the hold-ups in the State."

The Kid laughed.

"I'm sure wanted for a heap of hold-ups that I never heard about," he answered.

"You, that's wanted for shooting up Boss Lewson on his own ranch on the Alamito," said McCann venomously.

"You've got hold of that?" smiled the Kid. "I reckon you'll be shot up worse'n Boss Lewson if you call me a rustler, Mr. McCann."

"Put that gun away and talk business, Kid."

"I want you to believe that I never rustled that bunch," said the Kid coolly. "No galoot is goin' to call me a rustler and tell his friends about it afterwards. And I'm getting tired of holding this gun, feller."

McCann's teeth showed in a snarl.

Again he was tempted to clutch at his gun and yell to his men, who were loafing about the corrals.

But he dared not. The cattle-boss of Blue Pine had never backed down before, but he had to back down now, and he knew it.

He forced a laugh.

"Forget it, Kid," he said, as lightly as he could. "I guess I never knew you was so touchy. I take it back."

"You believe I came by that bunch honest?" persisted the Kid.

"I sure do."

"That's the talk, Mister McCann," said the Kid amiably, and his gun disappeared into the holster at his belt.

McCann almost trembled with eagerness to grasp his gun and try his luck now that he was no longer covered. But he knew that the Rio Kid was lightning on the draw, and he dared not venture. And there were other ways, he told himself savagely.

"Well, is it a cinch, feller?" asked the Kid, apparently dismissing that little dispute from his mind as amicably settled. "You're used to buying cows that have been rustled off Texas ranches and blotting out the brands before you can get rid of them again. Now you're offered a bunch that belongs honest to the galoot that's selling them, and I guess they're none the worse for that. Is it a cinch?"

"Sure!" said McCann. "But I want to see the cows before I buy. Where are they?"

"Justo, as the greaser said, when I asked him for half the bunch," smiled the Kid. "You want to see the cows, and that's O.K. But I reckon I'm not letting on exactly where they are, feller; some of your men might drive them off by mistake before you'd handed over the dust. I reckon such things have happened in Blue Pine."

"I'm giving you a square deal, Kid."

"I'm seeing that you are," agreed the Kid. "If you want to see the cows, hombre, call for your hoss, and take a little paseo with me. I guess it's not a long ride."

The cattle-boss of Blue Pine eyed him narrowly.

"I've sure got other business this afternoon, Kid. I can't leave my office yet."

"Take your own time," said the Kid obligingly. "I'll wait, if you say so."

"Not here," said McCann. "I guess I don't want it shouted out, even in Blue Pine, that I'm doing business with the Rio Kid. No offence, Kid; if you ain't rustled cows, you've done a heap of things!"

The Kid chuckled.

"You've said it," he agreed. "And I guess I'm not gone on hanging about a frame shack. You'll find me on the lower trail when you want me, any time till sundown."

"It's a cinch!"

LED INTO THE KID'S SECRET LAIR: "I guess I'll have to blindfold you now, pardner!" said the Kid. "I guess I expected that," said the cattle-dealer. The Kid tied a silken scarf round McCann's eyes, and then led his horse through the pines. (*See Chapter 2.*)

And the Kid lounged out of the office into the blazing sun of the single street of Blue Pine, and mounted his mustang.

Many staring eyes were turned on the Rio Kid as he rode through Blue Pine. Few were the towns or camps in Texas where the Rio Kid could have ridden in broad daylight without dire peril. But in that lawless camp, where Hank McCann, the dealer in stolen cattle, was town marshal, the cow-thieves and brand-blotters and gunmen, who loafed on the shady side of the street, had only admiring glances for the handsome Kid, and no man wanted trouble with him. His name passed from mouth to mouth, and that was all, as the Kid, with a smile on his face, cantered down the street, and rode out on the prairie trail.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Double-Crossing the Kid!

McCANN leaped from his chair when the Kid had gone, his hands clenched and his teeth gritting. Never before had the cattle-boss of Blue Pine been roused

to such deadly rage. He had been defied in his own office—contemptuously defied by a mere boy, and the boy had got away with it.

McCann was glad that no eyes had witnessed the scene; his prestige would have been lost among the gang of ruffians he ruled.

For several minutes the cattle-boss raged, cursing the Kid with an extensive vocabulary of "cuss-words." But he calmed down at last, and jangled the raucous bell on his pinewood desk. A half-breed Mexican looked in with a scared face.

"Send Dave Tutt hyer!" snapped McCann.

The half-breed disappeared.

A few minutes later the man who had been sent for arrived—a burly, bearded tough, whose low-slung guns proclaimed the "gunman."

"The Kid's been hyer, boss," he remarked curiously.

"You saw him?"

"I guess I saw him ride away," answered Tutt. "Some feller, the Kid!"

The gunman's tone was admiring.

McCann scowled.

"The Kid has the devil's own luck!" he said. "There's hardly a sheriff in Texas that hasn't tried to get him, and he's still riding the trails. He came here to sell me cows."

The gunman raised his eyebrows.

"The Kid? I sure reckoned that the Kid never touched rustling," he said. "I guess it's the only thing he hasn't touched."

"He's got a bunch of cows hidden somewhere on the prairie!" snapped McCann. "I'm going to ride with him and look at them. He's not let on where they're hidden."

"I guess the Kid knows his way about!" grinned Tutt.

"This camp has got a bad name, Dave," said McCann, changing the subject abruptly.

"It sure has, boss!"

"The ranchers make out that we're not much better than a camp of rustlers, and it's common talk among the punchers that half the cows that are missing from the ranches might be found here, with their brands changed," went on McCann.

Tutt stared at him.

"They ain't fur wrong, boss," he said. "What are you giving me now?"

"They make out that any rustler or gunman who's made his home town too hot for him can always bed down in Blue Pine and find friends."

"They sure do!"

"Well, we're going to give an answer to all that," said McCann. "We're going to let all the ranchers and punchers know that we stand for law and order in this camp, as much as any camp in Texas!"

"Aw! What're you giving me?" exclaimed Dave Tutt, in astonishment.

"And we're going to make that clear by handing over the Rio Kid to justice," said McCann.

"Oh, I get you, boss!"

"The Kid's badly wanted all the way from the Pecos to the Rio Grande," said McCann. "I guess I'm town marshal in this hyer burg, and it's my duty to see that the law has its due. It will do the camp good; it will show all those hombres that a fire-bug like the Kid can't bed down safe in Blue Pine. It will give the lie to all they say of this camp, when the feller that's most badly wanted in all Texas is roped in here and toted to the county gaol! You get me?"

Tutt grinned broadly.

"I get you, boss," he answered. "The Kid has sure rubbed you the wrong way. But you want to be careful: the Kid's a bad man to crowd!"

"He sure is; but I guess there are enough galoots in Blue Pine to crowd him dead to rights!" said McCann venomously.

"He won't be taken alive."

"That cuts no ice. There's five hundred dollars offered for him in Frio, alive or dead."

The gunman nodded, but his face was grave. It was evident that he did not wholly relish the task of getting the Kid, even with the whole rough crowd of Blue Pine to help.

"I'm riding out to join him on the trail, to look at his bunch of cows," went on McCann. "You'll follow on and keep out of sight. I guess you know how to follow a trail without showing your cabeza?"

"I guess the Kid won't see hide nor hair of me!" said Tutt emphatically. "He's too mighty sudden on the shoot fur me to let him see me trailing him!"

"He won't let me know where the cows are hidden—it will be blindfolding, or some such stunt. But you'll trail us both and get wise to it."

"Sure!"

"Once we know where to lay hands on the cows it's all O.K.! It's a prize bunch, from what the Kid told me, and I don't want to lose it. But I guess he won't touch any fifteen hundred dollars for it!" said McCann, with a sour grin. "I'll fix up a place to meet him and hand over the dust, and when he keeps the appointment he won't find me there with the dollars—he will find a dozen galoots ready to fill him with lead if he doesn't put up his paws pronto!"

"I guess I wouldn't give him a chance to put up his paws. Shooting on sight is the only way to get the Kid!"

McCann nodded.

"That's it! He will sure be sorry he horned the Blue Pine and gave me chin-wag in my own office!" he said. "I'm meeting the Kid on the lower trail. You want to be there first, Dave. And keep in deep cover!"

"You bet!"

After a few more words, the gunman lounged out of the office.

It was half an hour later that McCann mounted his horse and rode down the street of Blue Pine.

He left the camp behind him, and cantered out on the lower trail, his eyes open for the Rio Kid.

At a little distance from the town he sighted him.

The grey mustang was cropping the prairie grass, and the Kid sat under a big cottonwood, with his back to the wide trunk. His manner was careless, but where he sat no enemy could have reached him without coming out into the open trail.

He rose to his feet, and nodded cheerily as the cattle-dealer drew rein.

"I guess I'm ready to see that bunch," said McCann.

"We'll ride, then," drawled the Kid.

He leaped lightly on his mustang. McCann glanced sharply about him as he rode down the trail by the Kid's side. The trail ran through plains of bunch-grass, dotted with trees and patches of scrub. There was no sign to be seen of Dave Tutt. But McCann knew his henchman, and he had no

doubt that in deep cover the gunman was watching.

The Kid seemed to have no suspicion of trickery.

He chatted cheerily with his companion as he rode on down the trail for several miles, accommodating his pace to McCann's. The cattle boss preferred to ride at a moderate pace, and the Kid did not seem to mind. Once or twice McCann glanced at his face and saw that it was open and careless and obviously unsuspicious; the Kid certainly did not look like a man who suspected that his companion was deliberately delaying in order to make it easy for a secret spy to keep them in sight.

They turned from the trail into a deep pine-wood at last on the broken slopes of a low range of hills.

The Rio Kid halted.

"I guess I'll have to ask you to go it blind now, pardner," he said apologetically. "I sure don't want to give it away where those cows are till we've made a sale."

McCann smiled.

"That's fair play," he agreed.

If he wanted any proof that the Kid suspected nothing he had it now. The Kid would not have troubled to blindfold him had he known that a spy was following.

"No objection, feller?" asked the Kid.

"Nix! I guess I expected that."

With a silken neck-scarf the Kid blindfolded his companion. Then, taking McCann's bridle, he led him on through the pines.

In what direction they went McCann did not know. He brushed continually against trees and through thickets, and there were many windings and turnings. Wheresoever the Kid had hidden that bunch of cows, he had hidden it well. But there was a sudden halt, and the neck-scarf was jerked from the cattle boss' eyes.

"Look! See?" drawled the Kid.

McCann looked.

The horsemen had entered a grassy glade in the very heart of the forest. In the grass were sprawled the cows that McCann had come to see.

His eyes gleamed as he looked at them.

There were a hundred and fifty, by the tale; and McCann's experienced eyes told him at a glance that every one was a valuable beast.

The Kid watched his expression, with an amused smile.

"What do you say, Mister McCann?" he asked.

"I guess they're worth my trouble, Kid," answered McCann. "It's a cinch. Ten dollars a cow."

"And dirt-cheap!"

"You ain't fixed to sell cattle dear, Kid," grinned McCann.

"I guess that's why I'm dealing with you, feller. If you've brought the dollars with you, I guess it's a trade on the spot; and I'll sure help you drive your cows into Blue Pine."

"When I travel with the Rio Kid I don't travel with hundreds of dollars in my rags," answered McCann. "No offence, Kid; but they sure tell about hold-ups where you weren't far away."

"They sure do," assented the Kid, without moving a muscle. "But I reckon I'm here to sell cows, not to hold-up a cattle boss. You don't touch those cows till you've handed over the roll—and I guess you know the Rio Kid is a man of his word!"

"You bet!"

"Then what's the programme?" drawled the Kid.

"I'm buying them cows," said McCann. "I'll have the dollars ready at my office to-morrow."

"To-morrow does it," assented the Kid.

And McCann was blindfolded again, and led away once more through the wilderness of pines.

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The Kid and the cattle boss parted on the trail, and McCann rode away for Blue Pine, the Rio Kid sitting his horse in the trail and watching him go, with a smile on his face. And as soon as the cattle boss was gone from sight the Kid turned from the trail and disappeared into the chaparral.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Upper Hand!

DAVE TUTT stopped and stared round him suspiciously in the thickets.

The gunman was feeling vaguely uneasy.

He had carried out McCann's instructions faithfully, and the thing had gone without a hitch.

Tutt had been watching the trail from cover when the cattle boss joined the Rio Kid, and he had followed the two riders without a fault. Keeping in cover with the stealth of an Apache Indian, he had followed, always keeping the Kid's Stetson with its band of silver nuggets in view—sometimes running, sometimes creeping, always on the trail and always out of view. It was an old and familiar game to the gunman; but he was extremely careful and on his guard; for he knew what to expect if a fellow like the Rio Kid discovered that he was being double-crossed.

Through the pine forest he had followed; in the hidden glade he had seen the bunch of Mexican cows in cover, not twenty yards from the Kid and McCann. The Kid's secret was his now, and he had only to return to Blue Pine and report to his boss. When the horsemen rode away once more Dave Tutt took his way back to camp, with a grin on his face.

He had a long tramp before him; for he had followed, of course, on foot—a horseman could not have kept in cover. Like most cattlemen, he was a bad walker, and he was tired and savage in mood long before he had covered half the distance back. He was still a good two miles out of Blue Pine when his keen senses, rather than any actual observation, warned him of danger. Many a sharp, suspicious glance he threw round him; but the scrubs gave no sign, and he tramped on faster than before with growing uneasiness. The snapping of a twig, the murmur of the wind in the pendant masses of Spaniard's beard, sufficed to alarm him; yet he had seen nothing, heard nothing definite. But the conviction was growing in his mind that he was being hunted in the chaparral, and he was intensely anxious to find himself back in the open trail again.

He stopped at last and glared round him, his hand on his gun.

Was there danger? Or were his nerves playing him false?

No sound came to him, no movement. For several minutes he waited, his head bent to listen, his breath coming thick and fast.

But there was nothing—nothing. And yet the silence and the stillness seemed threatening to the tautened nerves of the gunman.

He plunged on again, his gun drawn in his hand now, his eyes watchful as a cat's. He was close to the open trail now; and once out of the scrubs he would at least be able to see an enemy if enemy there was. He gripped his gun hard and hurried on.

"Drop it, feller!"

Dave Tutt started almost convulsively as the quiet, pleasant voice broke on his ears.

He did not raise the gun that was gripped in his hand; for a levelled Colt was looking at him through the thick foliage, and the Rio Kid's smiling eyes looked at him over the Colt.

Dave Tutt stared at the Kid, his heart thumping. He was mentally calculating his chances of taking a pot-shot; and a glint came into the Kid's eyes over the levelled Colt.

"I guess I said drop it, feller!" said the Kid.

The gun crashed from Tutt's hand into the undergrowth. The Kid gave him a cheery nod.

"That's sense!" he said approvingly. "What's the good of asking for hot lead, feller? I guess it ain't my business to save a sheriff the trouble of hanging you some day."

"What's this game, Kid?" asked Dave Tutt huskily. "You've no call to pull a gun on me."

"I guess I want your company for a little pasco, feller," smiled the Kid. "Leave your gun where it is and walk!"

"Where?" hissed Tutt.

"I opine you know the way. You're walking with me to the place where my cows are feeding."

Tutt felt a shiver run through his burly form.

"I guess I don't know anything about your cows, Kid," he said. "Never knew you had any cows. I don't get you."

"I'll tell a man!" smiled the Kid. "Perhaps I'm making a mistake. I guess we all make mistakes at times, hombre. But I sure figured it out that you know where my cows are."

"Not a hide, not a hair of them, Kid. I never knew you had any cows."

"My mistake!" said the Kid. "I sure reckoned you was dodging behind all the time I was riding so friendly with McCann."

The gunman trembled.

"I sure reckoned it was a game to double-cross me, and get my cows for nothing," grinned the Kid. "I sure fancied that I piped the track of your number elevens a dozen times in the bush, riding back with McCann to the trail. I sure allowed that if an Apache Injun was pickin' up your trail, he'd pick it up from Blue Pine camp to my cows, and back again from my cows to this hyer spot. You allow I'm making a mistake?"

His tone was bantering, but the gun in his steady hand never faltered. The gunman breathed hard.

He knew that it was useless to deny further; he knew that the Rio Kid had been wise to the game from the beginning.

"Why, you dog-goned gink!" exclaimed the Kid derisively. "Did you reckon you could pull the wool over my eyes? I knew you was watching me before McCann came along from the camp. You want to learn trailing before you trail a man that's got his eye-teeth cut. Why, you hobo, you startled a blue jay out of the pecans when you settled down to watch me. I was wise to it all the time, and I let you run on. I knew I'd have heaps of time to get you after parting with your boss. Now I've got you, sabe?"

"Let up, Kid," muttered the gunman hoarsely. "I'm sure sorry I took a hand agin you; I might have knowed you was too cute."

"You might," agreed the Kid. "You know it now, feller, and the knowledge may come in useful if you live to put it to use."

"Let up, Kid."

"Who's hurting you?" drawled the Kid. "I've told you I want you to take a little paseo with me. Walk, feller, walk. I'm following you, back to where you saw my cows. Get a move on, feller."

The gunman turned in his tracks in silence, and tramped.

The Kid followed him.

Neither spoke as they tramped through the clinging scrubs, but once or twice the gunman heard the Kid chuckle softly, as if at entertaining thoughts.

With mingled feelings of rage and fear and hate, Dave Tutt tramped wearily on, retracing the miles he had already covered on foot.

Not for a moment did he think of dodging into the thickets and running. Swift as he might have been, he knew that a bullet from the Kid's gun would have been swifter.

The Kid was sparing his life. Why, the gunman could hardly guess; he had expected the Rio Kid to burn powder at once if he discovered treachery. But Dave Tutt knew that his life would not be spared if he attempted trickery now.

He tramped on, the Kid behind him.

Weary mile after mile dragged under his feet, till he tramped at last into the glade where the bunch lay.

"Halt, feller!" drawled the Kid.

Dave Tutt stopped.

"Back against that tree."

The gunman obeyed.

Taking a length of trail-rope in his left hand, the Kid ran it round the gunman and the tree, and knotted it securely. In a few minutes Dave Tutt was bound to the trunk, a helpless prisoner.

"You ain't leaving me here, Kid," he muttered.

"You're sure so keen on my cows, feller, I reckon I'll leave you with them," said the Kid. "I guess you'll be let loose after I'm through with your boss."

"Let up, Kid," said Tutt hoarsely. "Keep clear of Blue Pine. You horn into Blue Pine agin, and you'll never come back here to let me loose." His rugged, bearded face was white with apprehension. "You won't leave a galoot to be chawed up by coyotes, tied to a tree."

"I sure reckon I shall come back safe from Blue Pine," smiled the Kid.

"Forget it, Kid! I'm giving you the straight goods," panted the gunman. "It's you for the long trail if you show up in Blue Pine. I tell you that when you drop into McCann's office to collect your dollars you'll be riddled with lead afore you can say no sugar in mine."

The Kid laughed.

"That's the game, is it?" he asked. "I figured it out that it was. All same, I'm going back to Blue Pine to collect the dollars for my bunch, and I reckon the price has gone up now; this bunch will cost McCann three thousand. I want to be paid for my trouble as well as my cows."

"I keep on telling you you're a dead man if you butt into Blue Pine agin," panted Tutt.

"Search me!" said the Kid, cheerfully.

And he turned and disappeared into the pine-woods, leaving Dave Tutt staring after him with black despair in his face.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Pony Up!

McCANN stared out of his doorway for the last time, and scowled, and shut the door. The hour was late, the naphtha lamps of the Blue Pine saloon had been extinguished; the camp was mostly sleeping. McCann, as usual, had spent his evening at the saloon, where he had expected Dave Tutt to come in with his report; but the gunman had not come. Neither was Tutt at his framehouse when he came back there, and McCann, as he closed and barred his door, wondered what had become of the spy. Tutt should have been back long since, unless he had fallen foul of the Rio Kid or some other enemy. But he had not come, and the cattle boss gave up expectation of seeing him that night.

McCann gritted his teeth as he reflected that the Rio Kid might have been more wideawake than he supposed. If he had spotted the spy in the thickets and shot him, McCann had lost one of his best men, and in that case the Kid was probably wise to his treacherous scheme, and would not come to the office on the morrow; he would drive his cows elsewhere for another market. But he should not get away with them, McCann swore through his teeth. The Kid on his mustang was rapid and elusive; a ride of sixty miles only made him smile; he knew a hundred hidden retreats where he could lie safe when the hunt was up; but a cattle-drive was a different matter. The Kid could not save himself from the cattle boss' vengeance without leaving his cows behind. If Tutt had only been delayed, or in trouble with other enemies, the scheme held good—the Kid would come to the office on the morrow for his dollars, and would be taken dead or alive, and handed over to the sheriff of Frio by the marshal of Blue Pine. But if Tutt had fallen at the Kid's hand, if the Kid did not come, then the hunt would be up—a hundred toughs would be searching the country for the Kid's bunch. McCann would get the bunch, that was certain; and if he got the Kid, too, so much the better.

McCann took a last glance round his office, and then went into his sleeping-room which was behind it. He closed his bed-room door and locked it after him, and set down his candle. His face was grim and angry; he was sure of the bunch of cows, whatever turn the affair took; but he wanted to get the Kid, and it seemed doubtful now whether the Kid would fall into his snare.

It was more doubtful than the cattle-boss supposed.

Having set down the candle on a bench, he was turning, when a cold rim of steel touched his neck.

"Put 'em up, boss!" said a pleasant voice.

A shudder ran through McCann from head to foot. He was so utterly taken aback that for a moment he did not obey the injunction. Then his hands rose slowly over his head, and in the flickering candle-light his staring eyes fixed on the face of the Rio Kid.

The Kid nodded and smiled.

"You sure look surprised, boss," he drawled, "I'll tell the world!"

"You—here!" McCann barely uttered the words.

"Too early for you, boss?" asked the Kid apologetically. "We fixed it for to-morrow, when you saw the cows; and it's sure to-morrow now—more'n half-past twelve, feller. Is it too early?"

McCann could not speak; he could only glare at the cool, self-possessed Kid, and the six-gun that was almost touching him, with the Kid's finger on the trigger. The Kid was smiling, but there was a deadly menace in his eyes.

"It's sure early, boss," the Kid said banteringly. "But I allow I'm rather in a hurry; I've got a hunch that the quicker I get outs of the Blue Pine country the better it will be for my health. I know that an early call like this spoils the little surprise-party you had ready for me—just a few. Are you still buying them cows? The price has gone up now. That bunch will cost you three thousand dollars. Are you buying?"

"No!" hissed McCann.

"I'm real sorry for that," sighed the Kid. "Any prayers to say, feller?" The smile left his lips, and the grim look that came over the sunburnt face sent a cold shudder down the cattle-dealer's spine. "You dog-goned cow-thief, you figured out you'd double-cross me and get that bunch for nothing. You've got one minute—and if you try to touch a gun, not so much as that."

McCann gasped.

"I'm buying!" he panted.

"At three thousand?"

"Sure!"

"It's a trade," said the Kid cheerily. "Sort out the dust, feller. I'll mind your gun while you're sorting it out!"

He lifted the gun from the cattle-boss' belt.

"Pronto!" he snapped.

Without a word, trembling with rage, but with the fear of death in his heart, McCann unlocked an iron box that was hidden under his pillow. In bitter silence he counted out a roll and handed it to the Kid, who took it with his left hand and slipped it into a pocket.

"That lets you out, boss," smiled the Kid. "The bunch is yours, and I guess your man will drive them in later."

McCann stared at him blankly; he had not expected that the Kid would keep faith with him. The Kid understood the look and laughed contemptuously.

"You're sure a dog-goned thief, McCann," he said. "You've bought the bunch and its yours. I reckon you'd have done better to make a fair trade when I moseyed in; but you've got the bunch cheap, all the same. Now, I reckon all you can do for me is to keep quiet for a spell while I slide out. Put your paws together, feller!"

Under the threatening gun, the Kid bound the cattle-boss hand and foot and stuffed his own neckscarf into his mouth. He blew out the candle. McCann, sprawling bound and helpless, gagged and silent, on the bed, watched him with glittering eyes. He heard a soft laugh, and the sound of a door opening and closing. The Rio Kid was gone, and the cattle-boss of Blue Pine, writhing helplessly in his bonds, waited furiously for morning and release, knowing that long before morning the Rio Kid would be far away.

* * * *

In the first gleam of dawn a smiling face looked at Dave Tutt from the shadows, and a knife slid through the trail-rope that bound him to a tree in the heart of the pine-woods. The gunman, stiff and sore, staggered away from the tree, panting with relief. No man in Texas had ever been so glad to see the Rio Kid alive and well.

The Kid waved his hand to the sleeping cows.

"You want to drive that bunch to Blue Pine, feller," he said. "Hank McCann's bought that bunch, and paid on the nail like a good little man. So-long, feller! Keep your eyes peeled next time you figure out to trail the Rio Kid!"

And the Rio Kid rode away through the scented pines.

THE END.

(You'll find another roaring long yarn of this amazing outlaw, the Rio Kid, in next week's issue. Look out for it!)