THE "ROBIN HOOD" OF THE WEST!

They call the Rio Kid the toughest outlaw in Texas, and many are the bad deeds laid to his credit. But there are a good number in the West who bless this young outlaw for the lion-hearted, generous friend in need he has been to them!

The RIO KID'S CHRISTMAS!

by RALPH REDWAY

OUR ROARING WESTERN YARN THAT WILL KEEP YOU THRILLED FROM BEGINNING TO END—STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

The Lone Cabin in the Valley!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

THERE was rain in the Huecus—winter rain—and bitter wind. Darkness had fallen on the hills like a blanket, and through the darkness the rain lashed and streamed. The Rio Kid's slicker ran with water, water streamed from his Stetson hat, water squelched from his riding-boots. The grey mustang streamed with rain.

The Kid, leading the mustang by the bridle on a path hidden in blackness, kept his eyes fixed on a light that burned dimly in the night, far away, flickering faintly. On that stormy eve of Christmas the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande was a hard case.

"Dog-gone my boots!" growled the Kid as he tramped wearily through drenching rain. "This hyer is going to be some Christmas, old boss!"

The Kid had been glad to see that lonely light burning in the distance, on the dark, rainy hills. It promised him, at least, shelter from the rain and the wind. Shelter, perhaps, might be refused to the outlaw; but the Kid cared nothing for that. He was ready to make his demand good, at the end of a six-gun, if needed.

The light, he reckoned, was burning in the window of some lone nester's cabin, many a long mile from the nearest settlement. Some hardy pioneer had settled in that lonely valley in the heart of the sierra.

The Kid tramped on towards the light, leading his horse, in an ill-humour with himself and all things. He had kept his word to Sheriff Watson, of Frio, and had ridden out of the Frio country; but he had not gone contentedly. But the Kid was not one to repine, and he had set his face resolutely towards new trails and a new country.

"Oh, dog-gone it!" snapped the Kid as he bumped, in the darkness, into a wire fence. "Them gol-darned nesters!"

The Rio Kid had no love for nesters, still less for their wire fences. In a worse humour than ever, he groped along the fence till he came to a gate. He threw the gate open, and led the mustang through.

The light was burning directly before him now.

It came, so far as the Kid's keen eyes could make out in the gloom, from the window of a cabin, or, rather, a shack, standing by the bank of a creek that overflowed with rain, and roared and splashed down the valley in a torrent.

He squelched through mud up to the wooden porch of the shack.

Save for the lonely light that glimmered through a curtained window, there was no sign of life about the place.

The Kid struck on the door with the butt of his quirt.

Knock, knock!

He knocked angrily and loudly.

There was no reply from within. The Kid knocked again, and shouted:

"Hyer, you'uns! Let a galoot in out of the rain! Thunder! Do you want me to bust a board out of your shebang?"

Knock, knock!

The door opened suddenly.

A candle-light glimmered from the dark interior. A man stood there—a man with a pale, harassed face, his finger on his lips.

The Kid stared at him.

"Quiet!"

"What's the dog-goned trouble?" demanded the Kid gruffly.

The nester pointed to the adjoining room, from which the light glimmered into the night from the window.

"She's sick!" he whispered.

"Oh!" said the Kid, shamefaced.

The man of the shack peered at him. He saw a handsome cow-puncher, drenched with rain. The Kid saw a haggard-faced, worn-looking man, weighted down with black care.

"Your wife?" asked the Kid soberly.

The settler nodded.

"Bad?"

Another nod.

"I'm sure sorry!" said the Kid awkardly. "Dog-gone my boots, if I'd knowed I'd never have knocked at your door, feller. Sleeping?"

"Yes."

"I hope I ain't waked her," said the Kid anxiously.

"No."

"That's good! I reckon I ain't troubling you any, hombre!" said the Kid. "Me and my cayuse can stand the rain and the wind. So-long!"

He backed from the porch.

"You can come in," said the nester quietly. "Put your horse in the shed and come in, stranger. I guess you're welcome to shelter, though there's little else I can offer you."

The Rio Kid hesitated.

But he nodded at last, and the man of the shack handed him the candle. The Kid sheltered the flickering flame with his drenched hat as he led his mustang into the shed adjoining the cabin. There was straw in the shed and a bundle of alfalfa; and the Kid fed and bedded down his horse, by the dim flicker of the candle, stuck in a ledge on the wall.

Then he tramped back to the porch.

The door was shut to keep out the wild wind; but it opened as the Kid's footsteps were audible without.

The Kid passed into the cabin, and closed the door behind him. He put the candle on a rough pine table.

The nester had stepped into the

adjoining room, where the lamp burned. He came back on tiptoe.

Silently, moving about like a man who was dazed, he set out a supper on the table before the Kid.

"Dog-gone it!" murmured the Kid.

Outside, the wind howled and the rain lashed and spattered. But the Kid was wishing that he had never struck that lonely cabin in the sierra. He had horned into a home where a sick woman lay, tended by a man who was worn out with watching, and he was worried about it.

"Been sick long?" he asked, as he ate his supper slowly, and with a poor appetite.

"Three days."

"You ain't got a doc here?"

"There's no doc nearer than Cow Crossing—that's forty miles. And I can't leave her!"

"Oh, sho!" grunted the Kid.

The Kid had seen much of the hard lives of the rosters, but this was the hardest case he had ever struck.

"There's a doc at Cow Crossing," he said thoughtfully. "I reckon I know the place—some!"

The man nodded.

While he stood by the table, one hand resting on it, he was listening for a sound from the sick-room.

The Kid knew Cow Crossing. Forty miles or more from the lonely shack in the valley in the Huecas, by the wildest and hardest trail in the west of Texas. The Kid remembered Cow Crossing well. He had ridden through that town once, with a sheriff and his posse on his heels, and bullets raining. It had been one of the closest calls in the Kid's career.

There was a soft, faint voice from the adjoining room:

"Harry!"

The nester made a gesture to the Kid, and went softly, silently into the sick-room.

A low murmur of voices followed.

The Kid, with a puckered brow, ate canned beef and drank cold coffee. He was careful to make no sound.

His thoughts were busy.

The man came back at last. He stood by the table, his haggard face looking deathly in the flickering candle-light.

"You can bunk here, stranger," he said, in a low voice. "There's blankets. Keep quiet."

"Sure!" muttered the Kid.

The wood fire burned low in the iron stove. The Kid, as he sat before it, was steaming. But he was not thinking of the blankets.

"Look here, feller," said the Kid, speaking barely above a whisper. "You want the doc from Cow Crossing."

The man made a hopeless gesture.

"I can't leave her."

"I reckon a galoot about my size might do it," said the Kid.

The man eyed him.

"A ride of forty miles on a night like this!" he muttered.

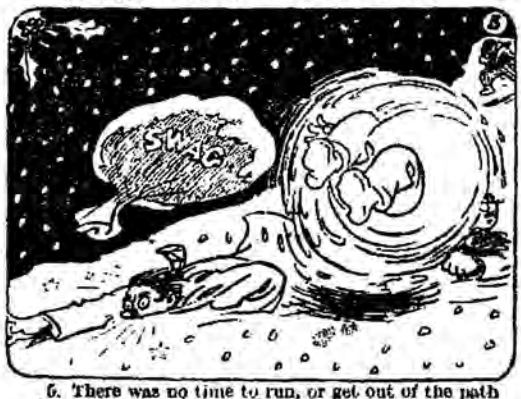
THE BUNTER BROTHERS! *Mirth Makers.*

1. It was Christmas night, and Billy and Sammy Bunter were shuffling through the snow on their way back to Bunter Court, when they espied a strange figure moving away down the hill. "Why, if that's not a burglar, I'll eat my boots!" said Billy. "I bet he's pinched the pater's silver plate," added Sammy.

2. "What's to be done?" murmured Billy. "We can't let that old bounder run away with the family spoons!" "You tackle him," said Sammy. "What, and get a biff in the eye. I should think so," answered Billy. And all the time that light-fingered gent was getting farther and farther away.

3. The two brothers stood and argued on the brow of the hill. Then Sammy gave Billy a gentle push in the back. "Off you go, Billy," he said. And off Billy did go, rolling over and over down the hill.

4. The burglar had nearly reached the valley when he heard the sound of heavy thudding, and wild yells behind him. Looking back he saw a great snowball, complete with legs, come hurtling straight at him.



5. There was no time to run, or get out of the path of that advancing snowball. Crash! The light-fingered gent gave a fog-horn gasp as he was hit clean in the rear and sent whizzing into a snowdrift. "Och!"

6. The swag-hunter was completely winded. Billy called to Sammy, and they both held the burglar till the police arrived. The brothers got their reward in the shape of an extra-large dinner—and you bet they enjoyed it!

"Sure!" said the Kid.

"There ain't nothing coming, stranger," said the nester wearily. "Doc Pigeon don't travel forty miles at night, on Christmas Eve, for his health. And——" He broke off.

The Kid understood.

"I reckon the doc would want some fee," he assented. "And you ain't struck it rich on this hyer homestead, I guess."

"It's a living," muttered the nester—"a living while a man's in health. I ain't got no kick coming: but now——"

The Kid rose from the bench.

"You want that doc from Cow Crossing," he said. "I've heard of Doc Pigeon—he's a good man. I guess I could fix it with him. I reckon the galoots there won't be gunning after me to-night—on a night like this—Christmas Eve, too. Anyhow, I'm going."

The nester stared at him.

"You'd never make it," he said. "No man in Texas could ride that trail on a night like this!"

The Kid grinned.

"I guess I've hit trails as hard afore now," he said. "If you don't get that doc afore Christmas is out feller, you can tell galoots that the Rio Kid has ridden his last trail."

The nester started. Evidently that name was known to him.

"The Rio Kid!" he ejaculated.

"Yep—outlaw, fire-bug, and the worst wanted galoot in Texas," said the Kid grimly. "And I'm riding to Cow Crossing to-night, feller; and the doc's sure hitting the trail for this shebang, if I have to drive him at the end of a gun."

He shook his still dripping hat, jammed it on his head, and crossed to the door. The nester's haggard eyes followed him.

"God bless you!" he said softly. "Outlaw or not, God bless you, Kid!"

The Rio Kid stepped out into the wild night.

The Kid sat in the saddle, and gave one last glance at the lonely cabin. Then he turned his back on the glimmering light.

He rode through darkness and rain. Few riders would have followed that trail at all in the dark and the rain, and even the reckless Kid did not venture to ride fast. At a trot the sure-footed mustang clattered on, needing little guidance from the Kid. Later, the Kid would be able to break into a gallop, when he was clear of the rugged valleys and broken hillsides of the Huecas; but for the present he was cautious—as cautious as the Kid could be. He was not thinking of his own neck, but of the sick woman who lay in the lonely cabin, of the man worn down by watching who sat at her bedside.

Clatter, clatter, clatter!

The Kid had the route mapped out in his mind. He had ridden those lonely trails many a time. Beyond the slopes of the Huecas stretched prairie for long miles, till he should strike the ford of the Chicken River, which he had to cross. Beyond that, grassland again, till he came to the town of Cow Crossing.

It was wild, rough country, every foot of the way. The Kid, like a good plainsman, could guide his course on the boundless prairie by the stars; but in the blackness of the sky no star was visible. Here and there he would find landmarks that he knew, if he could pick them out in the darkness. It was a ride from which the hardiest cowpuncher might have shrunk. But the Kid entered upon it with a cheery heart.

The ill-humour, which had haunted the Kid ever since he had pulled out of the Frio country, was gone now. His grouch had vanished. All his thought and energy were concentrated on the task before him.

Somehow—if he did not break his neck on the way—he was going to hit Cow Crossing by dawn. Earlier would be useless, even if he could have done it earlier; for Doc Pigeon, good man and hardy as he was, could no more have ridden that trail in the dark than he could have flown it. But at dawn, the Kid swore to himself, he would hit Cow Crossing, and rouse out the doc and start him for that lonely cabin in the Huecas. There was always a possibility that the doc might refuse to stir at the demand of an outlaw; but the Kid did not heed that. Willing or unwilling, the Kid did not intend to take "No" for an answer.

The grey mustang clattered out of the Huecas at last, and the Kid was glad to feel the grassland under the beating hoofs. Now he let out the mustang and rode hard. By the instinct of horse and rider, the route was kept; no eye could have read the sign of the trail in the gloom and the wet. But here and there landmarks loomed up, to vanish behind the galloping rider—a clump of gigantic cottonwoods where the Kid had once camped—a burnt patch where chaparral had been cleared—a tract of sand and stones, an arm of the desert that reached into the grasslands.

The Kid knew it all; and if he had doubted, the successive signs he recognised would have told him that he was still on the right way.

Faintly, from the distance ahead, came the sound of roaring water.

The Kid smiled grimly.

He had to ride the Chicken River at the ford; but in the rain-flood the ford was likely to be deep, a roaring torrent of water. Torrent or not, the Kid had to ride it. And as the distant roar of tumbling waters reached him, and warned him that he was nearing the river, the Kid's keen eyes roved to right and left, striving to pierce the darkness.

He was in dangerous country now—somewhere in the wild and broken country along the Chicken River the Jefferson gang had their haunt, and a pilgrim needed to keep his eyes open and his gun handy when he rode that lonely trail.

"But I reckon them galoots won't be riding the trails to-night, old boss," the Kid said to the mustang. But he dragged his holster within easy reach, and watched like a cat as he rode.

There was a lull in the heavy downpour of rain. From a rift in the black-clouded sky a bunch of stars glimmered down. Anywhere else on the trail the Kid would have welcomed the pale glimmer; but he would have been glad to ride as far as the river in the blackest darkness. He was not looking for trouble with the Jefferson gang

A DASH TO SAVE A LIFE! Wild oaths and sharp shots rang out behind the Rio Kid as he dashed on towards the foaming river. He set his teeth—there was a life to be saved that night, and he must ride on! (*See Chapter* 3.)

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Rio Kid's Ride!

"OLD hoss, you and me's got to hump it!"

The Kid's grey mustang stirred in his bed of straw. In the darkness of the shed his intelligent eyes glimmered, as he turned his head towards his master.

"We got to hump it, old cayuse," said the Kid, stroking the mustang's neck affectionately. "It's sure an ornery night to ride you on the roughest trail in Texas; but we're for it, old hoss, and don't you forget it!"

The Kid saddled up and led the mustang from the shed. In the dark sky was not the glimmer of a star. Dim shapes of hills loomed ghostly round the lonely valley in the Huecas. Behind the Kid, as he led his horse to the gate, the solitary light still burned in the window of the shack, where a haggard man sat by a sick wife's bedside. But round the Kid was rain and darkness and howling wind, and the crashing of the branches of the tortured pines.

now; he did not want to have to burn powder on his way to Cow Crossing. But he hoped that at so late an hour, and in such foul weather, the gang of cow-thieves and road-agents would be nicked under shelter, heedless of a lone rider on the trails.

It was a vain hope. Ahead of the Kid, in the pale glimmer of the stars, still far distant, but in sight, gleamed the wild, tossing waters of the river. And between the Kid and that glimmering water a bunch of vague, shadowy figures loomed in sight—he counted four of them, vague shadows that he knew were horsemen. A husky shout rang through the night, and a revolver barked, with a sudden flash in the gloom.

"Halt!"

The Kid gritted his teeth.

He might have ridden that lonely trail a score of times without horning into the gang; yet on this night, when he was anxious to avoid trouble, to carry out his task without hindrance, Fate willed that he should ride right into Hank Jefferson and his gang.

The horsemen were bunched in the trail. The Kid did not draw rein. His gun was in his right hand now, his reins in his left. The mustang thundered on at a mad gallop.

There was a wild sputtering of shots, a buzzing of bullets like bees. The Kid's gun was ringing as he rode. It seemed scarce a second before he was charging through the bunch of riders, who broke open and plunged wildly as he came. He swung his heavy Colt right and left, and felt the cracking of bone under the barrel as it struck. In the darkness the shooting had been wild; but that blow had reached the mark, and there was a heavy fall behind the Kid as he careered on.

Wild oaths and sharp shots rang behind him, and the thunder of hoofs. The Kid dashed on towards the foaming river, longing for the rain and darkness again; but the rain still held off, and the stars shone down still more brightly. He glanced back over his shoulder, and picked out three Stetson hats that bobbed to the motion of furious riders. There had been four in the gang, but one lay far behind in the drenched grass with a cracked skull. The Kid set his teeth hard.

The river was close now—a wild and roaring flood. The stars shone down on the wild waters; light enough, as the Kid knew, to make him an easy target while he picked his way across. Every moment was precious to the Kid; but he slacked speed, and drew in the panting mustang. With his gun in his hand, the Kid leaped from the saddle and faced his pursuers.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Kid Makes Cow Crossing!

"STEADY, old hoss!"

The mustang stood like a rock.

The Kid levelled the six-gun across the saddle, resting it there to steady his aim. From the shadows came three furious riders, galloping fiercely, firing wildly as they came. Whether the gang had recognised him in that glimpse in the starlight, the Kid did not know; but if they had, they knew there was a rich prize for them if they could rope it in. It was well known that the Rio Kid packed a fat roll.

Crack!

The Kid waited till he was sure of his aim, and then he pulled trigger. From the shadows came a fearful yell and a heavy fall, and a riderless broncho went careering into the night with dangling stirrups. Two horsemen dragged in their steeds in hot haste.

The Kid grinned.

"I reckon they know this infant now, if they didn't savvy afore," he murmured. "I reckon there ain't a whole heap of galoots in Texas that could have picked off that guy at the distance with a six-gun."

He stared through the dimness. The thick bunch-grass had swallowed the remaining two riders from sight. They dared not ride on in the face of the Kid's gun. The Rio Kid leaped into the saddle again and dashed on towards the river. He had checked the pursuit, and, with time on his hands, he would have pushed the fight to a finish, and rooted out the crouching ruffians in the bunch-grass. But he had no time to cut to waste, if he was to reach Cow Crossing by dawn. He galloped on to the river, taking his chance of further pursuit.

Thud, thud! came the beat of hoofs behind him. Bang, bang! rang the guns of the two pursuers, firing wildly. The Kid's eyes glittered back over his shoulder. With a sudden movement, he swung the mustang round and faced them, and his gun rang out at the same moment. It was such a shot as few marksmen could have brought off. But the Kid's aim did not fail him, and a wounded man went plunging into the grass, screaming hoarsely. The last of the gang hunted cover on the instant, and the Kid wheeled again and dashed on to the river. When once more he glanced over his shoulder, he had a glimpse of a distant, bobbing Stetson hat—out of effective range. Hank Jefferson was still following, but he was keeping his distance.

Before the Kid now roared the Chicken River. The ford, knee-deep to a horse at other times, was a raging torrent now. But the Kid did not hesitate. He had not ridden so far to hesitate now. The mustang plunged into the flood.

Scrambling, plunging, swimming, steadied by the Kid's wrist of iron, the gallant mustang fought his way through the swollen stream.

Once, twice, he was almost swept away; but still the Kid's luck, his strength, and his courage, saved him; and he fought on, with clenched teeth and grim brow.

The hoofs were in the shallows at last on the southern side, and the mustang, exhausted by the struggle, almost tottered from the foaming flood.

Bang! came the roar of a Colt from the bank the Kid had left, and a bullet grazed his wet cheek, drawing a spurt of blood. Hank Jefferson had reached the river now, and he was firing on the struggling horseman as he glimpsed him in the starlight on the wild waters.

Bang, bang!

"You ornery cuss!" gritted the Kid between his teeth, as the bullets fanned him. "You jest hold on a piece, you dog-goned gink, and you'll sure get yours!"

The mustang clambered up the bank from the water. He halted, and stood shaking and trembling. The Kid, standing beside the horse, stared back, with gleaming eyes, across the flood. He dragged open the holster, into which he had had to thrust his gun to keep it dry from the river.

Jefferson, on the farther bank, a black shadow against shadows, was still firing fiercely. The Kid's gun leaped into his hand, and from his hand leaped flame and smoke, and the black shadow across the river lurched and swayed. The Kid heard a hoarse yell, and saw a bent figure, drooping over the horse, ride away wildly into the night.

He thrust the gun back into the holster, and wiped a stream of blood from the cut on his sunburnt cheek.

"I guess that lets me out!" drawled the Kid.

He turned to his mustang again.

"It's sure pizen for you, old cayuse," he muttered. "But we've got to bump it—we sure have! We got to beat it!"

He remounted, and rode on under the glimmer of starlight. Long miles lay still before him, and the tired mustang responded bravely to his caressing voice. Whip or spur the Kid did not need to use.

Thud, thud, thud! rang the hoofs on the rough prairie. Behind the Kid the roar of the flooded river died away into silence.

The rain was over, but thick clouds banked the sky again; the glimmer of starlight failed. Through dense darkness he rode, but not at a gallop now.

Slowly, faintly in the east the blackness was giving way to the pale gleam that told of coming day.

Thud, thud, thud! The mustang kept steadily on, the Kid, weary to the bone, drenched with water, smothered with mud, still erect in the saddle. Slowly night gave place to day.

"Put it on, old hoss!" murmured the Kid anxiously.

The wild ride was almost at its end. In the dawn of Christmas Day the Kid would ride into the town. Once more he loosed the revolver in its holster. In Cow Crossing were foes. A score of guns would leap from their holsters if the Rio Kid was seen riding the street. There was a thousand dollars on the head of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande, and a hundred men in the town knew him by sight. At his journey's end, danger dogged every step of the boy puncher.

But he rode on without a pause. In the glimmer of wintry dawn, a weary horse and a weary rider rode into Cow Crossing. In the rainy, wind-swept streets, at that early hour, no man was to be seen, and the Kid was glad of it. At any other time, he might have found a wild amusement in shooting up the town, and bringing the Cow Crossing pilgrims to their doors and windows with the roar of his revolvers. But the Kid was not hunting trouble now. He rode into the sleeping town, with a clatter of hoof-beats that echoed eerily through the silent, unpaved streets, and drew rein outside the shack of Doc Pigeon.

He slipped from the saddle, and patted the sweating neck of the mustang.

"I reckon we've done it, old hoss. Now I guess we've got to rouse out the doc."

With the butt of his gun he knocked loudly on the door. At that early hour Doc Pigeon was not yet astir.

Crash, crash! rang the butt of the Kid's Colt on the door. From within came an angry shout.

"Aw, let up on that racket, and get home to bed, durn your hide!"

The Kid grinned. Doc Pigeon had the impression that some very late roysterer, full of fire-water, was rousing

...out. The Kid ceased to crash on ... creaking door.

"You're wanted, Doc!" he shouted.

"Aw, forget it!"

"You're sure wanted, Doc, and I ... I ain't taking no for an answer. ... want to hop out of your leetle ... ick, and hop lively!"

There was an angry growl in the ...ack, and the door opened, revealing a ...an in shirt and trousers, who peered ...t grimly at the Kid, as he stood with ...e grey glimmer of dawn behind him.

Then Doc Pigeon gave a yell.

"The Rio Kid, by thunder!"

He leaped back from the doorway, ...and grabbed up a shot-gun that stood ...y the wall.

But before he could raise the shot-gun a revolver was looking him in the face, with the Kid's cool eyes gleaming over it.

"Drop it, feller!" drawled the Kid.

The butt of the shot-gun dropped to the floor. The Kid holstered his revolver and stepped into the doctor's shack.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Christmas!

DOC PIGEON stared grimly at the Rio Kid.

"You've woke up the wrong cayuse, Kid," he said. "What do you reckon you'll raise by holding me up?"

"You ornery guy," said the Kid indignantly. "Do you figure that I've horned on hyer to hold you up, and you a medicine man, too, dog gone you!"

"I reckon you ain't rode into camp jest to wish me a merry Christmas," said the Doc, with a grin.

"I sure ain't," said the Kid. "And this ain't going to be a powerful, merry Christmas for you, Doc, seeing as you've got to ride forty miles on the roughest trail in Texas, with a galoot about my size to keep you company."

"I guess not," said the Doc.

"I guess it's a cinch," said the Kid coolly. "There's a sick woman in a shack up in the Hueeas, the other side of the Chicken River, and I've sure humped it down here to fetch you, Doc."

"I should smile!" grinned the Cow Crossing medicine man. "You want to tell me you've ridden down from the Hueeas to Cow Crossing on a night like last? That's sure a tall one, Kid."

"I'm jest telling you that," assented the Kid.

He leaned against the door, breathing hard and deep. The Doc eyed him curiously, reading the weariness in his face, the signs of a hard trail in the mud that lathered him from head to foot.

"You're giving me straight goods, Kid?" asked the Doc, at last.

"Straight as a die, dog-gone you!" growled the Kid. "Do I look as if I'd come hyer to string you along, you unbelieving guy?"

"You sure look as if you'd hit a hard trail," said the Doc. "And I reckon somebody's been pot-shooting."

The Kid dabbed the scratch on his cheek.

"That was Jefferson's gang," he said. "I struck them on the Chicken River prairie."

"Search me!" said the Doc. "You've come through that gang, and got hyer alive, Kid."

"I guess that gang won't worry this section a whole lot any more," said the Kid grimly. "I guess you'll see what's left of them, Doc, on your way up to the Hueeas, if the coyotes have left anything for you to see. But I ain't here to chew the rag, Doc. You want to get moving."

BRINGING BACK THE DOC! The Kid drew weary rein at last, and pointed with his quirt at the lonely cabin. "I guess that's the shebang, Doc. You don't want me now!" panted the gallant young outlaw. (See Chapter 4.)

The camp doctor eyed him long and searchingly. He nodded at last.

"Ten minutes!" he said.

"Good enough!" said the Kid.

He sat down on a bench to wait.

"You give me the word, Doc, when you're ready."

"Sure!"

The Kid leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. He was asleep almost before his eyes had closed.

"Gee!" murmured Doc Pigeon, staring at him.

If he had lacked faith in the word of the Rio Kid, the Kid's trust in him was a rebuke. The boy outlaw, upon whose head was a reward of a thousand dollars, closed his eyes and slept in a town that swarmed with enemies. Doc Pigeon had but to give a call——

"Gee!" murmured the Doc again.

And he passed softly into his bedroom to dress for the ride.

A touch on the Kid's shoulder awakened him. The camp doctor, cloaked and booted and spurred, was standing before him. And at the door was his horse, saddled and bridled.

The Kid jumped up.

Side by side they rode out of the cow-town, and struck the trail across the prairie. In a few minutes Cow Crossing dropped out of sight behind them.

The doctor's horse, a powerful pinto, covered the trail with great strides. But the iron-limbed mustang of the Rio Kid kept pace. In a blaze of wintry sunshine they reached at last the ford on the Chicken River.

They splashed into the river, and fought their way across the flood. On the further side the trail was taken up again. Now they rode on in silence, while the hours of the morning passed; and at last the rugged tops of the Hueeas broke the sky-line in the distance. The black-muzzled mustang, iron-limbed and long-enduring as he was, was panting pitifully as he faced the rugged slopes of the hills. But he kept gallantly on, weary horse and rider defying weariness.

The Kid drew rein at last, and pointed with his quirt at the lonely cabin in the valley, standing out against the sharp, cold sunshine.

"I guess that's the shebang, Doc. You don't want me now."

The Doc halted.

"You ain't coming on, Kid?"

"I guess not. But look hyer." The Kid groped under his slicker, and fumbled at a pouch in his belt. The Doc stared at the handful of bills he drew out, and made a gesture of refusal.

"Aw, forget it, feller!" snapped the Kid. "That nester is down to bed rock, and he's got a sick wife to care for. You'll take them five hundred dollars, Doc, and hand them to that galoot, and tell him it's a Christmas present from the Rio Kid."

As the Doc still hesitated, the Kid's handsome face flushed.

"Dog-gone your hide!" he exclaimed. "Do you figure that there's anything on these hyer dollars, you pesky guy? I guess I made them with pick and spade, fossicking for gold in the gulches over in Arizona, you all-fired jay. Do you reckon I got them in a hold-up?"

"I guess I'll take your word for it, Kid, and the dollars along with it," said the Doc, taking the roll. "They sure tell a heap things about you, Kid; but I allow you're one of the whitest men I've ever struck. If you're hitting the trail, good-bye, Kid, and good luck!"

He held out his hand.

The Kid's brow cleared, and he smiled as he gripped it. The door of the lonely cabin opened. The nester stood there shading his eyes with his hand, and staring towards the two riders. His haggard face lighted up with joy as he recognised the Doc of Cow Crossing.

"Good-bye, Doc!"

Doc Pigeon rode on towards the cabin. The Rio Kid wheeled his weary mustang, and rode away down the valley.

In a far canyon of the lonely Hueeas the Rio Kid camped to rest his weary horse, and his own weary limbs. As the dusk of Christmas Day faded into night the stars came out in a velvety sky, and glimmered down on the Kid, rolled in his blankets, sleeping peacefully as a child.

THE END.

(The Rio Kid in another thrilling adventure, next week, chums. Don't miss "The Cattle Thieves!")

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