THE OUTLAW-ADVENTURER IN THE THICK OF IT!

They couldn't stop the cattle-lifting on the Sampson Ranch—until the Rio Kid came along. This dare-devil outlaw saw what was going on, put on his thinking-cap, and then proceeded to create a sensation!

The CATTLE THIEVES!

by RALPH REDWAY

OUR ROARING WESTERN YARN—STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Ordered Off!

THE Kid reined in his mustang on the last hill, and looked across miles of waving grass to the blue beyond. The Kid knew little of the sea, and had seen little of it. His ways had lain in other places, far from the blue waters that washed the coast of Texas, for the Frio country lay three hundred miles and more from the salt water.

Twice, perhaps thrice, in his young life, had the Kid seen the ocean rolling, not oftener than that. There were men on the ranches thrice his age who had never seen it, who hardly knew that Texas had a coast at all. And the Kid, generally speaking, did not think much of the blue water, and did not envy the men who went down to the sea in ships. As a method of locomotion, he chose the saddle on a good horse, with firm ground under thudding hoofs. Sails did not appeal to him, nor steam, either on a ship or a railway train.

But as he came in sight of the Gulf of Mexico from the brow of the hill, the Kid drew rein, and sat idle in the saddle, looking at the far stretch of waters with interested and admiring eyes.

"It's the big wash, old hoss," he told the grey mustang.

The Kid's eyes, keen as an eagle's, swept far and wide. Far out on the shining waters were sails—a schooner, a lugger, a brig—though the Kid would have admitted freely that he could not have told one rig from another. But he could admire their graceful gliding, and the sun catching the sails, the white wake glistening behind the shining blue waters stretching round them.

One of the vessels—a schooner, had he known it—was heading in to the shore, making long tacks against the breeze that blew off the Texas plains, and the Kid watched it with interested, if perplexed, eyes. That galoot, the Kid told himself, was going a whole piece to and fro to get where he wanted.

It was a lonely stretch of shore that lay before the Kid's eyes. He always kept clear of towns if he could. The sights of Galveston and Corpus Christi had no attraction for him. And it was not to see the rolling blue waters of the great gulf that he had come.

He had kept his compact with Jake Watson to ride out of the Frio country, and he had hit the trail for the east simply because it led away from Frio. He had ridden for days, and would have ridden for days more, had not the Gulf of Mexico lain in the way.

Now he was at journey's end, for he had no fancy for blue waters. The Kid, a handy man in all that pertained to horses and cows and ranch work generally, grinned at the idea of trying his luck on shipboard. And yet, had he guessed it—which he was far from doing—Fate had a cinch on the Kid, and he was to make a much closer acquaintance with the blue sea that rolled afar.

Right and left, as he looked down from the hill, the coast stretched. If there was the haze of a town in the distance, it was too far off even for the Kid's eagle eye to pick it out with certainty. Down by the waters was a collection of buildings by a little inlet, not to be called a town—not half the size of the cow-towns that the Kid knew. A few Mexican adobe buildings and a score of shacks, the Kid could see.

"That'll be San Pedro, old hoss," he said to the mustang.

Inland, to the Kid's right, he made out the distant buildings of a ranch-house.

The Kid wheeled his horse a little, and looked away towards the ranch; more interested in that than in the sea.

The Kid was considering. Long hundreds of miles lay between him and the Frio country, where he was known, where his name was on every man's tongue, and where a reward of a thousand dollars was on his head. In many other regions of that far-flung State he was known and looked for. But here, in this quiet stretch by the blue waters of the gulf, it seemed to him likely enough that the name and face of the Rio Kid had never penetrated, that to the ranchers of this country he would be nothing but a cow-puncher who had ridden in from the West. And the Kid was tired of riding lonely trails and camping in the lone chaparral. His heart yearned for the corrals and the horses and the herds, and the cheery good-fellowship of the bunkhouse. The Kid packed a substantial roll, and could have eaten the bread of idleness had he liked. But he did not like.

He turned his horse down the hill at last, and rode at a canter towards the distant ranch.

The sea disappeared from his sight, hidden by a fold of the grassy prairie. The Kid forgot it.

Cattle were grazing in bunches on the plains. The sight of the long-horns was pleasanter to the boy puncher's eyes than the sea had been.

Between him and the distant ranch buildings lay a stretch of timber, through which a well-marked trail ran. The Kid followed the trail, winding under the great branches of spreading cottonwoods.

But he had not penetrated a score of yards into the shadows of the wood, when a Stetson hat lifted from the thickets by the trail, and the barrel of a rifle glimmered from amid the pecans and pendant Spanish moss.

"Halt, you there!"

The Kid pulled rein with a smile.

He figured that it was some suspicious puncher who had spotted him for a stranger, and wanted to know his business. He did not touch a gun. He sat his halted horse, with a smile on his face, as the man who had challenged him emerged from the trees.

"I reckon you're on the wrong trail, stranger," said the man with the rifle, eyeing the Kid.

The Kid eyed him in turn.

The man was no puncher. He looked like a gunman now that the Kid saw him squarely.

But the Kid's answer was cheery and civil. He had not come to the San Pedro country hunting for trouble.

"I reckon not, feller," he answered good-humouredly.

"You don't belong to Old Man Sampson's bunch, you don't?" said the man with the rifle.

The Kid grinned.

"Never heard of Old Man Sampson, and I sure ain't one of his bunch," he assented.

"Yep, I reckon I ain't seed you around before."

"I'm from the Rio Grande," the Kid explained genially. "Is this how you meet strangers in this section, with a gun in your grip, feller?"

The man grinned sourly. He was a burly, grim-featured fellow, with a knife-scar across his cheek that showed white in the tan of the skin. He looked as tough a man as the Kid had ever seen in any cow-camp.

"I reckon I've said you're on the wrong trail, pilgrim," he said. "You want to turn that there cayuse of yourn right round, and beat it, pronto!"

"And why?" asked the Kid.

"Because this hyer rifle will go off, stranger, if you don't," said the man with the scar. "This hyer timber ain't healthy for strangers, and I'm telling you."

The Rio Kid sat in the saddle and looked at him. The man's rifle was half-raised, his look threatening. The Kid was lightning on the draw, and he had no doubt that he could have pulled a gun, and dropped this bulldozer in his tracks, before the rifle could have hurt him. And it went against the grain with the Kid to be bulldozed. Something, evidently, was going on in the timber, and this man was posted to watch the trail, and evidently it was something that strangers' eyes were not desired to see. The Rio Kid was powerfully tempted to try conclusions with the scarred gunman, and look into the matter further.

But he repressed that temptation. He had not come a-shooting to the San Pedro country. If he could help it, the walnut-butted guns should not be drawn from their holsters. What was going on in the timber was no business of his, he told himself, and, though he hated to be bulldozed, he wanted to keep clear of burning powder if he could.

Like many who did not know the Rio Kid by sight, the gunman took him for what he looked—a handsome boy puncher, and nothing more. As the Kid, after a brief pause, wheeled his horse, the gunman had no doubt that he had scared him off, and he grinned contemptuously.

That contemptuous grin tempted the Kid hard; he was very near to giving the scarred man the surprise of his life. But he refrained.

"Feller, if you're particular about it, I guess I'll hit the back trail," he said amiably.

"Quit chewing the rag, and beat it!" grunted the other.

"Sure!" assented the Kid. "So-long!"

"Git!"

The Rio Kid rode back the way he had come, out of the timber.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Horning into Trouble!

THERE was a discontented frown on the brow of the Rio Kid.

By a roundabout trail, avoiding the wide stretch of timberland, he rode for the distant ranch.

It added three or four miles to his way; but three or four miles mattered nothing to the Kid or to the black-muzzled mustang.

It was backing down before the bullying gunman that worried the Kid.

More than once, as he rode on at an easy gallop, he was tempted to turn back, penetrate into the timber, and hand out to that gunman what he had asked for.

The fellow, taking the Kid for a young puncher who was easily scared by a scowling gunman, had been left in the belief that he had frightened the Kid away. It was a galling reflection.

Once the Kid drew rein, his mind made up to return and give the ruffian what was coming to him. But he shook his head and rode on again.

"Dog-gone the pesky gink!" growled the Kid. "He don't matter a continental red cent, anyhow. He sure gets my goat, but—dog-gone him!"

And the Kid resolutely dismissed the gunman from his mind, and rode on to the ranch.

The timber dropped out of sight in the folds of the rolling prairie behind him as he came nearer to the ranch buildings.

A puncher who was riding on the skirts of a bunch of cattle looked round at the thudding of hoofs, fixed his eyes keenly on the Kid, and rode across to intercept him.

The Kid reined in.

This man was evidently a member of the ranch outfit, a puncher in spurs and chaps, with a bronzed face under a Stetson hat.

"What you want hyer, stranger?" asked the puncher, eyeing the Kid.

"I guess I'm moseying along to the ranch," answered the Kid. "Say, feller, any room for a good man on the pay-roll?"

"I reckon Old Man Sampson ain't looking for strangers to take into the bunch!" drawled the cowboy. "If you're up from the coast town, I guess you can save yourself the trouble."

"But I ain't!" smiled the Kid. "I'm from the Upper Rio Grande and the Pecos. Say, you fellers hyer got any grouch agin the galoots down in San Pedro?"

"You're said it," answered the puncher. "I guess they're too keen on cheap beef down in the town to please this hyer bunch. If you'll take my advice you'll beat it without seeing Old Man Sampson."

"Oh, sho!" said the Kid. "Does your boss bite strangers?"

The puncher grinned.

"There's a dozen cows missing from the herds, and the old man is sure as mad as a hornet," he answered. "We ain't gone on strangers on this hyer ranch, and I guess I ought to turn you back."

"Forget it!" said the Kid sweetly; and he gave his mustang a touch of the spur, and rode on towards the ranch.

The puncher stared after him doubtfully, and then clapped spurs to his broncho, and rode in pursuit of the Kid.

"Say, bo!" he shouted.

The Kid looked back.

"Stop, I'm telling you!" shouted the puncher; and he lifted a Colt from his belt and waved it in the air.

The Kid halted again.

With a clatter of hoofs, the puncher came up.

"Beat it!" he said. "I ain't saying that you don't look square; but the boss' orders is to keep strangers off the ranch, and I guess that goes. Beat it back to where you came from!"

The Kid's eyes gleamed.

This was the second time in an hour that he had been ordered to take the back trail, and the Kid was tired of getting orders.

"And if I don't beat it!" he asked.

The puncher half raised his revolver.

"You better!" he said briefly.

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid.

"Old Man Sampson's orders is to keep strangers off, and drive 'em off at the end of a gun if they raise objections," said the puncher. "Now get going, I guess——"

The puncher broke off suddenly.

A six-gun had appeared, as if by magic, in the Kid's hand, and the muzzle was looking him full in the face.

"Keep that gun down, feller," said the Kid quietly. "I reckon I ain't hunting trouble, but if you lift that shooter you get yours!"

"Great snakes!"

The puncher glared blankly at the Kid. But he did not lift his gun-hand. The Kid's eyes were gleaming like steel over the levelled six-gun.

"Drop that Colt!" said the Kid tersely.

For a second the puncher hesitated, his face red with rage. Then the Colt dropped into the grass.

"Now beat it back to your cows!"

The puncher breathed hard.

"You goin' on to the ranch?" he asked.

"Sure!"

"I reckon you'll get yours—the boys there can see you——"

"I reckon they're welcome to see all they want!" said the Kid coolly. "I've told you to beat it!"

"You've got the drop," said the puncher, shrugging his shoulders. "I guess I'll come along and help to plant you when the outfit get through with you. You can't bulldoze Santa Fe Sam this-a-way!"

And he galloped off to the herd he had left, leaving his revolver in the grass where it had dropped.

The Kid glanced after him curiously, and then rode on to the ranch.

Three or four punchers were standing by the buildings, watching him as he rode up. The Kid knew that they had observed that little scene from the distance. More men came from various quarters and joined the watching crowd, till nearly a dozen of the Sampson outfit stood there, their eyes on the approaching horseman. From the door of the ranch-house, a tall man with a white moustache and grizzled hair, stepped, and strode towards the group, and then fixed his eyes on the Kid. The Kid could guess that this was Old Man Sampson, the boss of the ranch.

That the looks of the ranch crowd were hostile the Kid could hardly fail

to note. But he rode on cheerily, as if all were friends there. There was a smile on his face, but the Kid was getting a grouch. His temper was rising, and he was ready for trouble if it came.

He drew rein with a clatter of hoofs in front of the frowning group. Two or three of them had dropped hands on their guns, but no weapons were drawn—yet.

The man with the white moustache, his tanned face dark with anger, strode towards the Kid.

"Who are you?" he rapped out.

"Puncher from the Rio Grande," answered the Kid amiably. "You can call me Carfax, if you're keen on the name."

"What do you want here?"

"Punch cows."

"No new man wanted in this hyer outfit."

"Well, I'll tell the world!" sighed the Kid. "You're losing a good man, Mr. Sampson."

"You held up Santa Fe Sam, back there on the prairie!" rapped out the rancher. "You was seen to do it."

"Sure!" assented the Kid. "The galoot wanted to stop me on the trail. But I ain't hurt the feller any. He was a good little man, and did jest what he was told."

"I guess you'd have been wise to turn back when you was told," said the rancher grimly.

"Oh, sho!" said the Kid. "If you don't want a man in your outfit, I guess you're going to let a galoot bed down for a night, ain't you? I've never struck a ranch in Texas where a stranger was turned away from the chuck-house."

Old Man Sampson scowled.

"I guess this ranch is as hospitable as any in Texas!" he growled. "But we ain't gone on cow-thieves and gunmen here."

The Kid's eyes gleamed.

"You calling me a cow-thief?" he demanded.

"I guess you know as much as any galoot about the beef that's missing from this ranch. You've horned in where you ain't wanted, and held up one of my men under my eyes. I guess this is a new stunt of them thieves down in San Pedro to get one of the gang on the ranch."

"Feller, I ain't never set foot in San Pedro, and never saw the place afore to-day, from the top of a hill."

"So you say!" sneered the rancher. "Every day there's cows missing—and when we ride down to San Pedro they know nothing about it. They kill beef every day on this ranch, and sell it to the coasting boat. I guess I ain't running this hyer ranch for the loafers in San Pedro to live on!"

"Sure!" assented the Kid, his anger fading. "I reckon, if I was boss of this hyer ranch I'd ride my outfit down to the place and shoot up the town as a warning."

The rancher eyed him keenly.

"That talk don't go here!" he snapped. "You're one of the gang, and I reckon now you've horned in here you ain't getting away as easy as you came. Hand over them guns!"

The Kid backed his horse a little.

There were guns in the hands of the Sampson outfit now, and dark and lowering looks were cast on the Kid.

The Kid smiled whimsically.

"You sure don't lose any time in jumping on a stranger, you 'uns," he said. "I reckon I understand you're suspicious of strangers, if there's a gang working the ranch for the beef. But——"

"That's enough talk; light down from that hoss and hand over your guns!" snapped the rancher. "You'll be held here till we find out more about yew—and if we find you're one of that gang you'll go up to a branch on the end of a riata!"

"Them beef-stealers have kinder got you on the jump, I allow," said the Kid. "But you can't rope in a galoot about my size, rancher, on them lines. I'm a stranger in this country, and I never knew anything about your trouble here with the San Pedro bunch when I horned in. I'm the man to help you handle them, if you want."

"Quit chin-wag and light down, I'm telling you!"

"You ain't taking no for an answer?" asked the Kid.

"No. Light down, or you'll get yours so sudden you won't know what hit you!"

The Kid made a movement as if to obey. The next instant he had wheeled his mustang and dashed past the corner of the bunkhouse at a wild gallop.

He did not draw a gun. The Kid wanted no trouble with a bunch of cattlemen whose tempers were raw from a cause with which the Kid could deeply sympathise. But he had no intention of being held a prisoner at the ranch on suspicion. That did not suit the Kid at all. So sudden and unlooked-for was his break that the bunkhouse was between him and the bunch before a weapon could be raised.

There was a roar of wrath from the old rancher.

"Foller him! Shoot him down!"

The whole bunch rushed after the Kid.

But the bunkhouse and a range of buildings had been placed between by the Kid's rapid manœuvre, and the black muzzled mustang was streaking away across the prairie at a frantic gallop, the Kid bending low in the saddle.

As the enraged punchers came rushing round the buildings the galloping horseman was already at a distance.

Bang, bang, bang!

There was a roar of guns behind the Kid; and one of the bullets came near enough for him to feel the wind of it.

But the galloping hoofs carried him swiftly out of range, and he rode on at top speed, till at last he halted on a low hill and looked back. Five or six horsemen were starting out from the ranch in pursuit.

The Kid grinned, and rode down the farther side of the hill.

"I guess we can beat that bunch, old hoss!" he said to the mustang.

And the Kid was right; by the time the angry riders breasted the hill the Kid was far out of sight.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Kid Takes a Hand!

THE Rio Kid dismounted on the edge of the timber and tethered his horse in a thicket of pecans.

The swift mustang had easily dropped the pursuit; the ranch riders had long since turned back in angry disappointment.

After dropping them, the Kid had made a wide sweep of more than twenty miles at a gallop, and reached the hill from which he had looked out on the sea earlier in the day.

From there he had ridden down to the timber where the gunman with the scarred cheek had turned him back.

The timber lay like a black shadow on the plain, in the level rays of the setting sun. The Kid was not following the trail into it, however. He had skirted the timber, and was approaching it from the eastern side—the side towards the sea.

Having tethered his horse in deep cover, the Kid advanced into the timber, with the stealthy caution of an Apache on the warpath.

There was a grim expression on the Kid's sunburnt face.

His reception at the Sampson ranch had got the Kid's goat; but his anger at that inhospitable reception had soon evaporated. A cowman born and bred, the Kid could understand only too well the bitter anger of the cowmen whose herds were thinned by cow thieves.

The ranch, whose broad lands lay contiguous to the coast town of San Pedro, was favourably placed for the operations of the beef stealers.

It was not a matter of "rustling" cows, such as the Kid had happened on often enough on the ranches on the Pecos and the Rio Grande. The gang at San Pedro who were "working" the Sampson ranch did not drive cows. They slaughtered cows for the beef, the coasting vessels that came into the inlet affording them a ready market.

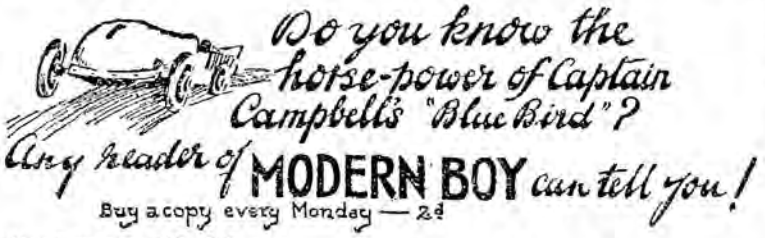
A rancher whose cows had been rustled might hope to trail them down, identify them by the brand, and recover them. But of the slaughtered cows only the hoofs and horns were left for the punchers to discover, in hidden places on the prairie.

The Kid did not wonder that the Sampson outfit were "on the jump," with the ranch being worked on those lines.

Howsoever numerous an outfit might be, and howsoever keen a watch they kept, the great herds could not be so closely guarded as to defeat the thieves who watched for stragglers, and for chances to drive small bunches into some sunken coulee or patch of timber.

Two or three or half a dozen cows every day, or every other day, made up a total that might mean ruin to a ranch in the long run; and such thievery was harder to deal with than attempts to drive off herds.

The Kid understood it quite well. He had no grouch against the ranch outfit, roughly as they had greeted him, and narrow as had been his escape from the shower of bullets that had been dispatched after him when he rode for his freedom.



The Kid's grouch was entirely against the cow thieves; and he had determined to take a hand in the game.

He had been puzzled, as well as angered by the gunman who had turned him back on the trail in the timber. But the Rio Kid was no longer puzzled, after what he had learned at the ranch. He could guess now easily enough what had been going on in the timber, and why the scarred gunman had been set to watch the trail there. The Kid had a hunch that the cow thieves were at work in that hidden spot, and that that was why the gunman watched the trail.

Whether that hunch was well-founded the Kid was going to see. It was some hours now since the gunman had turned him back, but if the gang were gone the Kid had nothing to learn about trailing. But he did not figure that they were gone. If they had rounded up a small bunch of cows in the timber it was more than likely that they would wait till dark before conveying their plunder down to San Pedro.

Winding through the thick timber with the stealth of a cougar, the Kid silently approached the spot where the scarred gunman had been on guard. He made no sound as he went, stepping lightly among the clustering pecans and cottonwoods, or creeping on hands and knees among the thickets and ferns. The open trail through the timber lay before him at last, and the Kid stopped to watch and listen, peering out from thick cover.

He grinned as he looked.

A Stetson hat showed up on the beaten trail, and a scent of tobacco came to him. The scarred man was still there; he was seated on a log by the trail, his rifle across his knees, smoking, leaning back against a cottonwood. The Kid grinned, but his face grew grim. The ruffian had been content with scaring him away, as he supposed; but had a puncher of the Sampson outfit ridden into the timber, looking for lost cattle, the Kid could guess what would have happened.

"You dog-goned scallywag!" the Kid muttered inaudibly.

He could hear sounds in the timber, at a distance. He could not define the sounds, but he knew that several men, at least, were there; and he did not need telling what their occupation was.

For a few minutes the Kid watched and listened; and then he was in stealthy motion again, and a cougar creeping on its prey could not have crept more silently than the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande.

The scarred gunman was knocking out his pipe when he gave a sudden, convulsive start. The cold steel rim of a muzzle was grinding into the back of his neck, and a soft voice whispered in his ear:

"Jest one yaup, you cuss, and you get yours!"

The gunman sat quite still. The Rio Kid pressed the six-gun harder on the bull-neck as he moved into sight. The gunman glared up at him, and his eyes blazed with rage as he recognised the Rio Kid. But he did not dare to move or to speak.

"Not a yaup, you dog-goned cow thief!" said the Kid quietly. "I'd spill your juice jest as soon as look at you! Quiet!"

The gunman breathed hard and deep.

"You figured that you'd scared me stiff, and scared me away," said the Kid contemptuously. "You've got another guess coming, feller!"

"You durned——"

"Forget it!"

The muzzle ground harder into the ruffian's neck, and he was silent.

With his left hand the Kid drew away the rifle, and the man put his hands behind him and turned. There was no need to speak; the Kid's gun enforced obedience. The ruffian's life hung on a thread, and he knew it. With the fellow's own neckscarf the Kid bound his hands tightly behind his back. Then, taking off the gunman's belt, he shackled his legs securely. The ruffian lay in the grass, his eyes burning up at the Kid.

Holstering his gun now, the Kid dragged him away from the trail, deep into the timber. There, with twisted lianas, he bound him to a tree.

"Now, you're goin' to talk some, feller!" said the Kid. "Jest in a whisper—your pards ain't goin' to hear. How many in the gang?"

The man did not speak.

The Kid bared the bowie knife from his belt, and pressed the point to the gunman's chest. His eyes gleamed at the ruffian like cold steel. There was a gasp from the gunman of San Pedro.

"Three!" he muttered thickly.

"Killing beef?"

"Yes."

"How they getting it down to San Pedro?"

"They got a waggon."

"When they hitting the trail?"

"Soon arter sundown."

"Any other galoot on the watch?"

"Nope."

"How many cows they got into this timber?"

"Six."

"They killed the beef already guess?"

"Sure."

"And jest waiting for dark to beat it?"

"Yep."

"Good enough!" said the Kid.

He cut a strip from the gunman's shirt and gagged him securely. Leaving the man glaring after him, with eyes that burned with impotent rage, the Kid disappeared into the darkening wood.

A BID FOR FREEDOM! "Light down, or you'll get yours so sudden you won't know what hit you!" roared the rancher. The Kid made a movement to obey. The next moment he had wheeled his mustang and dashed away at full gallop. There was a yell of wrath from the punchers. "Shoot him!" "Stop him!" Bang! Bang! Bang! (*See page* 20.)

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The Kid's Peace Offering!

THE three roughly-clad men who lounged by the wagon under the cottonwoods were smoking Mexican cheroots and talking in low tones, as they stared idly out of the trees towards the shore, and the shacks and doby houses of San Pedro in the distance.

The sun was low on the plains now, and the timber full of deep shadows. Only three miles from the timber lay the coast town; and over the rugged ground the masts of a schooner could be seen in the swampy inlet. The light wagon used by the beef thieves was ready packed; two horses were traced to it, and the gang were only waiting for darkness to fall to drive down to the coast.

They heard no sound to alarm them from the darkening timber. Any puncher who had ridden into the cottonwoods looking for cattle would have entered by the beaten trail that ran through the woods; and on that trail the gunman kept watch, with ready rifle. The three men with the wagon expected to hear a warning shot if an

enemy appeared, little dreaming that the sentinel was already a helpless prisoner, and that a pair of keen eyes were watching them from the thickets.

The Rio Kid watched, and listened, for long minutes, after he had sighted the gang of beef thieves.

He was satisfied that the gunman had told the truth; there were three in the gang, and no sign or sound of others.

Three cow thieves, all of them armed, and as desperate a crew as the Kid had ever seen, had no terrors for the boy outlaw.

Satisfied at last, the Kid stepped softly from cover, and advanced at a quick run towards the wagon.

At the cracking of a twig under his foot, the trio spun round as if moved by the same spring.

They found themselves looking at two levelled guns, with the Kid's eyes glittering over them.

"Hands up!"

The Rio Kid rapped out the words staccato.

The San Pedro gang stared at him blankly. At the sound of his step they had expected to see their comrade from the trail; but with the caution of their kind they had grasped their guns as they turned. But the levelled six-guns in the Kid's grasp daunted them, and they stared at him in rage and uncertainty.

"Hands up, you durned scallawags!" rapped out the Kid sharply. "Let them guns alone, and put up your paws, or it's you for the long jump!"

Slowly, savagely, two of the ruffians put up their hands. But the third, with a desperate oath, wrenched out his revolver and threw it up to fire.

Bang!

There was a wild yell from the cow thief as his right arm dropped to his side, shattered at the elbow by the bullet.

"You 'uns want yours?" snapped the Kid, his eyes flashing menace.

"Hold on, pardner!" gasped one of the ruffians. Both had their hands high above their heads. "You're the doctor, sure! Pass, pardner!"

"Keep to that!" growled the Kid.

He advanced into the glade. The wounded man was leaning against a tree, white as death, groaning out curses. Holstering one gun, the Kid, with his free hand, disarmed the two cow thieves, tossing their Colts into the wood. Then he signed to them to get into the wagon.

"Look here, feller——" began one of them.

"Pronto!" rapped out the Kid.

They clambered in, muttering curses. The Kid followed them in, picked up a rope, and threw a loop round them. In a few minutes they were secured, bound with their own lasso.

Cursing in low, deep tones, the two cow thieves lay bound and helpless, on the stack of beef they had aimed to drive down to San Pedro, but which was never to reach the coast town.

The Kid lifted the wounded man into the wagon, and bound up his arm with his neckscarf, binding the other arm to his side.

"I guess you 'uns are fixed!" he remarked cheerfully.

"You dog-goned puncher——"

"Oh, can it!" interrupted the Kid.

Leaving the wagon, and the prisoners bound in it, the Rio Kid plunged into the timber. He returned very quickly, leading his mustang, and driving the gunman before him.

"Hop into that hearse, feller!" said the Kid.

"I guess——"

"Hop in, I'm telling you!"

The Kid's eyes gleamed menace, and the scarred gunman clambered clumsily into the wagon, his arms bound behind him.

The Kid, with a cheery grin, led the horses out of the timber, on the side towards the Sampson ranch. The black-muzzled mustang ambled at his side.

"Where you heading, gol-darn you?" yelled one of the prisoners in the wagon.

"I guess we're hitting the ranch as fast as this hyer hearse can travel!" answered the Kid.

"Dog gone you!" the man yelled in affright. "That bunch will string us up, if they get us, with the beef in the wagon!"

"I guess if they do you'll get what's coming to you sooner or later!" answered the Kid coolly.

He led the wagon out of the timber on to the open prairie, and then mounted to the driver's seat and gathered up the reins. His quirt cracked, and the horses trotted, the mustang trotting behind.

Over the darkening prairie the Kid drove, towards the ranch, to an accompaniment of mingled oaths and pleading from the captured cow thieves. The Kid did not heed them. The last rays of the sun disappeared as the wagon rumbled on; and the lights of the ranch and the bunkhouse gleamed out ahead.

There was a clatter of hoofs as the Kid turned into the beaten trail that led up to the ranch. A puncher loomed up in the shadows.

"Hyer, you!" he hailed.

It was Santa Fe Sam, the puncher on whom the Kid had pulled his gun that afternoon.

The Rio Kid shouted him a cheery greeting.

"All O.K., feller—you don't want to pull a gun! I'm sure hitting the ranch with a surprise packet for Old Man Sampson."

The puncher rode up to the wagon, stared into it, and stared at the Kid.

"Jumpin' gophers!" he ejaculated. "What's this lay-out?"

"Cow thieves!" said the Kid cheerily. "I guess I'm toting the beef where it belongs, and the thieves along with it—I reckon Old Man Sampson would like to talk to them a piece."

"Dog-gone my boots!" yelled the puncher in amazement. "I allowed I was going to fill you full of holes, feller, next time I seed you; but this sure lets you out. Gee-whiz! I guess Old Man Sampson will sure be tickled to death when he sees this outfit!"

And the puncher, wheeling his horse, rode ahead of the Kid to the ranch, cracking his quirt, and yelling to the bunch. By the time the Kid drove up a crowd of punchers were gathered, with the rancher, waiting for him. They gathered round the wagon; but there was no drawing of guns now, no sign of hostility. The Rio Kid threw down the reins and dropped to the ground and called to his mustang.

"You sure gave me the frozen mitt when I humped along here, you 'uns," he said. "But I ain't got no kick coming. You'll find your beef in that hearse, Mr. Sampson; and the gang that have been running it down to San Pedro. Adios!"

"Stop!" rapped out the rancher.

"I guess I'm through," answered the Kid.

"You've rounded up the toughest gang in San Pedro," said Old Man Sampson. "I've had my eye on that gang for a month of Sundays, and I reckoned they was the bunch that was working the ranch; but I never could prove it up again them. You got them on the prod. I take back all the things I said to you, puncher—I own up I was mad. You rounded up that gang, and got back the beef, on your lonesome!"

The Kid smiled.

"That's the size of it, rancher. I give 'em to you."

"I've sure got a hunch to string them up out of hand!" growled Old Man Sampson. "But I reckon they'll keep for the pen. But you ain't hitting the trail none, young feller. You asked me for a job on this ranch; and now I'm asking you to join the outfit, and I guess the boys'll give you a welcome."

"Sure!" said the punchers in chorus.

The Kid nodded and smiled.

"It's a cinch!" he said.

And he turned his mustang into the corral.

* * * * *

The next day the Rio Kid was riding range with the Sampson outfit, with a cheery face and a light heart. Contented days followed for the Kid; though he wondered, at times, whether the trouble that ever dogged him would find him out once more, and how long it would be before it found him.

THE END.

(The Rio Kid is not left long in peace. You'll find this dare-devil boy outlaw well in the thick of a rousing adventure next week, chums. Look out for: "RUCTIONS ON THE SAMPSON RANCH!" another fine long Western tale.)