TRAILING THE KID! Judge Shandy of Butte vows to bring the Rio Kid to justice, but when he sets out to fulfil that vow, it is borne in upon his mind that "trailing the Kid" is a very dangerous game to play!

THE RIO KID!

by RALPH REDWAY

A ROUSING LONG COMPLETE WESTERN YARN, FEATURING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW OF TEXAS.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Trailing the Kid!

THE Rio Kid smiled.

It was a smile of genuine amusement, though it was called forth by a sight that would have made few smile—the sight of six armed men riding on his trail, seeking his life.

They saw nothing of the Kid, though he lay within twenty feet of them. The Rio Kid lay doggo in the sassafras and dwarf pecans, high up the steep side of the narrow ravine. Twenty feet below him the horsemen rode, between walls of rock that made the path too narrow for more than two men to ride abreast. The Kid could have tossed a pebble upon the Stetson hats that bobbed below. The six-gun in his hand could have picked them off one after another, like so many prairie-rabbits, before they had had a chance of hunting cover. But the Rio Kid only smiled, and waited and watched for them to pass.

He could see little of the riders, save their big Stetson hats; but one of them he knew—Judge Shandy, of Butte. The judge was speaking, and his hard, metallic voice came clearly up to the Kid.

"We're sure close behind the dog-goned puncher now, I guess."

The man riding beside the judge drew in his horse.

"Sure!" he answered.

"What are you pulling rein for, Long Bill?"

Long Bill, without replying, dropped from his horse, and bent to examine the trail he was following. The other horsemen halted behind him.

"What is it?" exclaimed the judge impatiently. "We're wasting time. The sign's plain enough."

"The trail's sure fresh," said Long Bill slowly. "I reckon it's not an hour since the mustang came up this ravine. It's sure the same trail that I picked up 'way back in the mesquite. That puncher ain't fur ahead of us *now*. But——"

"But what?" snapped Shandy.

"We want to keep our eyes peeled, boss. We're riding into a blind gulch. There ain't any way out of it except by this ravine, onless a galoot had wings to fly with."

"All the better. He won't be able to get away."

"Nope. But——"

The judge muttered an oath.

"You're wasting time, Long Bill."

"I reckon I don't figger it out, judge. That puncher has had heap time to find out that there's no way out of the gulch ahead, and, naterally, he would ride back and pick another way. But there's no back-tracks. He never came back this way onless he blanketed his trail as he came. That means that he's waiting for us ahead, with his six-gun handy."

"Camped, most likely," said Shandy. "The durned galoot told me he would camp three days in the buttes, to give me a chance of hunting him if I wanted. He's camped in the gulch ahead."

"If he's camped, we'll soon rouse him out, judge. But more like he's behind a rock with a six-gun in his grip."

"And what's the matter if he is?" snarled the judge. "I've picked out five of the toughest gunmen in Butte to ride this trail, and that puncher won't have a dog's chance. You're not scared of a cow-puncher with a six-gun in his fist?"

"Nope! But you allow he shot a gun out of your hand, judge, so he's handy with his shooter," said Long Bill. "We're sure going to shoot up that puncher, judge, whoever he is; but I guess we want to keep our eyes peeled if he's waiting for us in the gulch."

"Keep your eyes peeled, then, but come on!" said Judge Shandy. "We've been riding his trail most of the day and now we've run him down where he can't get away. I tell you, I wouldn't let that puncher ride safe out of the butte country for a thousand dollars. He beat me in a deal, he shot a gun out of my fist, and he defied *me* to follow him into the buttes. I tell you, I'll get him if I have to ride all the way to New Mexico on his trail."

Long Bill grinned.

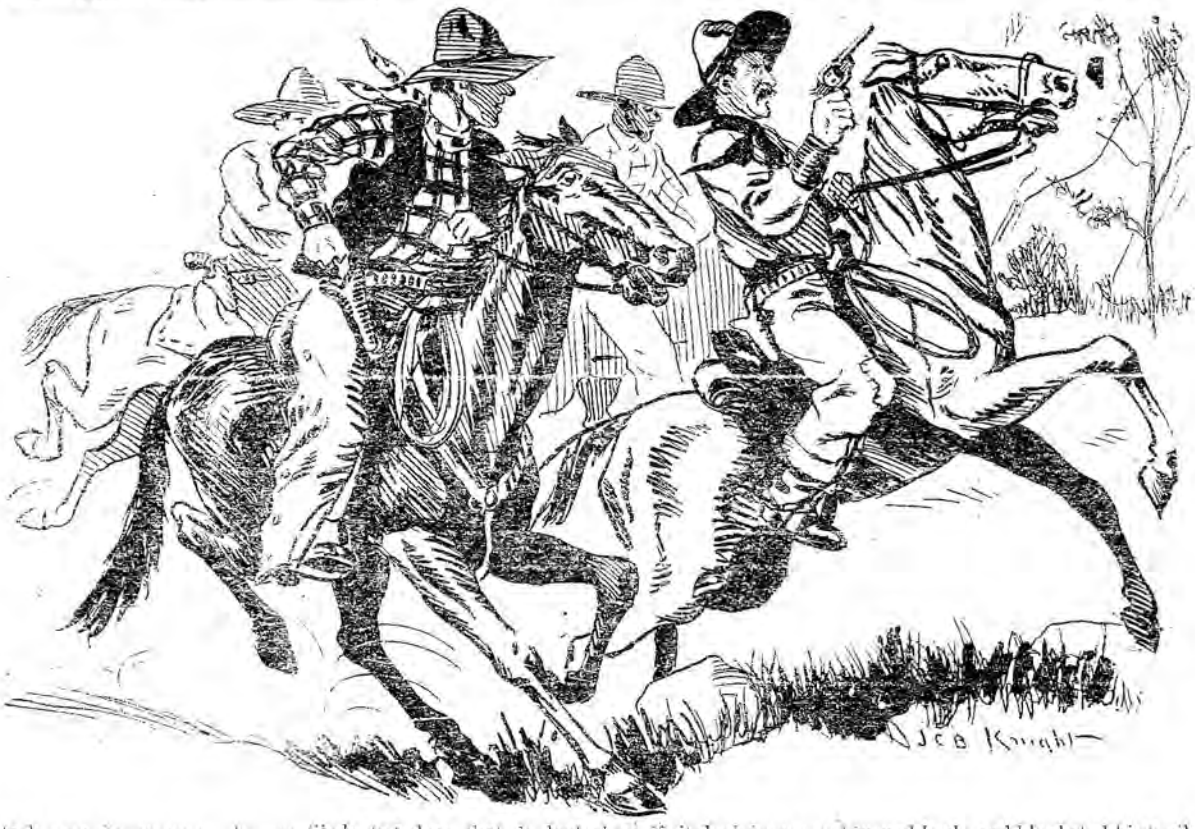
"You sure won't have to ride so far as that, judge. A quarter mile ahead of us, nothing but a bird could get fartner. Onless he came back *this* way and blinded his trail, we've got him cornered."

"Come on!"

The judge rode on again, and the gunmen followed.

They had their guns in their hands now, and their eyes watchful on all sides as they rode.

Before them the trail of the Rio Kid's mustang ran, and not a single back-track was to be seen. All the signs indicated that the puncher had ridden through that ravine into the locked gulch ahead and stayed there. If he had camped, unknowing that foes were on his trail, the task of the gang of gunmen from Butte was easy. If he knew that they were after him, and had turned at bay among the rocks, the



task was not so easy. It was likely to prove dangerous if the puncher knew how to handle his gun. Dangerous enough to have scared even that rough gang into flight had they known that the puncher they were following was the Rio Kid.

From the thicket high above, the Kid watched them winding down the ravine, till they disappeared into the gulch beyond.

He smiled.

Leaving his cover, the Rio Kid swung himself down the steep side of the ravine, from rock to rock, with the activity of a mountain goat. In a few minutes he stood in the trail where the horsemen had passed. Ahead, among the rocks, he could hear the clink of hoofs, but the riders from Butte were out of his sight—and he was out of theirs.

"I guess those galoots won't get out so easy as they got in," the Rio Kid said to himself.

He glanced round him, and picked out the narrowest throat of the ravine. There he settled down behind a great, rugged boulder, between which and the steep wall of the ravine, was a narrow crevice, through which he could watch the way the riders had taken. Lying behind the boulder, watching through the crevice, with his six-gun in his hand, the Rio Kid waited patiently.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Trapped!

JUDGE SHANDY swore savagely.

In the locked gulch in the heart of the hills, the gunmen had halted, at a loss.

Long Bill was on foot now, searching for sign. The other ruffians sat their horses and waited. The trail of the Kid's mustang, which had guided the man-hunters so far into the very heart of the desolate hills, had failed. Right up to that point the trail was clear—so clear that it looked as if it had been purposely left as a guide. And there it stopped suddenly, as if the puncher and his mustang had flown into the air from that spot. The judge was angry and puzzled, but Long Bill was figuring out what had happened.

Shandy had spent most of his life in the butte country—called "butte" because of the range of rocky hills covering it on all points of the compass—but he knew little of the trails. He was a man of the office and the lighted street. In his office in the town of Butte, Judge Shandy, the moneylender, usurer, and skinflint, was a powerful man, little liked, and greatly feared. But in the wilderness of the rocky buttes he was little better than a tenderfoot.

His followers—gunmen accustomed to loafing about the saloons of Butte—were little more, with the exception of Long Bill, whom the judge had selected for his knowledge of trailing, to track down the puncher in the buttes. The whole gang were perplexed, with the exception of the long-limbed ruffian now examining the sign.

"Well, what do you make of it?" demanded the judge at last, as Long Bill rose from his minute examination of the sign left by the puncher.

"I guess we've been played for suckers, judge," answered Long Bill. "That puncher, whoever he is, knows his way about. He wanted to get us landed in this locked gulch, and, by gum, he's done it!"

"What the Moses do you mean?" snarled Judge Shandy.

"The feller rode on as fur as this, and turned back," said Long Bill, with a grunt.

"Can it, Bill," said one of the gang. "There ain't a single back-track all the way."

"I guess you know more about shifting fire-water than tracking a puncher in the buttes, Jake Peters," grunted Long Bill. "I tell you he stopped hyer, and turned back, and blanketed his trail. 'Cause why, there ain't any other way out of it, nohow. Hyer his tracks stop, and I sure reckon he never flew up into the air. He turned back hyer and rode out by the ravine, and blinded his trail arter, like the Injuns do. He left an easy trail for us to foller into this gulch, but he never left a sign of his back-track. He's sure a good man on the trail, that puncher is, whoever he may be."

"And where is he now?" snapped the judge.

Long Bill shrugged his shoulders.

"Ask me some more," he said. "He got out of hyer afore we came up, and I guess he may have lit out in any direction. We've got to get back through the ravine yonder into the open, and I guess I'll pick up his sign again sooner or later, if——"

"If what?"

Long Bill was staring back at the narrow ravine, where it opened into the locked gulch. Like a narrow corridor it ran between high rocky walls.

"If he lets us get out," he answered. "He's fooled us into getting into this pesky corner, and if he's looking for a scrap he's got us fair and square. In that narrow way yonder one man who knows how to handle a gun could hold up fifty."

"Follow me!" snarled Judge Shandy.

He wheeled his horse, and rode back towards the ravine, the only outlet from the locked gulch.

The gunmen followed him, their faces serious now.

If Long Bill knew what he was talking about, the puncher they were tracking had deliberately tricked them into that lonely recess in the buttes, and if he was barring their way out by the ravine their situation was a perilous one. The judge's opinion was that the puncher had tricked them merely to gain time for flight, and he rode back into the narrow ravine at a gallop.

Bang!

AMBUSHED! Leading the way, the judge rode into the narrow ravine at a gallop. Bang! From among the rocks came the sudden report of a revolver, and a bullet tore the hat from Judge Shandy's head. "Halt, you 'uns!" came the Kid's voice, and the gunmen dragged in their horses in ludicrous haste. (*See Chapter 2.*)

From among the rocks came the sudden report of a .45 Colt. The bullet tore the hat from the head of Judge Shandy and dropped it behind him. A voice rang out after the shot:

"Halt, you 'uns!"

The judge reined in his startled horse. The gunmen dragged at their reins with almost ludicrous haste.

They knew now what had happened.

The puncher was in the ravine by which they had entered the locked gulch, and he had cut off their retreat. To ride through that narrow way, in the face of a six-gun, was to ask for destruction.

"I guess that galoot has got us beat!" said Long Bill coolly.

The judge gritted his teeth.

"Keep clear, you 'uns!" rang out the mocking voice of the puncher hidden among the rocks of the ravine. "The first who comes a yard nearer drops in his tracks!"

"Let up, feller!" called out Long Bill. "You hold the cards."

"I guess so," chuckled the Rio Kid.

Judge Shandy clenched his hands.

"You dog-goned puncher," he snarled, "I'll never let up on you till I see you swinging from a branch!"

The Rio Kid laughed.

"That's tall talk, judge, when my six-gun is looking at you this very minute," he said. "Get off your horse."

The judge did not stir.

"You better, judge," whispered Long Bill. "The galoot can sure drop you where you sit."

"Never!"

The judge glared into the rocky ravine. Not a sign was to be seen of the puncher, only his voice told that he was there. But the whole group of horsemen were exposed to his aim, and they knew it; and every man sat his horse like a stone image, fearing to draw a shot by stirring. The bullet that had carried off the judge's hat could just as easily have been driven through his head, or any head there. The whole gang had been trapped, and were at the mercy of the man they had been trailing.

The Kid's voice drawled on cheerily:

"Light down, judge; I'm telling you."

Judge Shandy set his teeth and dragged round his horse to gallop back into the gulch.

Bang!

There was a sharp cry from Shandy, and he dropped like a log from the back of his horse. The gunmen stared at him as he crashed helplessly on the rocky ground and lay there—still!

"I reckon the judge has got his." The Rio Kid's voice rang out sharp with menace. "You 'uns want any? say!"

"Let up, puncher," gasped Jake Peters—"let up! We ain't asking for any trouble."

"Get off your critters."

The five gunmen dismounted. They hardly glanced now at the still form of the judge, stretched on the ground. The judge's horse galloped on through the ravine, passing the hidden cover of the puncher and clattering on to the open valleys beyond.

The Rio Kid, kneeling behind the boulder, watching the gang through the crevice, grinned. Through the crevice his six-gun was aimed, and he could have shot down the whole gang with ease, long before they could have rushed his cover, or retreated into the gulch behind them. The Kid had laid his plans well for dealing with the gang of gunmen from Butte.

"That's better," called out the Kid. "Now drive on your cayuses. I guess you can get back to Butte hoofing it, fellers."

"Say, pard——"

"I guess that's enough chinwag. I'm waiting, and I'm sure getting tired of holding this gun."

"You've got us, feller," said Long Bill; and he struck his horse and sent the animal galloping up the ravine.

The other horses followed.

"Now drop your guns."

The five ruffians drew the revolvers from their belts. They did not think of seeking to use them. They stood in the open, under cover of a gun that was hidden, but which they knew bore full upon them. Their weapons clattered to the ground.

"You 'uns sure know how to do as you're told," chuckled the Rio Kid. "I guess I'm through with you. You can beat it, fellers. Get back into the gulch, and don't come this way again before sundown. I'm shooting at sight next time I see you. You get me?"

"It's your say-so, puncher," said Long Bill philosophically. "I reckon we'll carry the judge away with us."

"I reckon you'll leave him right there," rapped out the Kid. "I want the judge, and I don't want you. Get!"

"But look here, feller——"

Crack!

A bullet tore a strip of skin from Long Bill's ear. He gave a yell, and started back down the ravine at a run. His comrades went after him helter-skelter. That hint was enough.

The Rio Kid's laugh followed them.

In a couple of minutes the gang of gunmen, dismounted and disarmed, were tramping out of the ravine into the locked gulch, leaving Judge Shandy lying where he had fallen, on the rocks.

"I sure reckon this is my game!" chuckled the Rio Kid; and he came out of his cover at last.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Prisoner!

THE judge opened his eyes.

He stared round him wildly.

His head was aching, and he strove to put his hand to it, and made the discovery that his hands were bound to his belt.

He was lying on a blanket on a bed of sassafras, and his dazed eyes, as they stared round, saw only walls of rock. His hands were bound, and his feet were shackled with a trail-rope. He was a prisoner, that was clear to him, dizzy as he was. He lay in a cave, with rugged, rocky walls, and a wide opening through which he could see the stars glinting in a sky of deep dark blue.

He was alone in the cave.

Of what had happened since the puncher's bullet had struck him down, the judge knew nothing. Many hours had passed, he knew that, since it was now night. He was a prisoner—evidently in the hands of the puncher he had trailed; but the puncher was not to be seen.

The judge sank back on his blanket with a groan.

For a long time he lay motionless, but after a while he stirred again, and began to struggle with the rope that held him. He struggled in vain, and gave it up at last. He had been tied with care and skill: the bonds caused him no discomfort, but they were as secure as iron shackles. He was helpless, and he soon realised it. He lay down on the blanket again and waited for his enemy to appear—and at last he slept, undisturbed by a voice or a footstep.

When he opened his eyes again, the sun was glimmering in at the mouth of the cave. The judge sat up and looked round. It was high morning, the sun blazing in a cloudless sky. He found that he could get upon his feet and move about within a radius of a couple of yards: the trail-rope, knotted to a peg driven in the ground, prevented him from moving further. He could not reach the opening of the cave, but he could stand and look out, and he realised at once that he was high up in the buttes. From the cave, hill and valley stretched before him like a panorama, and far in the distance, he saw a winding river on the green plains beyond the buttes, and a collection of buildings tiny in the distance. And he realised, with a start, that it was the town of Butte that he was staring at—visible in the clear air, but many a long mile away.

There was a step in the mouth of the cave, and a handsome young puncher stood there, smiling at the judge.

"Morning, feller," said the Rio Kid cheerily.

Judge Shandy gave him a black look.

"You!" he said, between his teeth.

"Nobody else," smiled the Rio Kid. "I reckon you're fixed up hyer comfortable, judge. Not quite like your house in Buttes, perhaps—but safe—quite safe, judge."

He laughed lightly.

"You want to know where your gunmen are? I guess they hoofed it home to Butte last night, and I sure opine they were tired when they got there. Their cayues are wandering somewhere in the buttes—along with yours, judge.

And you're here—you're my guest, judge. You're here for a quiet time, feller. Nobody will nose you out up here, at the top of the buttes—I guess we're over a thousand feet up, and I've sure blanketed the trail we came by. You let me know when you get tired of your quarters."

"What does this mean?" hissed Shandy. "You shot me down——"

"I guess I only creased you, judge, same as I used to crease ornery steers on the ranch," grinned the Rio Kid. "Jest a crease along the top of your cabeza, judge—it stunned you and put you to sleep, and you was sure sleeping sound when I brought you here. Don't you be scared that I'm going to shoot you up. You're sure too valuable."

"You can't keep me here long," hissed Shandy.

"You opine not?" asked the Rio Kid. "Why, feller, I played your gang of gunmen like a set of suckers, specially to rope you in. That was all I wanted—jest to rope you in, judge."

The Rio Kid sat on a boulder at the mouth of the cave, and fixed his eyes on Judge Shandy.

He was still smiling, but there was a merciless gleam in his eyes.

"You listen to me, feller," he said quietly. "You're a hard-fisted man, judge, and there's a heap folk in Butte would be glad to hear that you'd gone up the flume. You've grown rich by money-lending, and taking up mortgages and foreclosures, and ruining men who was working while you sat in your office like a spider getting them into your meshes. You're a bad egg, judge—bad through and through. What made you go gunning after me?"

The Kid paused a moment.

"You had a galoot in your clutches and I lent him the dollars to get clear of you, and that sure made you mad with me," said the Kid. "You pulled a gun on me on the trail, and I shot it out of your fist. You couldn't let up at that. You sure had to get a gang of gunmen and follow me into the buttes, and you'd have shot me up if I hadn't been too wide for you, judge. You'd have left me for the buzzards."

"I'll leave you for the buzzards yet, you durned puncher," said Shandy, between his teeth. "Ask any galoot in Butte, and he'll tell you that Judge Shandy ain't the man to be beat up by a cowpuncher."

"You're beat by me, judge," said the Rio Kid coolly. "You're sure beat. You're a hard man, judge, and a hard grinder, and now, by the holy smoke, you'll be ground hard. You can chew on that."

"You figure on keeping me hyer?"

"You've said it," assented the Kid.

"I guess I'll be searched for and found, and that'll mean ten years in the pen for you, puncher, if you ain't shot up."

"I reckon they can search from now till the cows come home, and they won't find you," grinned the Kid. "I'm sure taking the chance of it, anyhow. Bless your little heart, judge, I had all this cut and dried. I trapped your gang down in the gulches, jest for this reason—because I had this little shebang all ready for you, judge. And you walked into the trap like a good little man—you was so keen to get me."

And the Kid laughed heartily.

Judge Shandy's eyes glittered.

"And if you keep me here, what then? Do you figure on getting a ransom out of me?"

"I'm not a Mexican brigand to hold a galoot to ransom, judge."

"Then, what?"

"Don't I keep on telling you you're my guest here?" said the Kid banteringly. "I'm keeping you for the pleasure of your company. Besides, I'm selling you food."

"Selling me food?" repeated the judge.

"Yep—if you want any."

It was long past the judge's usual hour of breakfast. In the keen, sharp air of the high buttes, Judge Shandy was already hungry. He stared hard and savagely at the Kid.

"If you keep me a prisoner, dog-gone you, you'll have to feed me," he snarled.

"Not unless I choose," reminded the Kid. "It's my say-so, judge—you don't amount to shucks hyer. You ain't in your office in the Main Street of Butte now, talking to a settler that owes you money. If you want a can of bully beef and a frijole for your breakfast, judge, you've only got to say the word and pay the figure. Prices are high in this hotel—higher'n the interest you charge on a loan, you durned money-grabber. Breakfast costs you a thousand dollars."

"What?" yelled the judge.

"Every meal you take here will cost you the same," drawled the Rio Kid. "No extra charge for bringing in the meals."

"You gol-darned hobo!" yelled Shandy. "I'll starve first!"

The Kid nodded.

"You're free to do that," he agreed. "It's sure a free country, and any galoot who wants to starve can sure do it. Starve, then."

And the Rio Kid lounged away from the mouth of the cave, leaving Judge Shandy grinding his teeth with rage.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The Ransom!

THE day passed, in the cave in the high hills, every minute on leaden wings.

Judge Shandy raved and cursed and raved again, hoping every moment to hear the sounds of rescue, yet knowing in his heart that there would be no rescue. Only too well he knew that this puncher—whose name even he did not know—had taken every care. He was miles, he knew, from the gulch where his gang of gunmen had been trapped—the route by which he had been brought lay over mile on mile of barren, trackless rock. The keenest trailers in Texas might hunt for him for weeks without finding a clue to his hiding-place. He knew it only too well. And who, after all, was to hunt for him? He had hired a gang of gunmen to ride down the puncher and "shoot him up," but they were not likely to range the buttes in search of him. The sheriff of Butte and his men might search for a time, but they were not likely to spend days in searching for the best-hated man in the town. The judge was a hard man, a hard-fisted and hard-hearted man, and he had chosen rather to be feared than liked; but those who feared him were little likely to trouble their heads about his disappearance. It was forced into his mind that he was a prisoner without hope: his fate utterly dependent on the will of the unknown puncher—and from that puncher, what had he to expect? He had trailed the puncher down to take his life, fiercely, lawlessly, ruthlessly. He knew that he had no mercy to expect, and that he deserved none.

The judge was a hard man—stern to inflict, and stubborn to endure. In the keen air of the buttes hunger assailed him fiercely. But he would not yield: he was determined not to yield. All through the weary day he raved and cursed, and tramped about the rocky cave at the end of his tether, tethered

like a beast in a cage. But he would not call out—he would give no sign of surrender. The day passed, and night fell once more on the buttes. Far away, across the plains, he could see the twinkling lights come out one by one in the town of Butte—the town where he was a power, the town where he had sat in his office, like a spider in his web, spinning meshes for his fellowmen. The twinkling lights mocked him from afar.

Hunger gnawed him; but he called out no word to recall the puncher to the cave. Late in the night he threw himself on the bed of sassafras, and tried to sleep. He tossed there fitfully till morning came, and the light of a new sunny day streamed down on the buttes.

No sign, no sound had come from the puncher; and a terrible fear came into Shandy's heart that the man was gone, had gone and left him to perish there, caged in the cave. His fierce anger and pride were quelled at last, and he called; and as there came no answer, he shouted, and shouted again. Only the echoing of his voice among the rocks answered him. The puncher was gone—but would he return?

It was high noon when the Rio Kid looked into the cave again. He gave the white-face, furious man a cheery nod.

"I reckon I've been away a time, judge," he remarked. "Did you want me, feller?"

The judge panted.

"Give me food."

"You pay the figure?" smiled the Kid.

"Yes!" groaned Shandy. "Anything—anything you like! Only give me food."

"You haven't got the dollars in your rags, I guess?"

"No."

"Then you want to sign a draft on the bank in Butte. I guess I'll let loose one of your fins to write it out. I've got the things here you'll want. Make it all square, judge; if the draft ain't paid I guess I'm riding on the western trail, and I shan't come back here. If you play any gun-game with that draft, judge, you'll never play another!" said the Rio Kid grimly.

But Judge Shandy was past trickery now. For his own sake he hoped fervently that the puncher would have no difficulty in collecting the money on the draft.

His right arm was released, and he wrote out the draft. The Kid examined it carefully, and put it in his belt. Then he tossed the judge a tin of bully beef and a tough frijole, and handed him a can of water. The judge devoured the food like a famished animal, the Kid watching him coolly. When the meal was over the judge's arm was bound again, and the Kid left him.

From somewhere in the distance the judge heard the sound of hoof-beats, the puncher had his mustang at hand. The prisoner of the cave threw himself upon his rough bed and groaned.

The hot day wore itself away.

Night came once more.

The judge called, and called again; but there was no answer. The puncher, he figured out, had gone down to Butte, and was in no hurry to return. Whether he had gone to Butte or not, the puncher did not reappear all through the long, weary night. The judge was tormented by fears—fears that the draft had not been paid and that the puncher had made good his threat to ride away and abandon him; fears that the puncher might have fallen in with the gunmen and been "shot up," That was what Judge Shandy had planned for him; but he was in mortal dread now lest his plans should have taken effect.

When dawn came up once more over the buttes the judge watched it with haggard, sunken eyes.

The hardest man in Butte was changed now. He lay on his rough bed in misery when the Rio Kid looked into the cave once more, with the rising sun behind him.

"Morning, feller!" said the Kid.

"Give me food!"

The judge was almost whimpering. The hardest man in Butte was broken now.

"You've got another thousand dollars to spend, judge?" asked the Kid coolly.

"Anything!"

"I guess the folks in Butte would hardly know you now, judge; you've grown so polite and obliging," said the Kid.

"Let me out of this," said the judge hoarsely. "You've got me beat—you've got me broke! Name your figure, and let me loose!"

The Kid regarded him coolly.

"Ten thousand is the figure," he answered.

The judge groaned.

"It's almost all I have!" he muttered.

"How did you get it, judge? Does it sure belong to you?" asked the Kid banteringly. "It's other men's money, judge, though you've banked it. But take your choice—I ain't in a hurry to ride out of the buttes. I'm for New Mexico when I ride out of hyer, but New Mexico can sure wait till you've made up your little mind, feller."

"I'm beat! Give me the pen."

"You've said it, judge," smiled the Kid. "Make it nine thousand dollars this time, and when it's clear you're a free man—and I sure hope the lesson will do you good."

The draft was written, and the Kid belted it. The judge was left with a free hand, and an ample supply of food and drink.

He ate and drank, and ate and drank again, as if he would never have his fill. The puncher was going; but he stepped into the cave again as the judge began to fumble with his bonds.

"Not yet, feller!" smiled the Kid.

And the judge's free hand was bound once more.

A little later he heard the clatter of a mustang's hoofs dying away into the silence of the buttes.

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Food and drink were within the prisoner's reach, and he could help himself, bound as he was. When the night came he slept.

With the morning the puncher did not return. The sun rose higher and higher, and he did not come. The judge groaned in anguish of spirit. The terrible thought haunted him that the puncher, now that he had obtained the ransom, had abandoned him to die. What better did he deserve at the hands of the man he had sought to hunt down to his death? The judge watched the golden sun rise higher and higher in the sky, till the heat of noon was blazing down on the plains and the buttes.

There was a footstep at last.

He turned his weary head to the mouth of the cave. But it was not the puncher that entered.

"Long Bill!" said the judge faintly.

"You're here, judge!" exclaimed the gunman.

"Let me loose."

Long Bill came across the cave. His keen bowie-knife glided over Judge Shandy's bonds, and he was a free man. He staggered to his feet and sank down on a boulder.

"How did you find me?" muttered the judge at last.

"I reckon that puncher put me wise," said Long Bill. "He held me up with a gun this morning, and I guessed who he was—though I hadn't set eyes on him afore. I sure allowed that it was the long trail for me; but he only wanted to chew the rag. He told me where to find you, and allowed you'd be glad to see me up hyer in the buttes, judge. I reckon I've been all the morning getting hyer. Say, you look as if you'd had a bully time, judge."

The gunman fumbled in his belt.

"He sure handed me a billy-doo for you, judge, and I reckon I've got it hyer. Hyer it is."

The judge took the letter, and unfolded it. His haggard eyes ran over the pencilled lines. Then the paper fluttered from his hand, and the gunman picked it up and glanced at it.

"Oh, holy smoke!" ejaculated Long Bill. "The Rio Kid! It was the Rio Kid we was trailing, judge. I reckon I ain't surprised that we slipped up on it, nohow. The Rio Kid is bad medicine, judge."

There was a grin on his rugged, bearded face as he looked at the Rio Kid's "billy-doo," as he called it, again.

The Kid's note was brief:

"I'm giving this to your bulldozer to bring to you, judge. Your dollars have gone to the hospital in St. Antone; your money's sure too dirty for me to touch. I told you you was my guest, judge, and you've had your fodder free. Follow my trail into New Mexico if you want to see the Rio Kid again."

"The Rio Kid!" muttered the judge.

He said no more; and uttered no word on the way down from the high buttes to the town. Whether that lesson had done the judge good, or whether it left him the hard-fisted rascal that it had found him, the Rio Kid never knew; he had left the buttes country far behind, and Judge Shandy was dismissed carelessly from his mind as he rode on the trail for New Mexico and the gold-mines.

THE END.

(There will be another stirring yarn of the Rio Kid next week, shortly, entitled: "THE CALL OF HIS RACE!")