THE LEADING BOYS' STORY PAPER

The POPULAR

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"THE SCHOOLBOY 'PUG'!"

Rousing School Tale inside!

A BOY OUTLAW IN PERIL!

The Rio Kid vows to bring the range rustlers to book, and when the Kid makes up his mind to do a thing, nothing short of a bullet will stop him from carrying out his word!

ROUNDING UP THE RUSTLERS

By RALPH REDWAY.

OUR ROARING WESTERN TALE, STARRING AN AMAZING CHARACTER—THE RIO KID—BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Camp of the Rustlers!

"CORRALLED!" murmured the Rio Kid.

A silver crescent of moon was rising over the Sierra Baja of New Mexico. It gleamed through clustering pines into a wide, deep canyon in the heart of the hills.

The canyon split the hills east and west, and on the southern side was a deep embayment—a vast hollow in the wall of cliff. Shut in on three sides by circling walls of cliffs, topped by nodding pines, the space covered an extent of a dozen acres. Where it was open to the canyon a deep and wide stream flowed, one of the head-waters of the Rio Bajo, rippling and murmuring on its way down to the plains. The Rio Kid, looking across the glimmering stream that was turned to silver by the rising moon, could see huts of pinewood, fenced corrals, and more cows than he could count. And the Kid grinned as he looked.

He was looking at the headquarters of Judson's gang, the rustlers of the Rio Bajo. He was looking, also, at the herd of cows that had been rustled from the Carson Ranch. Step by step, sign by sign, the Rio Kid had trailed the rustlers to their den, through the trackless wilds of the untrodden hills, and now he had reached his goal, or almost reached it. By barren rock and stony ways he had come; but across the stream where the rustlers had their camp was one of the fertile spots that were to be found in the recesses of the arid sierra. Watered by the stream, rich grass grew, dotted with clumps of cedars and pecans, with here and there a great ceiba spreading its mighty branches. Well had Scar-Face Judson chosen the spot for his camp, hidden in the very heart of the trackless hills, approached by a trail known only to the rustlers' gang—until the Rio Kid had found it. Two hundred head of cows were feeding in that pasture of the sierra—cows that had been driven from the Carson ranges by a hidden trail. Among the huts the Kid could see figures moving.

Keeping in cover by the bank of the stream, the Kid watched the camp for long minutes. The spot was well chosen for defence, as well as for pasture and concealment. Attack could only come across the stream that barred in the rustlers' camp, and it had to come in the open, under fire from the rustlers' rifles. To rush that camp was, the Kid knew, a tough proposition, even for a strong force. But if attack on the camp was difficult, escape for the rustlers was impossible, so long as the northern bank of the stream was held by their enemies. The Kid was right when he pronounced that the ranch raiders were "corralled."

The Rio Kid, carefully in cover, crept back the way he had come. Beyond a jutting cliff, where the winding canyon made a bend, waited Buck Wilson and ten punchers of the Carson Ranch. They were waiting, out of sight of the rustlers' camp, till the Kid came back to report.

"I guess it's O.K., fellers," said the Kid cheerily. "The camp's jest ahead, and I guess the scallywags is to home. We've got them cinched—cows and all. But I reckon if they'd seen us coming they could have picked us off like so many prairie rabbits."

"They ain't seen us coming," said Buck.

"They sure ain't!" agreed the Kid. "We got the man on watch down below, and I sure gave that galoot in the pines a sockdolager from my butt that will keep him asleep till morning. If there'd been a shot fired I reckon they'd have made some vacancies in this bunch. Now we've got them dead to rights—but you'll sure want a bigger crowd than this to handle them, Buck."

"We're a dozen," grunted Laramie Bill. "We sure can handle a crowd of cow-thieves, Kid."

"I guess they're more'n a dozen, and they've got good cover," said the Kid. "You wait till you see how they're fixed, feller."

"We ain't trailed them a whole day to let up at the finish!" said Buck Wilson. "We're sure going to wipe out that gang, Kid, now we've got on to their hiding-place."

"Wipe out nothing!" said the Kid. "I tell you you want a bigger bunch than this, and you'll have to send back to the ranch for every man they can spare. But you can sure keep them from making a break till you've got the men to handle them, and that's good enough."

And the Kid, in a few words, explained the position of the raiders' camp. Buck listened and nodded.

"We've got them cinched," he said. "We can keep them penned in their camp till we get all the help we want. Stake the hosses here, you-uns, and come on. Keep in cover—Judson and his gang will shoot to kill when they see hide or hair of us. This means a long stretch in the pen for all the gang that ain't strung up. Watch out!"

Leaving the tethered horses, the Carson bunch trod forward on foot, round the bend of the winding canyon.

Along the bank of the stream were trees and rocks that afforded plenty of cover.

Buck Wilson grinned with satisfaction as he noted the position of the camp.

Attack needed all the force that the ranchers could draw upon; but to keep the rustlers penned in their camp, to prevent them from making a break to escape, was easy for the dozen punchers who had trailed them down.

Buck muttered orders, and the bunch spread out along the bank of the stream, rifle in hand, keeping in cover of rock and boulder and bush. There was no sign or sound of alarm from Judson's gang. Two men had been on the watch; one far down in the lower canyon, the other in a bunch of pines only a few hundred yards away. Both of them were silent—one bound and gagged, the other stunned by the Rio Kid's butt. Had the alarm been given, there were a dozen points where the advance up the canyon could have been stopped by a handful of riflemen. But no alarm had been given—the Rio Kid had taken care of that. And now it was too late—the punchers had passed the last danger-point, and their position was as good as that of the rustlers—in cover of rock and bush, with the wide stream flowing between the two hostile parties.

"We've got the scallywags!" grinned Buck. "We've got Judson's gang where we want 'em. Kid, I reckon your mustang is the fastest cayuse in the bunch——"

"He sure is!" assented the Kid.

"Ride back to the ranch hell for leather and give the news to Colonel Carson. Tell him how we're fixed, and put him wise. I reckon he won't lose time in bringing up every man that can be spared from the ranges. Hit the trail, feller, pronto."

Bang!

The report of a rifle awoke a thousand echoes in the canyon, thundering back from rock and pine.

A bullet whizzed within a foot of Buck's Stetson hat as he dodged closer into cover.

"I reckon they seen us!" he remarked coolly.

The Kid peered from behind the rock.

The rustlers were in alarm at last. The Kid caught a glimpse of a powerful man with a thick beard and a deep scar on his cheek. It was Scar-Face Judson, the chief of the rustlers of the Rio Bajo. Among the huts back at the rocky wall men were running and shouting. Shot after shot followed the first report.

Crack, crack, crack! rang along the stream. The bunch were firing on the camp now across the water. Bullets searched into the huts and whizzed by running, dodging figures.

"I guess the circus is jest beginning," said Buck. "We've got them dead to rights if they try to cross the creek—jest as they've got us if we rush them. Tell the colonel that we can hold them for a month of Sundays, Kid, and that if he wants to corral Judson's gang to the last cow-thief, he's only got to bring up twenty punchers."

"You bet!" said the Kid.

He returned to the spot where the horses were picketed, mounted the black-muzzled mustang, and rode away down the hills. Behind him, as he rode, he could hear the thunderous echoes of incessant rifle-fire. But the sounds died away in silence at last far behind, and the Kid rode under the moonlight in silence, save for the clatter of the mustang's hoofs on the rocky earth.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Saddle Up!

COLONEL CARSON stood in the doorway of the rancho, staring out across the dim plains that glimmered in the crescent of moon. The rancher's face was anxious, as he listened to the sound of galloping far out on the plains, that told of the coming of a single horseman. Since that day, the foreman of the ranch and his men had been out on the hunt for the rustlers, with the Rio Kid in the bunch. Two or three punchers had come in, driving cows that had been rounded up on the prairie, lost from the herd the rustlers had driven the night before. They brought the news that Buck Wilson and the bunch had gone into the hills, and since then there had been no news. The rancher's anxiety was keen. Hunting for the rustlers in the hills, without a trail, was like hunting for a needle on a haystack, and there was danger of ambush, and of pot-shooting from cover. It was a relief to the rancher to hear a horseman galloping back to the ranch, and he hoped that it meant news of the bunch, but he was not at all sure that it would be good news.

Gallop, gallop!

From afar, in the silence of the night, came the echoing thud of rapid hoofs. Outside the bunkhouse, of which the windows shone with light, a dozen punchers stood in a group, watching for the rider to appear from the shadows of the prairie.

Gallop, gallop!

But the rider was still far away, as yet, hidden in the dimness of the moonlight and the waving grass.

There was a step beside the colonel, and Steve Carson joined him. The rancher's nephew was smoking a cigarette. There was a lurking grin on his face, which died away as the rancher turned to him.

"I guess it's news, Steve," said the colonel. "I reckon that will be a man that Buck's sent back with news."

"News that they can't find a trail, I guess," said Steve.

The rancher gnawed his grey moustache.

"More likely than not, I reckon," he admitted. "Twenty times or more that gang have run off cows from the ranges, and every time they've blanketed their trail, somehow, and we've had to give it up. But Santa Fe Sam brought in word that Buck had gone into the hills with the bunch. That looks as if he may have picked up some sign."

Steve shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess not!" he said. "The rustlers have never left sign before, and they ain't likely to begin now. Unless you figure that that kid puncher from Texas knows more than the whole bunch about trailing!" he added, with a sneer. "I guess it's a sure cinch that that Texas galoot is a rustler himself."

"He's proved that he's no rustler, Steve," said the rancher sharply. "I guess you want to forget your trouble with him. He's as good a man as any in the bunch."

Steve Carson set his teeth hard, and made no rejoinder. He was not likely to forget his enmity to the Rio Kid. He suspected—more than suspected—that the Kid knew he was in league with the rustlers. The colonel gave him a sharp glance.

"You're prejudiced against that puncher, Steve. He picked up sign of a man with a limp on the trail of the stolen cows, and told the outfit. He'd never seen you, and never knew you had a limp. You can't reckon that he figured you were in cahoots with the rustlers—you, my nephew, and a Carson! You acted as if he accused you."

"I reckon that was in his mind," growled Steve.

"Nothing of the kind—though he might sure have fancied so, when you pulled on him," snapped the colonel. "You sure ain't the only rider in New Mexico that's had his leg hurt in a stampede, Steve, and Kid Carfax had never seen you when he told the outfit what he had picked up on the trail."

There was a shout from the bunkhouse.

"That's the Kid coming, boss!"

The colonel stared out into the moonlight, at the dim figure of a horseman that was now in view in the moonlight. He recognised the Rio Kid. Steve recognised him, also, and his hand dropped on the gun in his belt.

Colonel Carson grasped his arm.

"Drop that, Steve! You draw on that puncher, and you'll have to deal with me!"

Steve relinquished his gun.

"I reckon I'll meet up with him some other time," he said sullenly. "It's shooting between us two, I guess, but he will keep."

With a clatter of hoofs, the Rio Kid dashed up. He drew in his foaming mustang before the rancho, and leaped from the saddle. There was a rush of the punchers across from the bunkhouse to hear the news he brought. The Kid swept off his Stetson to the colonel, taking no heed of the sullen-faced Steve lounging at his side. But he had an eye on the rancher's nephew all the same, and had Steve risked his uncle's wrath, and pulled a gun, the Kid would not have been taken by surprise. But Steve Carson stood sullenly with his hands in his pockets, staring at the boy puncher from Texas, with a sneer on his lips.

"What's the news, Carfax?" called out the colonel eagerly.

"I guess it's good, boss."

"Where's Buck and the bunch?"

"In the sierra," answered the Kid.

"I guess they ain't picked up nary trail of the rustlers," said Santa Fe Sam.

The Kid laughed.

"That's where you miss your guess, feller," he answered. "Judson's gang have been trailed home, and Buck's got them cinched in a canyon in the hills—the whole gang of the ornery coyotes, and a big bunch of stolen cows along with them."

The colonel uttered an exclamation. It was echoed by his nephew, who started forward, his face white, his eyes burning, as he fixed them on the Kid.

"You lie!" shouted Steve Carson hoarsely. "You lie, you durned cow-thief from Texas. The bunch never picked up Judson's trail."

The Kid eyed him coolly.

"The news sure seems to have made you mighty sick, feller," he remarked. "And, I tell you, it's the goods—we've got them, whether you like it or not, Steve Carson. And, I reckon, if you give a Texas cowpuncher the lie, you galoot, you got to back it up with a gun."

The Kid's gun was out as he was speaking, his eyes blazing over it at the rancher's nephew. In another second, Steve would have drawn his Colt. But Colonel Carson strode between.

"Stop!" he thundered. "Steve, put up your gun! You, Carfax——"

"I guess I aint hunting trouble, boss," said the Kid cheerily, as he slid the six-gun back into the holster, still with a wary eye on the rancher's nephew, however. "But I sure never did take that sort of talk from any two-legged galoot alive."

"I reckon you're loco, Steve!" exclaimed the colonel angrily. "You pull that gun again, or shoot off your mouth like that, and you're done with this ranch for keeps."

The young man muttered sullenly under his breath. Colonel Carson turned to the Kid again.

"You've got it straight?" he asked.

"Sure!" smiled the Kid. "The bunch found out how them rustlers blanketed their trail, and followed them into the hills, and they've got the ornery coyotes corralled. Buck allows that he can hold them in their camp till the cows come home, and if you can hustle along with twenty men to help, you can sure make a clean sweep of the gang that's been rustling your ranges for three years on end."

The rancher's eys gleamed.

"That's sure good news," he said. "Which of the bunch was it picked up the lost trail that's never been picked up before?"

The Kid grinned.

"Put it down to little me," he answered. "I sure guess it was a galoot about my heft. But that ain't what's the matter with Hanner. I reckon we want to mount and ride, boss, and we shall hit the bunch in the hills by dawn."

"Sure! I'll give orders at once. Santa Fe Sam, call the boys together—rope in every man that can handle a gun."

"You bet, boss!"

The Rio Kid sat outside the bunkhouse, to stretch his legs, and get what rest he could before the bunch started. The cook brought him food and a can of steaming coffee. Men were saddling and bridling horses, looking to their guns; every man at the ranch was wildly excited and eager. From all quarters men were called in to join in the ride; and in a very short time twenty horse-

men paraded before the rancho. A man brought the colonel's horse; and another was held for Steve Carson. But the rancher's nephew had gone into the house, and the colonel looked round for him in vain.

"Steve!" he shouted.

The young man appeared in the doorway, sullen and scowling. The Kid, over his steaming coffee at the bunk-house, looked across at him as he came out to the group of horsemen. The Kid surely did not want Steve Carson to ride with the party. He knew, if no one else knew, that Steve was hand-in-glove with Scar-Face Judson and his gang, and the Kid did not want a traitor in the ranks. But it was useless to tell the rancher what he knew—Gilbert Carson never would or could have believed it. Neither was the Kid keen to tell him, knowing what a blow such news would be to the proud old rancher.

"Steve! You're riding with us?" exclaimed the colonel, bending his grey brows severely on his nephew.

"I reckon I've no hunch to ride with that fresh young cuss from Texas!" answered Steve sulkily.

"Are you going to hang back, when we've got the rustlers cinched at last?" exclaimed Colonel Carson. "Buck's sent us word that every man's wanted to handle them. Are you going to lie doggo while other men are facing the music?"

Steve Carson flushed red under the looks of the cowpunchers. But he still hesitated. His motive was not one that he could explain to his uncle, though the Kid understood it well enough. He was in league with the rustlers; the news that their secret camp in the sierra Baja had been discovered had come like a thunderbolt to him. To ride against the cow-thieves with whom he was in league was not what the rancher's nephew wanted.

"I guess we're ready, boss," said Santa Fe Sam.

"Mount your cayuse, Steve!" said Colonel Carson harshly. "Do you want the outfit to reckon that a Carson has got cold feet?"

"I'm ready."

Steve Carson mounted. The Rio Kid laid down the coffee-can, and walked across to his mustang. Led by the Kid, the bunch galloped away from the Carson ranch; and under the glimmer of the moonlight the thundering hoofs awoke the echoes of the prairie.

THE WHITE FLAG! Judson held up the flag of truce, and in cover behind the rocks, the Kid, and Buck Wilson pushed their guns forward, ready for treachery if it came. "I guess you've got us beat rancher!" said the leader of the rustlers. *(See Chapter 4.)*

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The End of the Trail!

THERE was a gleam of dawn in the east when the Carson outfit reached the hills and rode into the rocky draw. The Rio Kid was riding ahead, guiding the outfit; by his side rode the rancher. Behind them came the outfit, strung out irregularly. The Kid figured that Steve Carson might find a chance of missing the bunch and disappearing into the plains, during the ride to the hills; he could guess the feelings of the man who was forced to ride against the gang with whom he had been in league. But if Steve thought of making such a break he did not venture under the eyes of all the punchers.

Steve Carson was still with the party when they rode into the draw, and fell into a walk as the hoofs of the horses rang and echoed on hard rocks and loose stones. The Kid glanced round once or twice, and met the bitter eyes of the rancher's nephew.

From the draw they rode into the wild hills, trackless, barren, desolate in the rising light of day. But trackless as the way seemed, the Rio Kid was at no loss. Without a halt or a moment's hesitation, he led on, and the outfit followed.

It was not till they were in the canyon a mile below the rustlers' camp that the Kid found what he wanted—a chance of speaking to the rancher's nephew unheard by the rest. Steve was riding a little apart, when the Kid pulled to his side, and spoke in a low voice.

"You want to beat it!" he muttered. "I reckon if you was to let on that your cayuse had fallen lame, you'd get away with it."

Steve gave him a savage look.

"What do you mean?" he snarled. "What are you hinting at, you durned Texas cow-thief!"

The Kid's eyes glinted at the epithet; but he kept cool.

"Hintin' nothin'," he answered. "I reckon you're wise to it that I've sized you up. You're in cahoots with the rustlers——"

"You lie!" hissed Steve.

"I reckon I was trailing you the day you tried to shot me up on the prairie, and saw you with Scar-Face Judson," said the Kid.

Steve's face blanched.

But he gritted his teeth, and gave the Kid a glare of defiance.

"Tell my uncle that!" he sneered. "Do you figure that he'd believe you? More likely to drive a bullet through your heart for telling him!"

"I ain't got no hunch to tell the colonel," said the Kid quietly. "I guess he's a proud man, and a white man; and it would hurt him sore to know that one of his own blood was a spy, and a traitor and a partner to cow-thieves. I ain't spilling nothing to the colonel. But it's the straight goods, and you know it. You're in cahoots with the cattle-thieves; and you can't help them any now; and if you try to help them while I'm around, I'll sure drive a ball through your cabeza, like I would through a cougar's. Your best play is to drop out of the rookus and stand clear!"

Without waiting for a reply, the Kid moved aside, and rode to rejoin the colonel, who was pressing on up the rugged canyon ahead.

Steve Carson cast a bitter look after him; and his hand strayed to his gun. But he did not venture to draw it.

And, in spite of his hatred and bitterness, he knew that the Kid had given him good advice. His best play was to ride clear, if he could. And the Kid had told him how.

Steve pulled in his horse and dismounted. Santa Fe Sam, riding on from behind, called to him:

"What's wrong with the cayuse, Steve?"

"I guess he's gone lame," answered Steve. "One of them durned loose donicks, I reckon."

"Sho!" said Sam; and he rode on past the rancher's nephew, grinning.

The hot blood flooded Steve Carson's face. The puncher evidently figured that he was making a pretext to keep.

clear of the fight that was coming. From one or two other punchers, as they passed, Steve received glances that made his cheeks burn. But he remained beside his horse, making a pretence of examining the animal's hoof, till the colonel rode back.

"What's the trouble, Steve?"

"Cayuse gone lame," muttered the young man. "I guess I'll foller on, hoofing it."

"Hyer, one of you punchers give my nephew his horse!" called out the colonel.

Santa Fe Sam unwillingly wheeled and dismounted, and gave Steve his broncho. The rancher's nephew mounted it and rode on with his uncle. There was no evasion for him now, unless he openly disregarded the rancher and rode away; and that he did not care to do. Santa Fe Sam examined the horse's hoofs with a grim face, and then grinned, and mounted, and rode after the outfit up the canyon.

"I guess you was mistaken about this hyer cayuse, Steve!" he grinned. "He ain't lame, not worth a cent, he ain't!"

The rancher's nephew affected not to hear. He rode on with the outfit, and they came to the last bend of the canyon below the rustlers' camp. There they found Buck Wilson waiting for them; the clatter of hoofs had warned the foreman that they were coming.

"You've got them cornered, Buck?" called out the colonel eagerly.

"We sure have!" chuckled Buck. "Got them where we want 'em, boss. We've been burning a lot of powder, but I reckon there ain't much harm done yet on either side. Oh gum! I never was so glad to see you boys—we're enough now to wipe out all the rustlers in New Mexico."

Crack, crack, crack, crack! came ringing down the canyon. Cowmen and rustlers were still firing at one another across the stream; though as the cover on both sides was good, most of the lead was wasted. But with the new day and the reinforcements from the ranch matters were to take a more decided turn.

The colonel's party dismounted and tethered their horses, and advanced on foot round the bend of the winding canyon. This brought them within sight of the rustlers' encampment across the stream, and they dropped into cover as they advanced. The Rio Kid gave Steve Carson a warning look.

Whether the traitor was figuring on helping his cornered confederates, the Kid could not tell. But he knew that he, at least, was certain of a shot from cover if Steve Carson had a chance to draw a bead on him unseen. And the Kid was grimly resolved that at the first sign of treachery he would shoot the traitor dead in his tracks.

Colonel Carson stood in a bunch of pecans, scanning the position of the rustlers' camp. The whole outfit were joining in the fire now, and more than thirty repeating rifles sent a stream of bullets searching into the cover of the dozen or so rustlers, who were firing back. But there was cover in plenty in the rock-walled enclosure that formed the camp, and so far, only two or three of the rustlers had been wounded. But the heavy fire that was now poured upon them warned the rustlers that they had a strong force to deal with, and Scar-Face Judson and every member of his gang knew that the game was up, however long they might hold out. And as the colonel watched, a man with a scarred face, holding a white rag tied to the muzzle of a rifle for a flag of truce, came out of cover and advanced towards the stream. And the firing died away as Scar-Face Judson came forward to "talk turkey."

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The Traitor Pays!

COLONEL CARSON stepped out into the open, facing the rustler across the stream. He eyed the scarred cow-thief with a grim face. Judson held up the flag of truce, the butt of the rifle resting on a rock. In cover, close behind the colonel, was the Rio Kid, with Buck Wilson beside him, both with guns ready to handle if there was trickery.

"I guess you've got us beat, rancher," said Judson. "I guess we're ready to talk turkey. I sure want to know the name of the galoot who squealed on us and led you here. But he will keep."

"Nobody squealed on you, you scoundrel!" said the rancher coldly. "Your trail was picked up and followed here."

"I guess that don't go," said the rustler. "There ain't a galoot in New Mexico wise to our trail."

The Rio Kid stepped out of the pecans.

"Hyer's a galoot from Texas that got wise to it, Jud," he said. "Put it down to me, you cow-stealing scallywag."

The scarred man glanced at him.

"That don't go," he said. "No galoot would never have hit the trail to this camp if some yaller coyote hadn't squealed. And I reckon I'm wise to the hound that did it, too, and savvy why the colonel ain't letting on."

The Kid grinned. Scar-Face Judson suspected that Steve Carson had betrayed him, in his fixed belief that the blanketed trail never could be picked up and followed.

"That's enough chewing the rag from you, Judson," rapped out the colonel. "If you're surrendering we're here to take you. If you're fighting it out there's thirty men along this water, corralling you, and I guess we'll get you. And if we want more help we'll get a hundred men in a couple of days from the other ranches down the Rio Bajo. Your game's up."

"I'm sure wise to that," said the rustler. "I'm hyer to talk turkey. We've got two hundred of your cows, and now we're trailed down we're ready to hand them over and quit the game for good, and ride clear of the Carson ranges. Give us two hours' start to ride for Mexico and we quit."

The colonel laughed contemptuously. "Every man will go down to Bunch Grass, and then to prison," he answered. "It's five years each, at least, for every man in your gang, Judson, and the man who shot Tommy Tucker on his range will be strung up out of hand. They're the best terms you'll get. Hand over the galoot who shot Tommy Tucker and we'll let the rest live to serve their sentences But if we have to fight it to a finish I guess there won't be a scallywag in your crowd that will see the sun rise to-morrow."

"The man that shot up Tommy Tucker ain't here," grinned Judson. "The dog-goned galoot that shot

BETRAYED BY HIS STUDY-MATE!

(Continued from page 11)

He could see that one shove would send the door flying inwards—and he shoved As he had expected, the lock gave way in a moment. And the guv'nor strode into the room, with the rest of us piling behind.

Grell turned with a bellow of fury, which somewhat faded away when he saw who the intruders were. Jack Mason was released like a hot brick, and he staggered over to the table.

"Wot's the meanin' of this?" snarled Grell.

"You need not ask that quesion!" rapped out Nelson Lee. "You tricked this boy to come to you, and you were ill-using him, Mr. Grell. Mason, have you anything to say?"

"No, sir!" panted Jack.

"Has this man persecuted you at all?"

"He—he was going to take something of mine, sir," replied Jack hesitatingly. "You just came in time to prevent him. Thank you, sir! I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't come!"

Grell swore horribly.

"He's my nephew!" he shouted, with great violence. "I'll do what I like——"

"No, Mr. Grell, you will not!" snapped Lee curtly. "Mason has told me that you were in the act of stealing some property of his. I give you just ten seconds to get out of this place!"

"Why, you—you——"

"Begad! Shall we kick him out, sir?" asked Montie eagerly.

"I'll have the law on ye——" began Grell, swearing again.

Nelson Lee made no bones about it this time. He seized the rascal by the coat-collar, ran him along the passage, and literally hurled him into the roadway. Simon Grell feared more, for he scrambled up, and tore away into the dusk for all he was worth. He disappeared round a bend in the road.

"Why didn't you give him in charge, sir?" asked Watson.

"Because he is Mason's uncle, and we must consider the lad," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "I fancy he will think twice before resorting to any further tricks of this sort. Come, boys!"

We entered the passage again, and found Jack Mason still in the parlour. He had recovered his composure by this time, and thanked Nelson Lee quietly for coming to his rescue.

Nelson Lee gave the landlady five shillings for damages to the door—which really amounted to about tuppence. After that we all got into the motor-car and went sedately home.

There is one other little point. Mason, upon being asked about the sealed package, told Nelson Lee that it had been left behind by Mr. Strong. And the guv'nor suggested that it should be left in his charge—a suggestion which Jack eagerly consented to. He felt that it would be safer with Nelson Lee.

THE END.

(Jack Mason has been saved again, and the mysterious gold locket in a place where Grell will not be able to get it. But there's more trouble to come for the Boy from Bermondsey, and all through this little trinket! See next week's topping tale of St. Frank's, entitled: "TROUBLE BREWING!")

Tommy Tucker is the same pizen skunk that's put you wise to our trail, and I guess his name's—Steve Carson!"

The colonel started violently.

"You cow-stealing dog!" he shouted. "You dare——"

"Forget it!" jeered Judson. "Steve's been in our gang for more'n a year, and he's had thousands of dollars out of the game. And now he's sold us up——"

"Steve!" roared the colonel.

Steve Carson stepped out of the cover of the pecans.

His face was white as chalk, and his eyes burned from it.

"It's a lie!" he said thickly. "It's a dog-goned lie! You'll never believe that, uncle——"

"Believe it?" stormed the colonel. "I guess not! I——"

"It's the frozen truth," said Judson between his teeth. "Steve shot up Tommy Tucker because the puncher reckernised him while we was driving the cows off his range. Now he's sold us up I reckon I'll see him strung up for it afore I go to the pen."

"You durned geck!" said the Kid. "Nobody's sold you up. You've been trailed hyer, you locoed moss-head, like I've told you. Ain't you got hoss-sense enough to keep you from chewing the rag this-a-way?"

"There ain't any galoot in New Mexico could have trailed us here," said Judson, "and only one man outside my bunch knew the way to this camp, and that was Steve Carson. The pizen coyote has sold us out, and I guess he's going to get his for doing it. I guess he's——"

Bang!

The rustler was still speaking when Steve Carson threw up his Colt and fired. Scar-Face Judson dropped the white flag and reeled against the rock. Bang! Bang! came two rapid shots, and both of them struck the rustler as he staggered. Steve Carson, with a face of fury, was firing as fast as he could pull the trigger before a hand could be raised to stop him. Thrice struck, the rustler staggered against the rock, but with a last effort he dragged the revolver from his belt and fired at the rancher's nephew. And Steve Carson, as he was pressing the trigger again, received the ball fairly between his eyes, and staggered back and fell.

"I guess you've got yours, you durned traitor!" panted Judson, and he fell heavily to the earth.

There was a yell of rage from the rustlers, and the firing from the camp recommenced at once. The punchers ducked into cover, but Colonel Carson stood looking down at his nephew, with a stony face, heedless of the bullets that whistled round him. He did not stir till Buck Wilson seized him by the arm and dragged him into the cover of the clump of pecans.

The rancher did not speak. He stood leaning against a tree, his face white and set. The Rio Kid glanced at him, and his glance was compassionate. He knew that the rancher knew the truth now—the truth that the Kid never would have told him. But as he looked from the pecans at the silent figure of the traitor who had paid with his life for his treachery the rancher made an effort to drive conviction from his mind.

"I guess that scallywag was lying, Buck!" he muttered.

"He sure was lying, boss!" said the foreman, with as much conviction as he could. "He sure was!"

The Rio Kid said nothing.

* * * * *

Before sundown the rustlers had surrendered and handed over their guns, and the outfit roped them to their horses to ride them down to Bunch Grass. Two hundred cows were rounded up and driven back to the Carson ranch. The Rio Kid rode back to the ranch with the Carson bunch, and that night he slept in the bunkhouse. But when morning came the boy puncher saddled the black-muzzled mustang to ride. On all sides he was urged to stay; there was not a man in the Carson outfit who was not his friend. But the Kid was for Texas.

A dozen punchers rode ten miles with him on his way. And when they parted, with a waving of Stetsons and a crackling of revolver-shots, the Kid waved his hand back to the friends he was leaving and rode at a gallop to the south-east for his own country.

But the Kid's sunburnt face was thoughtful as he rode.

"I guess we're heading for trouble, old hoss," he said to the grey mustang. "I reckon I'm sure an all-fired gink to be quitting that outfit and riding for the Rio Frio, where Sheriff Watson has got a rope under his arm waiting for a galoot about my size. We're goin' to hit trouble, old hoss—we sure are!"

Then the Kid burst into a cheery laugh. His own country called him after his wanderings, and he could not turn a deaf ear to the call.

"I guess we've hit trouble before, old hoss!" he said. "We've hit it bad, and we've pulled through. It's us for Texas, and we don't give a continental red cent for all the dog-goned sheriffs between the Rio Grande and the Staked Plain!"

And the Kid rode on his way, by grassy plains and rugged hills, till New Mexico was left behind him, and his eyes danced as the mustang bore him swiftly through the wide-reaching grasslands of his own country.

THE END.

("TRAILING BACK!" is the title of the next roaring Western story, in which the Rio Kid answers the call of his own country—Texas—and in consequence falls into bad trouble again.)

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