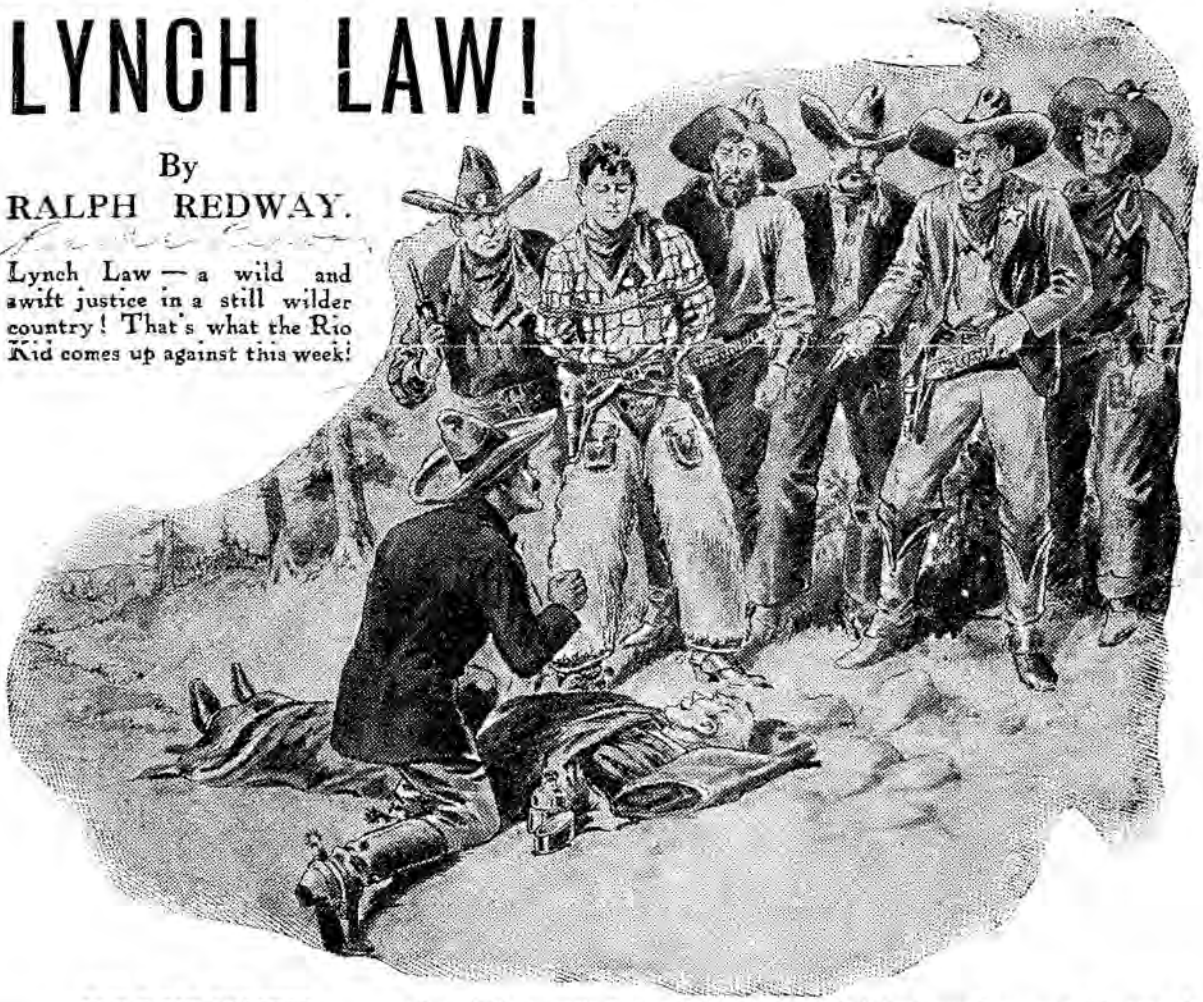
LYNCH LAW!

By
RALPH REDWAY.

Lynch Law — a wild and swift justice in a still wilder country! That's what the Rio Kid comes up against this week!



THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Watching in the Night!

THE flash of the six-gun in the shadows of the pecans was warning enough for the Rio Kid. He was in the grass as the bullet whizzed, and the roar of the Colt followed. The whizzing lead grazed his Stetson hat as he dropped; it was as close a call as the Kid had ever had.

Like an echo of the report, came the answering roar of the Kid's own gun, the bullet smashing through boughs and leaves. A startled yelp from his assailant told that the shot had gone near, though the Kid had had nothing but the flash of the revolver to guide his aim. There was a crackling of the brush as the enemy backed hastily into deeper cover, and for an instant, in the filtering starlight through the branches, the Kid had a glimpse of a black face, and a figure wrapped in a serape. He fired at it on the instant, but swift as was the shot, the man in the brush was swifter. He vanished into the darkness.

The Kid gritted his teeth.

Twice he fired into the brush after his elusive enemy, but he knew that he was wasting his lead. He half rose, to rush in pursuit of his foe, but sank back again. He dared not leave the spot with the wounded rancher lying there, insensible and helpless and utterly defenceless if the Kid left him.

"Black George!" said the Kid, between his teeth. "That dog-goned lobo-wolf! Dog-gone my cats, I guess I'd give all the cows in Texas, jest to draw a bead on that all-fired scallywag."

Deep in the thick grass, by the side of the insensible boss of the Bar-One ranch, the Kid lay, watching and waiting.

He lay in the clearing, circled round by the thick brush—not a position the Kid would have chosen, if he could have helped it.

It was there that Colonel Sanderson, the boss of the Bar-One, had fallen from his horse when the road-agent shot him down, and there that the Kid had to remain to guard him.

Only a mile out of Kicking Mule, on the trail to the Bar-One, Black George had ambushed the rancher, but the mile might have been a hundred miles, for anything the Kid could do. He could not leave the wounded man for a minute, lest the desperado should return to finish his murderous work—as now he had tried to do.

The Kid waited, and longed for dawn.

After daylight, men would be riding the trail, Mesquite Bill and the Bar-One punchers would be returning to the ranch from the cow-town. Until someone came along the trail, the Kid was chained to the spot. And the dewy shadowy brush circling round the clearing gave his enemy every chance against him. The Kid could only hug the thick grass, listen for a sound from his foe, watch for the flash of a gun, and fire at a stirring branch or a rustling twig. They were grim moments, even for the Kid, whose constant companion was danger.

A distant sound came to his ears. It was the trampling of a horse far away in the scrub.

The Kid figured that Black George had got wise to it that there was nothing doing, and had gone back to his horse and hit the trail. But he could not be sure. Earlier he had listened to the trail-thief riding away in the distance, and the desperado had crept back on foot through the brush, and very nearly cinched him. It might be the same trick over again. The Kid waited and watched like a lynx.

Silence followed the dying away of the hoof-beats.

Only a faint rustle of the wind in the branches came to the Kid's ears; and occasionally the weird howl of a coyote skulking in the brush. A rustle—and the Kid's gun roared. But it was only the snapping of a twig.

The Kid passed his hand over his forehead. There were beads of perspiration under the brim of the Stetson, though the night was cold.

"Dog-gone it!" the Kid muttered savagely.

He looked at the rancher, motionless, terribly still, in the glimmer of the stars. The moon was coming up over the prairie now, and the light grew in the clearing among the trees of the timber belt. It shone down on Sanderson's set white face. The rancher still breathed, but that was all. The Kid had done all that he could for him, the wound was skilfully and carefully

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bandaged. A litter was needed to carry him back to Kicking Mule, to the care of the cow-town doctor. The Kid could only wait. Side-Kicker lay by his side in the grass, quiet though not sleeping. Under the glimmer of the moon and the stars, the Kid waited wearily, longing for dawn as he never had longed before.

Would day never come? The minutes dragged by on leaden wings. It came hopefully into the Kid's mind that help might come before dawn. The rancher's horse had galloped away when his master fell, back down the trail to Kicking Mule. If the pinto reached the cow-town, the arrival of Sanderson's horse without its rider would surely cause alarm. Seth Starbuck, the marshal, was not likely to stir himself—he was the rancher's enemy. But there were Bar-One punchers in Kicking Mule that night, and at the first hint of danger to their boss they would mount and ride. The Kid hoped.

But it was long since the runaway horse had fled, and there was no sound or sign of any man on the trail. More likely, the Kid bitterly reflected, the cayuse had wandered into the prairie, or if he had reached Kicking Mule, he had reached the sleeping town unheeded.

Would day never come?

The Kid was fatigued, but fatigue was little to him. Lying there in the grass under the moon, circled by the shadowy brush, he was a target for Black George if the road-agent returned. But there was no hint of the black robber's return. This time, it seemed, he had gone for good. That spelled safety to the Kid, but he was sorry for it. Even with the chances heavily against him, he would have been glad to get to a cinch with the terror of the cow country.

But his enemy did not come, and the long, long night faded at last into dawn. Never had the Rio Kid heard so gladly the chirrup of the cicadas.

Dawn at last, glimmering over the clearing, over the shadowy brush. The new day had come.

The Kid rose and stretched himself wearily. There was no stirring from the rancher. He lay as comfortable as the Kid could make him, in the Kid's blankets and slicker, only his faint breathing telling that he still lived. He was sunk into a deep insensibility that seemed like death—that would glide into death, if he did not get the care he needed. The Kid had saved him from being riddled with bullets by the road-agent, but he could do no more. With haggard eyes the Kid scanned the trail that wound away through the timber towards the cow-town.

Hoof-beats at last!

The Kid's face brightened at the sound.

Horsemen were coming up the trail from the cow-town.

On the winding trail the Kid heard them long before they came into sight. He heard the beat of many hoofs—not less than a dozen men were riding up the trail. The Kid watched for them to appear, and the bunch came suddenly into sight. A dozen cowmen mounted on broncbos, and at their head, Seth Starbuck, the marshal of Kicking Mule.

The Kid's brows knitted a little at the sight of the cow-town marshal.

Starbuck was his enemy, and had come off second-best in gun-play with the Kid. But he was glad, at the moment, to see even Starbuck. And the rest of the party were Kicking Mule cowmen, whom the Kid was wholly glad to see. He wondered, a little, what had brought the party there so early. But whatever it was that had brought the Kicking Mule party there, the Kid was glad to see them.

The Kicking Mule men rode up with a clatter, and jumped down from their horses. Their faces were stern and grim.

"Say, you guys——" began the Kid.

A dozen revolvers covered him as he began to speak.

"Hands up!"

"Say——" gasped the Kid, in amazement.

"Hands up, you firebug!" said the marshal grimly. "Put 'em up, pronto, or you get yours, sudden."

And the Kid, taken at a hopeless disadvantage, put his hands above his head.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Lynch Law!

"KEEP 'em up!" said the marshal of Kicking Mule.

The Kid's eyes gleamed at him.

"It's your say-so, marshal," he answered, his hands over his Stetson. "But I sure guess you're wasting time. Colonel Sanderson wants help—he's hard hit——"

"Keep 'em up!"

Though the Kid's hands were over his head Seth Starbuck was wary in approaching him. The gun-play in the cow-town the day before had taught him to respect the boy puncher.

He stepped to the Kid, and drew from his holsters the two long-barrelled, walnut-butted guns. His relief was obvious when he had taken the Kid's guns from him.

He tossed them into the grass at a little distance. Then he gave the Kid a sour grin.

"I guess your teeth are drawn now, you lobo-wolf," he said. "You got to pay for shooting up Colonel Sanderson."

"What?" gasped the Kid.

"Keep him covered, you-uns," said the marshal. "Plug him if he tries to get away."

"You bet!" said one of the cowmen grimly. "He ain't getting away after shooting up the whitest man in Kicking Mule."

"You're sure missing your guess," said the Kid blankly. "Why, you durned pesky bonehead——"

"Can it!" interrupted the marshal. "You've sure told some tall stories in Kicking Mule; but you ain't getting away with this. You allow you never shot up the colonel when we've found you standing over his body."

"Dog-gone you," said the Kid fiercely. "I never shot up the colonel, and he'll tell you so when he comes to."

"That's a safe bet," said the marshal, scoffingly. "He don't look likely to come to."

"There ain't a lot of need for chewing the rag," said one of the party. "We got a rope here."

The Kid breathed hard.

His glance turned on the insensible rancher. One word from Colonel Sanderson would clear him and save him. But the rancher was sunk in unconsciousness, and gave no sign of returning life.

The Rio Kid realised that he was in a bad corner.

Starbuck was his bitter foe, though the Kid could hardly guess the reason for his implacable enmity. Starbuck, he was aware, would stop at nothing to put the rope round his neck if he could get it there. But the others were Texas cowmen—the men that the Kid liked and could trust—men who would never have stood for foul play. They would have given him the hand of friendship if they had known how matters stood. But they did not know, and the marshal was turning the situation to his own ends.

There was gloating triumph in his face as he looked at the Kid. He had failed at gun-play; he had been defied as marshal. But now the game was in his hands.

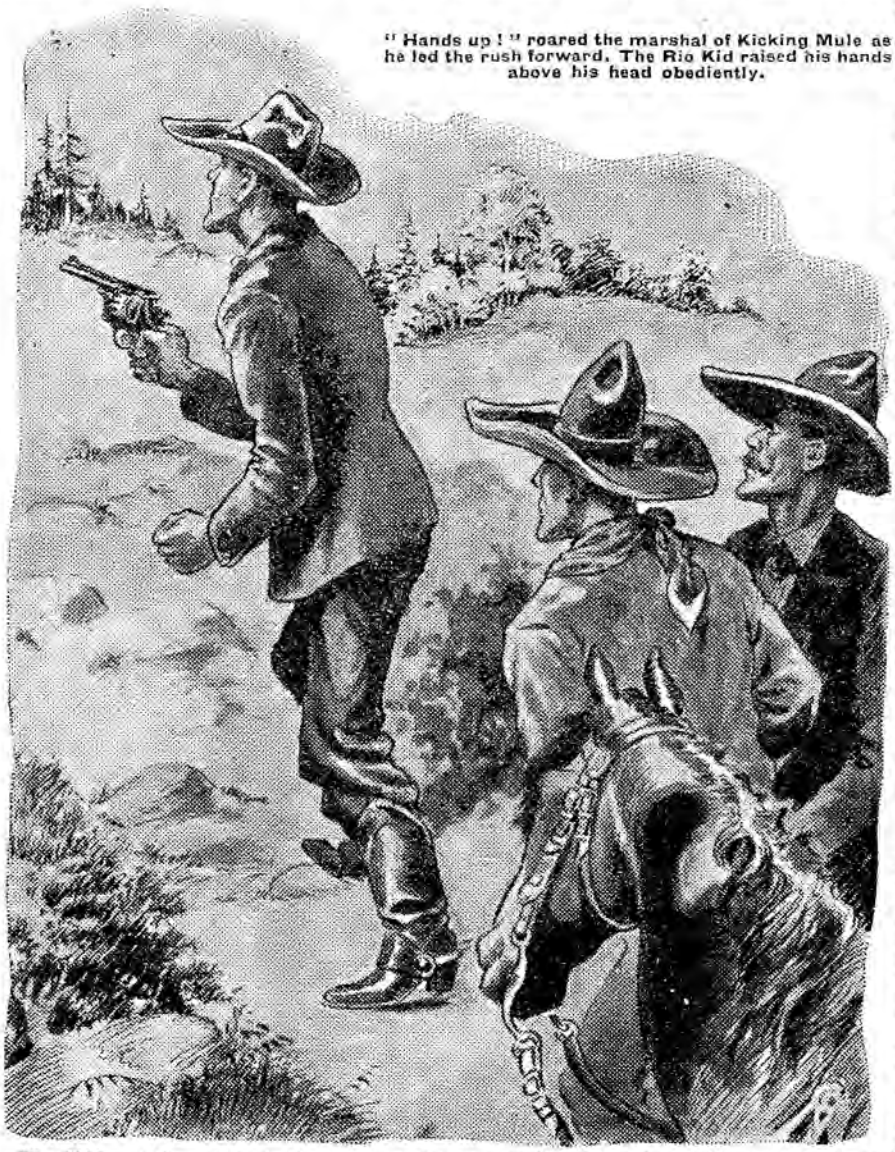
"I guess we got this cuss where we want him," said the marshal. "You get your riata, San Antone."

"You bet!" said the cowman.

"I'll tell the world——" began the Kid.

One of the party, who looked like a rancher, interrupted him fiercely. He pointed to the still form of Colonel Sanderson.

"I guess you don't know me, you lobo-wolf," he said bitterly. "Carter of the Joshua-A Ranch—and Colonel Sanderson's best friend. Dog-gone you, I'd walk all over Texas afoot to get the man that shot him up. You figure you're getting away when we've caught you with his body? Forget it, you durned gun-slinger."



"Hands up!" roared the marshal of Kicking Mule as he led the rush forward. The Rio Kid raised his hands above his head obediently.

The Kid met the rancher's fierce eyes steadily.

"You're sure roping in the wrong cayuse, Mister Carter," he said quietly. "You look a square man, and I guess all these guys are square men, leaving out that bushwhacker Starbuck, who's got it ag'in me that he tried gun-play on me and slipped up on it. Give a galoot a square deal!"

"You'll get a square deal," said Carter grimly. "And the square deal you'll get is a rope, and the branch of the nearest tree that'll take your weight."

"We're wasting time," said the marshal of Kicking Mule. "Grab the pesky fire-bug and put that rope round his neck."

A quiver ran through the Rio Kid. He was powerless—covered by levelled six-guns, as Carter and another man stepped forward to pinion his arms. San Antone opened out the loop of the lasso for his neck.

The Kid cast a despairing look at Colonel Sanderson. But there was no help to be hoped for from that quarter. He had only himself to rely on, in the tightest corner of his life.

"You got me, fellers," he said. His voice was cool and steady. "You got lots of time to string me up if you want; but if you're square men you'll let a man speak before you hang him."

"What you got to say, when we find you standing over the man you've murdered?" sneered Carter.

"That guy ain't dead, by a long way. Say, fellers, just give him time to come round and he'll sure tell you that I ain't the hombre that shot him up."

"You'd like time, to make your get-away, I reckon!" snapped the Joshua-A rancher contemptuously.

"We're wasting time!" snapped the marshal of Kicking Mule. "There's a cotton-wood back on the trail—hump him along to it."

"Give a galoot a chance for his life, Mister Carter," said the Kid steadily. "You're a white man, and you don't want to hang an innocent man, jest to please that lobo-wolf of a marshal. Give me three minutes, sir—that ain't asking a whole lot."

Carter made an impatient gesture.

"What you got to say?" he snarled. "Starbuck brought us after you, and we've got you. You was seen last night riding out of town with the colonel, and Starbuck believed that you was a durned spy in cahoots with Black George, and he allowed that you wasn't to be trusted. He told me so, but I figured that Sanderson knowed what he was about. But when he called me up this morning to tell me that the colonel's horse had been found on Main Street, without his rider, and with blood on the saddle, I reckoned he had got you down right."

"He sure had," said San Antone. "What's the good of chewing the rag? String him up."

"Gents," said the Kid earnestly. "I never shot up the colonel, and he'll tell you so as soon as he can speak. If I hadn't been with him I guess he would be gone up. It was Black George, the road-agent, who shot him up."

"Your side-partner!" jeered the marshal.

"That's a dog-goned lie," said the Kid. "I ain't never had nothing to do with Black George 'cept to burn powder on him. He laid for the colonel on the trail last night, and shot him up, and I been watching all night to stall him off. He came back once and tried ag'in. I'm telling you, if I hadn't been with the colonel that lobo-wolf would have filled him full of lead."

Carter's lip curled.

"Is that all, afore you go up?" he snapped.

"It ain't all," said the Kid. "Look at the guy with your eyes, if you've got any, durn you! Ain't he bandaged up and made comfortable in my blankets and slicker? You figure that after shooting a guy up I'd bandage him and stand by him all night, till you come along and cinch me? Is that hoss-sense?"

There was a murmur among the Kicking Mule cowmen, and Carter of the Joshua-A looked puzzled.

The wounded rancher was bandaged; it was evident that he had been given every care that could be given in a rough-and-ready way.

Seth Starbuck gritted his teeth.

"That cuts no ice!" he snarled. "Now, then, get on with that rope, boys!"

But a flicker of doubt crossed the hard, vengeful face of Carter of the Joshua-A. Bitter as he was at the sight of his fellow-rancher stretched in his blood on the earth, the sense of justice was strong in the Joshua-A cattle-owner,

and his fierce desire for vengeance did not wholly blind him.

"Hold in your hosses a spell, Seth," he said. "We're sure going to hang Sanderson's murderer; but——"

"We sure are, Carter, and we're wasting time," said the marshal gruffly.

"Let the guy speak," said Carter quietly, but with a determination that halted the blustering marshal. "We got heap plenty time to hang him. My old pard Sanderson sure is bandaged up, and if this puncher did it, it looks like there might be a doubt."

"Who else would have done it?" said the Kid. "I'll tell a man, sir, the colonel was shot up by Black George, and I bandaged him, and if I hadn't watched all night by him that murdering coon would have finished him dead to rights."

Some of the cowmen seemed to share the rancher's doubt now. San Antone, with the rope in his hand ready for the Kid's neck, paused. The grasp of sinewy hands was still on the Kid; but for the moment, at least, the execution was stayed.

"You letting that young lobo-wolf pull the wool over your eyes?" said the marshal of Kicking Mule, in a grating voice. "He says that the colonel will clear him when he speaks, but you can see that poor Sanderson will never speak agin. That scallywag put his lead where he wanted it, he sure did."

"And why you reckon he bandaged him, marshal?" asked Carter.

"Ain't it plain enough for a cross-eyed buzzard?" said the marshal impatiently. "He was known to have left the town with Sanderson, and if Sanderson was found shot up, what'd we think? Waal, he bandaged him and aimed to get off with a story of helping him after he was shot up by Black George? That's how he was going to get clear—figuring that Kicking Mule galoots were boneheads enough to believe him." The marshal laughed, scoffing. "By the great horned toad, he looks like getting away with it, too, fur as you guys go."

"That's it!" said San Antone, with an oath. "The marshal's right, fellers. String him up."

"I'm telling you——" said the Kid earnestly.

"You can tell the world all the durned lies you think of," said Carter savagely. "Dog-gone my boots if I wasn't half-believing you, you red-handed lobo-wolf! You got that galoot down fine, Seth; and we're wasting time, jest as you allowed. String him up!"

Sinewy hands dragged the Kid away towards a tal' cottonwood that grew by the trail, close on the edge of the clearing.

With a face white with rage, his eyes burning, the Kid struggled; but in the grasp of so many hands his struggles were useless.

Fiercely he resisted, but he was dragged along, his spurs tearing up the grass as he went.

Under a branch of the cottonwood that extended over the trail the angry crowd of cowmen halted with their prisoner.

San Antone threw the end of the rope over the branch and pulled it taut; the noose at the other end round the Kid's throat.

"Hang on, you 'uns!" said San Antone.

Five or six pairs of hands grasped the lasso. The Kid stood firm as a rock; his face white, set, fearless, his eyes gleaming at the gloating face of the marshal of Kicking Mule.

"Up with him!"

Hands dragged on the rope. At the same moment there came a thunder of horses' hoofs on the trail, and a bunch of cowboys dashed into sight from the direction of Kicking Mule. The Kid's despairing eyes swept round, and blazed as he recognised Mesquite Bill and the punchers of the Bar-One Ranch. One of the punchers was leading a riderless horse on a rope—the pinto that had carried Colonel Sanderson the night before. With his last breath, ere the drag of the rope choked it, the Kid shouted:

"Help here, fellers! Mesquite Bill, horn in and help——"

The dragging rope choked him. But as the grasping hands pulled, and the Kid's feet were leaving the ground, Mesquite Bill dashed up and drove right into the group of cowmen holding on to the rope. The charge of the broncho knocked them right and left, and the rope, released, slithered over the branch, and the Rio Kid dropped on the earth.

(To be continued.)

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
A Close call for the Kid!

THERE was a roar of rage from the lynchers.

Four or five of them were sprawling in the grass, hurled over by the charging broncho. Others jumped swiftly out of the way of the lashing hoofs.

Guns were drawn on all sides.

Mesquite Bill, his rugged, bearded face red with rage, leaped from his broncho and jumped to the Rio Kid. The Kid had sat up, his hands clawing at the choking rope about his neck. Mesquite stood over him, a six-gun in either hand, glaring at the opposing party. The Bar-One punchers had pulled in their horses and dismounted, and every man in the bunch had a gun in his hand to back up the foreman.

"You durned, dog-goned skunks!" roared Mesquite Bill. "You figure you're going to string up this hombre, jest to please that all-fired lobo-wolf Seth Starbuck? Forget it! You got to walk over my gun afore you do."

"That won't take us long, Mesquite!" shouted Starbuck. "Stand away, you bonehead, or we'll shoot you up and hang him arter!"

"Shoot, and be durned!" retorted Mesquite. "There's seven men hyer that can handle a Colt, and by the great horned toad, you ain't touching that kid puncher while we can burn powder! Say, you Mister Carter, I'm sure s'prised at you—a white man like you, playing the game of that dog-goned, gun-slinging marshal this-a-way!"

There was a roar of angry voices; loudest of all the fierce voice of the marshal of Kicking Mule.

"Stand back, you Bar-One boneheads! By the Rockies, we'll wipe you-all right out if you horn in hyer!"

"We're sure horning in!" roared Mesquite. "That kid puncher is O.K., and I'm telling you. He belongs to the Bar-One—the boss signed him on last night; and you figure that the Bar-One outfit are going to let you string him up because you couldn't beat him at gun-play. Not in your life-time!"

The marshal was white with rage. His gun was in his hand; but even the desperate and reckless marshal hesitated to begin an affray that would have cost so many lives. His party outnumbered the Bar-One bunch two to one; but Mesquite and his men were well known to be good at gun-fighting, and they were grimly determined. Had he been sure of a backing from his own party the marshal might have chanced it; but the Kicking Mule men, keen as they were to lynch the man they believed had shot up Colonel Sanderson, had no hunch for gun-fighting with Sanderson's outfit. Carter of the Joshua-A struck down the marshal's gun-arm as he half-raised it.

"Let up, marshal," he said. "This ain't a matter for gun-play. I guess these galoots will be as plumb glad to string up that cuss as you are when they know the truth."

"That's so," admitted the marshal.

There were angry looks from the men who had been knocked over by Mesquite's charging broncho. But guns were lowered; no one but the marshal was anxious for blood to be shed.

"We're all friends here," said Carter. "Put up your gun, Mesquite—you ain't any need for shooting-irons!"

"Let that durned lobo-wolf put up his gun first!" said Mesquite, with a glare at the marshal. "I ain't trusting that dog-goned polecat worth a continental red cent!"

"Put up your gun, Seth."

"We're hanging that puncher!" said the marshal, between his teeth.

"Not by a jugful you ain't!" retorted Mesquite. "The boss stood by him at Kicking Mule when you was on his trail, and I guess the boss would stand by him now if he was here. We're standing for him, durn you!"

The marshal dropped his gun into the holster. Carter of the Joshua-A was determined that there should be no gun-play, and the cowmen backed him. Most of them belonged to Carter's outfit.

"We're hanging him," said Carter, "and I guess you'll want to pull on the rope, Mesquite, when you know what he's done."

Mesquite gave an unbelieving snort.

"What's he done, then?" he demanded. "Give it a name, Carter. You're a man a guy can trust; which he can't that lobo-wolf Starbuck."

"Your boss has been shot up, and there stands the man that did it!" answered Carter, with a gesture towards the Kid, who was on his feet now amid the Bar-One bunch.

There was a general exclamation from the Bar-One men. They stared at the Joshua-A rancher, and stared at the Kid.

"He lies a dozen yards away from here, and we found that guy with his body! Now what do you say?" said Carter grimly. "We're hanging him for shooting up your boss, Colonel Sanderson, my old pard for twenty years, and you're not the man to stop us, Mesquite, now you know."

There was a brief pause.

"By the great horned toad," said Mesquite Bill, "if that guy has shot up our boss, we'll hang him and riddle him with lead! You allow that the colonel's dead?"

"He ain't dead, but near it! He can't speak—he lies at death's door!" said Carter sternly. "If he could speak, he'd name his murderer—and that's the guy he would name."

"Not by a jugful," said the Kid quietly. "Mesquite, you want to believe that these guys are making a mistake. Black George shot up your boss last night, and I drove the durned skunk off, or he'd have riddled him and made it last sickness."

Mesquite stared at him. The Bar-One punchers eyed him dubiously.

"We knowed suthin' had happened to the boss," said Mesquite soberly. "His cayuse came back to Kicking Mule without him, with blood on his trappings. We've brought him along with us. We knowed there had been trouble, but——"

"You know now who shot him up," said Seth Starbuck. "I guess Sander-

son's bunch ain't the men to let the murderer escape. Say!"

"You've said it, marshal," said several of the Bar-One punchers together. There was evidently a change in their feelings now that they knew of what the Kid was accused.

Starbuck was cool again now. The sudden interruption had disconcerted him; but there was no need for gun-play. The Bar-One punchers would be the first to grasp the rope to hang the man who had shot their boss.

"What's the puncher got to say?" said Mesquite Bill slowly. "I know the boss liked him, and signed him on to our outfit. I reckon he trusted him, and rode out alone on the trail at night, and the boss ain't nobody's fool. If this guy shot up the boss, we got him safe; but we ain't hanging him on the word of Seth Starbuck."

"I got this to say," said the Kid. "That skunk Starbuck is after my life; but I'd trust every other guy here. Make me a prisoner, tie me hand and foot, if you like, and wait till Colonel Sanderson can speak. Then, if he says that I'm the guy that shot him, hang me as high as you like. If I'd done that dirty work, you couldn't hang me too high."

"That's talking!" said Mesquite Bill.

"It's sure a whole mouthful!" agreed one of the Bar-One punchers. "Give the guy a square deal."

"And give him a chance to get away!" snarled the marshal. "I tell you, the colonel is plugged for keeps, and there ain't a chance in a hundred that he'll ever speak again!"

"That's a plumb lie, too," said the Kid coolly. "Look at your boss with your own eyes, Mesquite, afore you listen to that durned skunk!"

"I sure will!" said Mesquite. He glanced round at the lowering faces of Carter and his men. "Say, fellers, that's straight talk. Let's see the boss and see for ourselves. There's heap plenty time to hang this puncher if he's the right man; but, by the great horned toad, you ain't hanging him for nothing."

"You're sure a big bonehead, Bill," said Carter. "But there ain't going to be gun-play among friends. Bring that guy along safe, and have your own way!"

"I guess I'll tie his hands and make sure!" said Starbuck.

"Forget it!" rapped Mesquite. "I guess you'll keep your distance, Seth Starbuck. We're taking care of this guy—likewise Carter and his fellers. We sure ain't letting him absquatulate till we know the truth!"

The marshal's hand sought his gun again, and again Carter, of the Joshua-A, interposed.

"Let up, marshal! I tell you there ain't going to be gun-play among friends on account of a dog-goned murderer! Mesquite is my old pard's foreman, and he has a right to be satisfied."

"I ain't saying no to that!" growled the marshal. "So long's the guy don't make his get-away, I ain't got no kick coming."

"Come, then!" said the rancher.

He moved back towards the clearing where Colonel Sanderson lay, followed by his men. The Kid, in the midst of the Bar-One crowd, followed. The marshal strode sullenly along with the cowmen.

In a few minutes they reached the spot where the boss of the Bar-One lay bandaged in the Kid's blankets.

Mesquite's jaw set grimly as he stood and looked down on his boss. His brow was black as night.

"By thunder!" he said, through his gritting teeth. "The guy that did that is going to hang! By the holy smoke, I——"

"Black George is the man!" said the Kid quietly.

"That's your say-so!" answered Mesquite roughly. "We got to get at the truth. And, after all, you're a stranger here, and the marshal allowed from the first that you was in cahoots with Black George. I never stood for that. But now——"

He broke off, and there was a murmur from his comrades. The sight of their boss, lying senseless, with his face white as chalk, had stirred the Bar-One crowd to deep rage. In that mood, as the Kid realised, they were apt to fall in with the belief of Carter and his crowd. What had convinced one crowd was likely to convince the other; and, as Mesquite had said, the Kid was a stranger to them, though he had made friends with them and their boss at Kicking Mule.

The Kid breathed hard, reading aright the triumphant gleam in Starbuck's eyes. The marshal's vengeance was delayed—but it was only delayed!

"Fellers!" said the Kid. "Your boss is hard hit, but he's worth a heap of dead men yet! You want to get him on a litter and carry him into camp for the doc. If he don't clear me when he speaks, hang me as high as you like, as I said afore."

"That's talking!" said Mesquite Bill slowly. His mind was evidently swaying in doubt.

"Talking be durned!" said the marshal. "There's been too much talk! I guess I'm marshal of Kicking Mule, and stand for the law, and here's Mister Carter and his bunch standing for me. What more do you Bar-One guys want, when you see your boss, that was always a white man to you, lying shot to pieces, and his murderer in your hands?"

"Talking won't buy you anything," said Carter, of the Joshua-A. "We got the man, and he's going to hang. Chew on that, you Bar-One boys! You know me—Tom Carter, a square man, I guess, and your boss' friend for twenty years. Ain't my word good enough for you?"

Mesquite did not speak. But one of the Bar-One punchers answered:

"We know you, Mister Carter, we sure do, and what you say goes!" And the Bar-One crowd moved back a little.

There was a deep silence for some moments. It was broken by a faint sound—a moan from the man who lay in the blankets on the grass.

Mesquite started.

"He's coming to!" he ejaculated. "Boys, the boss'll be able to speak, and that guy will keep till he's put us wise."

Starbuck set his teeth hard. The eyes of the fallen man opened slowly, and stared wildly round him. They gazed dimly at the crowd of surrounding faces. Then, as they rested on the sober, set face of the Rio Kid, the rancher smiled faintly.

Carter dropped on his knees beside the wounded man. He placed a flask to Sanderson's lips.

A gulp of liquor brought a faint flush of colour to the wounded man's face. He tried to speak.

But only a scarcely audible murmur came from his lips. The Kid's face was tense. A word would save him; but the rancher seemed unable to utter a word.

Seth Starbuck's harsh voice broke in upon the deep silence.

"He can't speak—leave him alone! Leave the galoot alone, I say! You don't want to worry a dying man!"

"Silence!" rapped out Carter.

He bent lower.

"Sanderson, old-timer, we've got the man we reckon shot you up. If you can speak, give us his name."

The colonel made an effort. But no words came. It was torture to the Kid as he waited.

"Sanderson"—Carter's voice was low and clear—"do you see the man among us who shot you up? Nod your head if you do."

The haggard eyes turned from face to face. Then the head was slowly shaken from side to side.

The Kid breathed more freely.

"Let me speak!" he said. He bent a little over the rancher. "Sir, these guys figured that I was the man who shot you up. Was it Black George, the coon road-agent, that plugged you, sir?"

The rancher tried again to speak, and failed. But the heavy head nodded a slow assent.

"Did I stand by you, sir, and drive the firebug off?"

Another nod.

"That goes!" said Carter, of the Joshua-A. "We sure roped in the wrong cayuse, boys!"

The rancher rose to his feet. He held out his hand to the Kid.

"I ain't blaming myself a whole lot, for you know how it looked," he said. "But I allow you're square, and I'm plumb sorry. Shake!"

The Kid shook gladly enough. He looked round on friendly faces. The men who, a few minutes before, would have strung him up to the branch of the cottonwood were all his friends now. They knew now that it was Black George who had shot up the rancher, and that the Kid had stood by him, and feeling had changed completely round.

With the exception of the marshal of Kicking Mule! Seth Starbuck's hard face was set with rage. His eyes burned at the Kid, who had, at the last moment, escaped his vengeance. His hand lingered near his gun, as if he felt the temptation to draw and shoot him dead in his tracks where he stood. But even the ruffianly marshal of Kicking Mule could not venture to pull his gun, in the midst of a crowd, on an unarmed man, whose innocence had been proved.

Mesquite Bill clapped the Kid on the shoulder.

"The boss stands for you," he said, "and that's good enough for this crowd, I reckon. I knowed you was straight, and I'm sure plumb glad that we horned in, feller."

The Kid smiled.

"You sure ain't so glad as this baby!" he answered. "I don't want to have a closer call than that, hombre. Say, there never was a galoot in Texas so all-fired pleased to see you afore."

The marshal of Kicking Mule, with a bitter oath, leaped on his horse, and spurred away towards the cow-town. The Kid gazed after him as he rode, with a strange look in his eyes, and strange thoughts in his mind. Like a flash of illumination it had come to the Kid that there was a reason for the marshal's ruthless feud, and that if he followed the trail of Black George, the road-agent, it was likely to lead him very near the marshal of Kicking Mule.

THE END.

(The mystery surrounding Black George, the road-agent, gets thicker and thicker. You'll find all the thrills you want in next week's roaring Western yarn!)