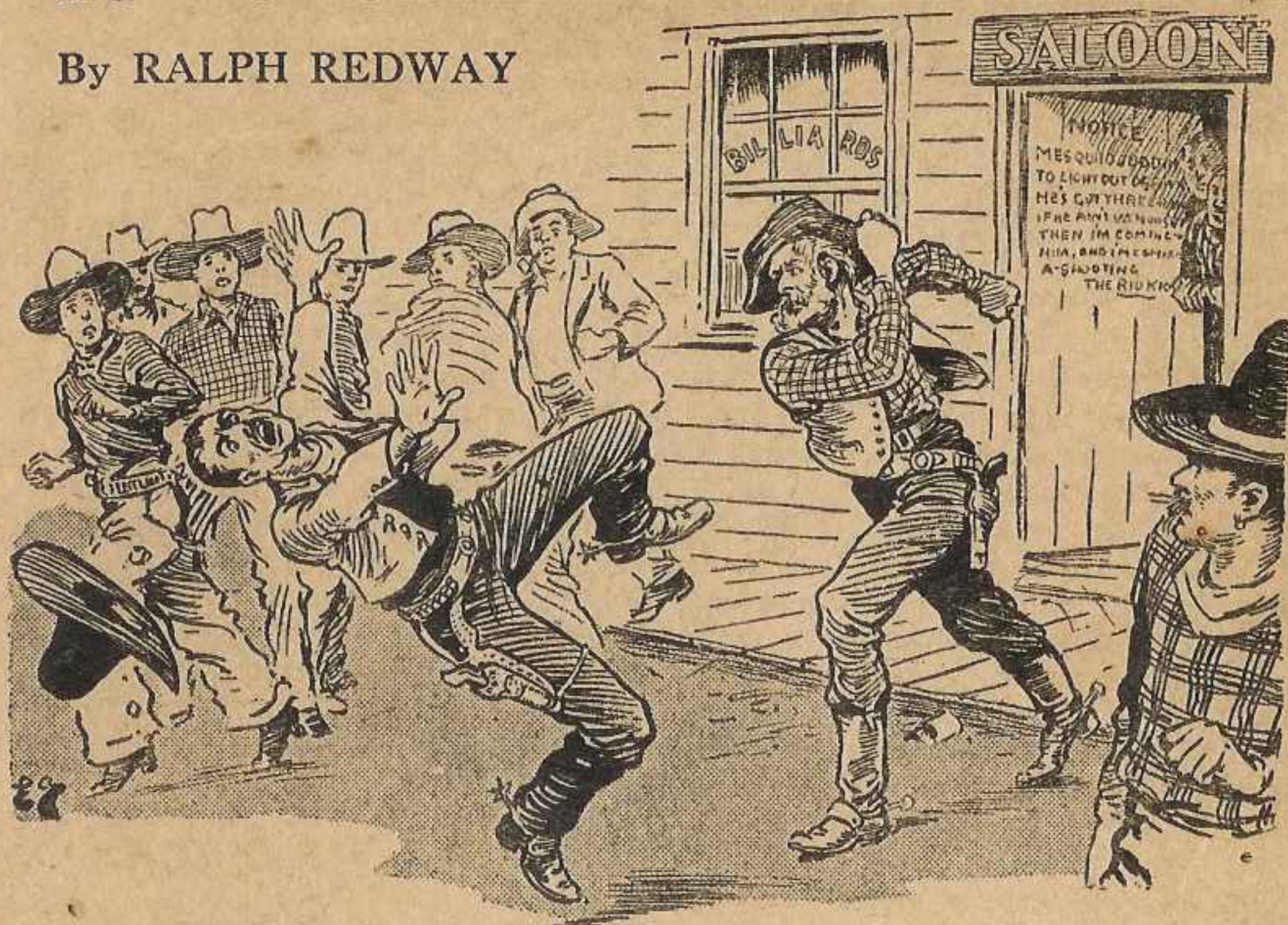


The PUNCHER From PANHANDLE

By RALPH REDWAY



THE FIRST CHAPTER

THE GUNMAN FROM THE BRAZOS!

MESQUITE JUDD rode into the cow-town of Frio, he and his horse covered with dust from the trail. Men on the street of Frio stared at Mesquite as he rode by, his scarred face grim under his Stetson hat.

There were many in Frio who knew the gunman from the Brazos; none who knew any good of him. No man was his friend; many were his enemies. But if the Frio men stared they were careful not to give offence. Mesquite, who packed two guns, was a "killer" by

reputation, and not a man to seek trouble with.

Three or four men saluted him as he passed, and Mesquite acknowledged the salutes with a sardonic grin. He was well aware that they would rather have pulled a gun on him, had they dared. But pulling a gun on Mesquite Judd was one way of asking for sudden death. The gunman was hated and feared, but he could ride without fear through any cow-town in Texas.

Through the quiet street, thick with dust that blew in from the plains, Mesquite rode on his horse,

Mesquite Judd was dead sure he could rope in the Rio Kid and the one thousand dollars reward for the capture of the boy outlaw. But he reckoned without the puncher from Panhandle!

and stopped outside the sheriff's office on the plaza.

A little crowd was gathered there, staring at a bill posted on the wall. That bill announced the reward of a thousand dollars for the taking of the Rio Kid, dead or alive. It was signed by Jake Watson, the sheriff. Across a blank space was written another announcement in a bold, clear hand, evidently added overnight while the town of Frio was sleeping. It ran :

"Two thousand, spot cash, for the galoot who can do it !

"(Signed), THE RIO KID."

Mesquite grinned as he looked at it.

"I guess that kid's got some gall ! " he remarked. "This here town ain't got much sand to let a kid puncher twist its tail this-a-way."

Some of the crowd looked round angrily at that comment from a stranger. But the anger died out of their faces as they recognised Mesquite Judd.

"The Kid's sure got a heap of gall," said Poker Smith, of the Red Dog saloon. "I reckon he moseyed in hyer last night to stick that up. The sheriff will sure be mad when he sees it."

"A thousand dollars offered for that doggoned outlaw, and no galoot hyer with grit enough to rope him in ! " said Mesquite contemptuously.

"He sure ain't easy to rope in," answered Poker Smith mildly. "The sheriff and his posse was arter him up in the Huecas, but the Kid rung in a cold deck on them. It ain't so plumb easy, Judd."

"Not for this burg ! " jeered Mesquite.

"Mebbe you'd like to take a hand ! " said Poker Smith, as sarcastically as he dared.

"You've said it," answered Judd

coolly. "I guess that's why I'm hyer, feller."

There was a buzz in the Frio crowd as the gunman dismounted, hitched his pinto to the rack, and strode heavily into the sheriff's office. The news that Mesquite Judd, the "killer" from the Brazos, had come to town to "get" the Rio Kid rang through Frio like wildfire.

Sheriff Watson was there—with an arm in a sling, a gun on the desk before him. He turned a scowling face on the newcomer, and started as he recognised the gunman. His hand dropped on the gun on the desk.

"Forget it, sheriff," said Mesquite. "I sure ain't come hyer for gun-play, hombre."

"I reckon you've got gall to come hyer at all," snapped the sheriff. "Your sort ain't wanted in Frio, Mesquite Judd. I guess the sooner you hit the trail the better it will be for your health."

"I'm after the Kid."

"The Rio Kid ? "

"Sure ! "

Watson stared at him and withdrew his hand from his gun. His face was still scowling ; the scowl had seldom left it since the day the Rio Kid had come back to his own country. Bitter and deep was the humiliation of the Frio sheriff. The boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had defied him, defeated him, led him and his men into a trap in the sierra, contemptuously spared his life when it was his for the taking. There were murmurings in Frio and in the surrounding ranches. The Kid was too good for the sheriff, and with reckless defiance he still rode the trails untouched, and even ventured into the cow-town to carry his defiance to the sheriff's own door. The Frio sheriff's cup of bitterness was full to overflowing.

But he eyed the gunman doubtfully. Frio did not want a galoot of Mesquite Judd's calibre within its borders; and in other circumstances Watson would have warned him out of the town.

"What's your grouch agin' the Kid?" he asked, after a long pause.

Mesquite shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I guess I ain't got no kick coming, fur as the Kid's concerned. It's the reward I'm after. I heard about it down on the Brazos, and I reckon I've moseyed along to collect it. He's a Thousand-Dollar Kid now." The ruffian grinned. "That's my grouch."

There was another pause. The sheriff's whole nature was against having anything to do with the gunman, or speaking a civil word to him. But in the bitterness of defeat and

humiliation he put that aside. If Mesquite Judd could get the Kid his visit was welcome.

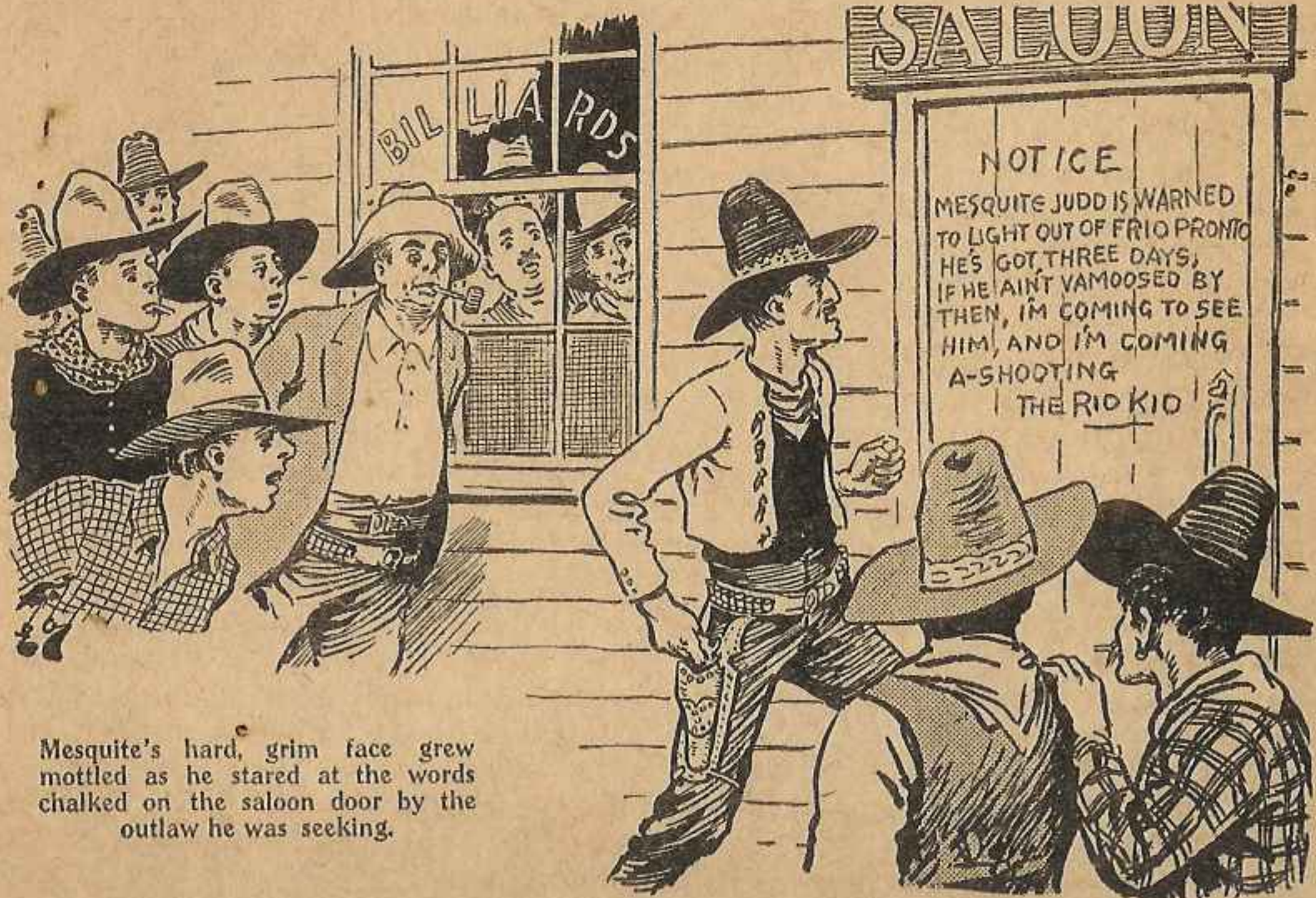
"I reckon you've as much right to go after the Kid as any galoot in Texas!" the sheriff said at last.

"Sure!"

"The reward's there for the man that can get him," said Watson. "If you mean business, Mesquite Judd, I reckon you're free to camp down in Frio as long as you like. I guess I ain't picking faults in any galoot that trails the Rio Kid."

"That's hoss-sense," said Mesquite coolly. "The Kid seems to have got this whole country where he wants it. Down on the Brazos I reckon we'd have got him roped in and strung up afore he could say 'No sugar in mine.' You sure are peaceable galoots in this burg."

"Enough chin-wag," snapped the



Mesquite's hard, grim face grew mottled as he stared at the words chalked on the saloon door by the outlaw he was seeking.

sheriff. "I reckon you won't find it plumb easy if you go after the Kid. You're welcome to try. He's about as easy to find as a weasel, and as easy to catch if you find him. I reckon if you light on him it will be the last thing that will happen to you."

The gunman's eyes gleamed under his beetling brows, and his square jaw was thrust forward. His hand lingered over one of his low-slung guns. The sheriff stared at him steadily; he was not the man to be bulldozed in his own office by a gunman—even a killer of Mesquite's reputation. The threat in the ruffian's look had no effect on him.

"I guess I've pulled on a galoot for saying less than that, Jake Watson," said Mesquite at last.

"Forget it," snapped the sheriff. "Pull a gun here, Mesquite Judd, and you go into the calaboose so quick it will make your head swim. You ain't on the Brazos now."

Mesquite breathed hard.

"I ain't come here hunting for trouble," he said. "I'm after the Kid, and the reward. You put me wise where he was last seen, and I guess I'm hitting the trail to look for him."

"He was last seen up in the Huecas, twenty miles from here," said the sheriff. "He may be there or he may be at the street's end for all I know. He's got gall enough to ride into Frio in the daylight and shoot up the town. And if he does I reckon you won't stop him."

"You watch out and see!" snarled the gunman. "I've heered about that rookus in the Huecas—he got you and your men dead to rights, and sent you home afoot, with a bullet in your fin. There ain't a man in the Frio country can handle the Kid;

but I reckon I can work the raffle—I guess getting that kid puncher will be pie to me."

"Get on with it, then," said the sheriff grimly. "I'll sure be glad to hand over the reward if you tote the Rio Kid into town—dead or alive."

"Dead, I reckon," said the gunman coolly. "I ain't taking no chances, and when I get a bead on the Kid, it will be last sickness for him. Don't you figure on getting him alive to string up—you'll sure miss your guess."

"Dead or alive," repeated the sheriff.

The scowl on the Frio sheriff's face was less black when the Brazos gunman was gone.

His conscience troubled him a little for dealing with a man like the killer. But the Rio Kid had defied the law too long; he had defeated and humiliated the Frio sheriff too deeply. Any man that could get the Rio Kid was welcome to Jake Watson now.

And the sheriff stifled his conscience and waited eagerly for news.

THE SECOND CHAPTER

THE KID'S ANSWER!

ALL Frio watched Mesquite Judd during the next few days with breathless interest. The gunman loafed about town, chiefly at the Red Dog Saloon, where he had taken up his quarters. Every day he mounted his pinto horse and rode out on the trails; but he was generally seen at the Red Dog at night. His hard, bronzed face told nothing, and he was a man of few words. But day followed day and Mesquite had not succeeded in "getting" the Rio Kid. He was known to be as good a man on a trail as he was with a six-gun, but the elusive Kid left little trail to be followed. Indeed, many of the

citizens of Frio, and the punchers on the ranches, opined that if the Kid learned that the killer was on his trail, he would not avoid a meeting but would go out of his way to give Mesquite what he was asking for.

Desperate and dangerous as the gunman was, it was certain that the Rio Kid would not fear a meeting with him; likely enough that he might seek one. Frio was a rough town, and every man in Frio packed a gun; but Frio had its limit, and a gunman of Mesquite's reputation for ferocity was not liked or wanted there.

Had the sheriff given the word the Frio citizens would have gathered in force to run the killer from the Brazos out of town. But it was fairly well known that the sheriff was backing the gunman, or, at least, that he was willing to give him every chance to earn blood-money. And the Frio men were civil to a desperado whose guns had more than a dozen notches cut on them, every notch registering the death of a man.

Once the gunman was absent from town for three nights in succession, and all Frio waited breathlessly for news, many opining that Mesquite had found his man at last and that it was the Kid who had proved victor. But Mesquite rode back to Frio on the fourth day, grim and silent as ever, worn by hard trailing and evidently still unsuccessful.

Getting the Rio Kid was a tougher task than the gunman from the Brazos had figured. But he gave no sign of throwing in his hand. The "killer" could not afford to admit a defeat. He was there to rope in a thousand dollars for the Rio Kid, and he was there till he had done it.

The Double-Bar bunch, if when they rode into town they came on Mesquite, gave him grim looks. On

the Double-Bar Ranch the punchers remembered the Kid with an affectionate memory, and in the bunkhouse there was a suggestion of riding into town in a body and stringing the Brazos gunman up to a branch.

But Old Man Dawney heard of it and intervened. In his own heart there was a soft corner for the Kid, but he would not have his bunch openly taking the side of an outlaw. Savage and ruthless desperado as Mesquite was, a reckless killer of men and a seeker of blood-money, he was standing for the law in his hunt for the Rio Kid. The reward of a thousand dollars stood officially offered for the boy outlaw, and it was open to any man in Texas to earn it if he could. But on the Double-Bar there was not a man who did not long to hear that the Brazos gunman had been found "shot up" on the trails.

And one afternoon as Bud Walsh, the foreman of the ranch, was riding an outlying range by the upper waters of the Rio Frio, thinking of the Kid and wondering how a galoot could get a word of warning to him, he sighted a rider in the post-oaks and waved his hat in greeting, and the Kid came galloping out of the scrub to meet him.

Handsome and sunburnt, cheery and fresh as ever, the Rio Kid sat the saddle of his grey mustang with the black muzzle. He grinned at the ranch foreman.

"You ain't pulling a gun, Bud?" he chuckled.

"I guess not," said the foreman.

"You ain't honing to handle a thousand dollars?" grinned the Kid.

"I guess there's a man in town honing for it," said Bud. "What are you doing here, Kid?"

"Looking at the old range," answered the Kid. "I was raised

hyer, and I reckon, if I ride ever so long a trail, I'll always come trailing back some time to the Double-Bar ranges. I reckon I was sure glad to see you from the post-oaks, Bud."

"I'm sure glad to see you, Kid," said the Double-Bar foreman. "I guess the best advice I can give you is to hit the trail out of the Frio country pronto."

"Sheriff Watson on the warpath again?" grinned the Kid.

"Nope. He's laid up for a piece, since you winged him in the Huecas. But there's a new man in town; you've heard of Mesquite Judd?"

"I sure have," said the Kid. "Seen him once down in the Brazos country. A bad man, Judd."

"He's after your scalp."

"Sho!" said the Kid.

"It's the reward he's honing after," said Bud. "Kid, he's a bad man, is Judd, and he's killed more galoots than he's got fingers and toes. I guess I ain't no slouch with a gun, but I look another way when I come on Judd in Frio. I don't want any trouble with him, Kid. That wolf will get you, soon or late, if you hang on in the Frio country. You sure want to hit the trail for New Mexico, or the Panhandle, till he gets tired and pulls out."

"What's his grouch against me?"

"Blood-money," said Bud briefly. The Kid's eyes gleamed.

"I guess I'll give him a chance to earn it," he said.

"Kid," said the foreman of the Double-Bar earnestly, "give it a miss. That galoot Judd is bad medicine. I guess you're a galoot to whip your weight in wildcats; but Mesquite Judd is a killer, and he's lightning on the draw."

"I ain't jest slow myself," grinned the Kid.

"He'll get you, Kid, if you hang on," said Bud. "I tell you, there's some tough galoots in Frio, but they speak soft when Mesquite is around. He's bad medicine."

The Kid smiled.

"I'll sure give him a chance," he said. "No man is going to hunt the Rio Kid and brag that I'm dodging him So-long, Bud! It won't do you no good if you're seen chewing the rag with an outlaw."

"So-long, Kid!"

The Rio Kid rode away and disappeared into the post-oaks. Bud Walsh rode on his way with a thoughtful brow. He had given the boy puncher a friendly warning, but he wondered whether he might not have done more harm than good. He guessed that the Kid was more likely to seek Mesquite Judd than to avoid him now that he knew that the gunman was hunting him.

In Frio that night some wakeful citizens heard the clatter of a horse's hoofs in the shadowy streets; but it was not till morning that the cowtown knew that the Rio Kid had come—and gone. On the door of the Red Dog Saloon, when Poker Smith opened it, a chalked inscription was to be read, and in half an hour all Frio had read it and commented on it, and when Mesquite Judd came to look at it a breathless crowd watched him.

"The Kid's been in town," said Poker Smith.

Mesquite's hard, grim face grew mottled as he stared at the words chalked on the door by the outlaw he was seeking.

"NOTICE.

"Mesquite Judd is warned to light out of Frio pronto. He's got three days. If he ain't vamoosed by then,



Crack! Swift as the gunman was, the old-timer was swifter. Two reports roared like one. The Stetson hat spun from the old-timer's head, but Mesquite Judd suddenly crumpled up.

I'm coming to see him, and I'm coming a-shooting.

"THE RIO KID."

Black as midnight grew the brow of the killer as he read that defiance. All eyes were on him; some of the crowd were grinning. But the grins died from their faces as Mesquite looked round. From face to face the gunman's cold, hard glance passed, and all eyes dropped before his. He was seeking one man who would venture to mock or to give offence; and if he had found one Mesquite's gun would have seen play in the street of Frio. But there was no man in the cow-town who cared to take up the unspoken challenge. Voices died away and there was a dead silence till the man from the Brazos spoke.

"You, Poker Smith, you reckon the Rio Kid put that up?" he asked.

"Sure," answered the saloon keeper.

"You reckon he was in town last night?"

"Sure."

"You reckon he'll keep his word?"

"The Kid ain't never broke his word, Mesquite."

The gunman knitted his brows.

"I reckon he'll break it this time," he said. "He don't dare to ride into Frio, except at night, sneaking in like a coyote in the dark. He don't dare to come a-shooting."

"To-day's Monday," said Poker Smith. "If you're here on Thursday, Mesquite, the Kid will come, and he will come a-shooting."

"You reckon so for sure?"

"Every galoot in Frio will tell you the same."

The gunman laughed grimly.

"I'll sure be at home when he calls," he said.

And he turned away. Later in the morning came Sheriff Watson, his arm still in a sling; and the sheriff read that chalked notice with bitter joy in his eyes. Mesquite might doubt, but the sheriff of Frio did not doubt; he knew that the Kid would keep his word if he had to ride through a hundred foes armed to the teeth. The sheriff, writhing under defeat and humiliation, saw light at last.

That day he was busy, and the following days. By Wednesday the sheriff's plans were laid and carried out. In the street of Frio armed men loafed and lounged, tried men that the sheriff could trust, men who were quick to shoot and ready to shoot. When Thursday dawned, the last day of grace for Mesquite, the sheriff and his men were watchful as lynxes.

All Frio believed that the Kid would be as good as his word; all Frio believed, knew, that he would come to seek the Brazos gunman as he had declared that he would. And all Frio knew that he could never get away alive. Whatever might be his luck in a shooting-play with the Brazos killer, he could not escape the sheriff. Once he was in the town he would be surrounded, shot down without mercy if he resisted arrest, and the long trail would be ended.

That day at early dawn men were riding into Frio from all sides. The news had spread far and wide—all along the Frio and the Pecos it was breathlessly discussed in ranch and bunk-house. Every puncher who could get away from the ranges rode into Frio that day.

The plaza swarmed with punchers

in Stetsons and chaps; the Red Dog saloon overflowed with a buzzing crowd. Every man who rode in was scanned by a hundred pairs of eyes lest he should be the Rio Kid.

At what hour the Kid would come no man knew or could guess, but that he would come all were certain. Among the crowd moved the sheriff's men, alert, watchful, hand near gun, watching for the handsome, reckless Kid.

At his office sat Sheriff Watson, grim, patient, relentless, with half a dozen of his men loafing on the benches outside ready for his call, ready for action at the first rumour that the Kid was in town or had been seen on the trails.

Outside the Red Dog saloon, cool, grim, silent, lounged Mesquite Judd. He had not gone—he had not thought of going. He was waiting for the Rio Kid to keep his word.

THE THIRD CHAPTER

THE OLD-TIMER!

THE old-timer who dismounted at the Red Dog in the hot afternoon, looked as if he had collected most of the dust on the prairie trail. His horse was a mustang, with white muzzle and white stockings; a handsome, sinewy animal. But the old-timer himself looked as if he had survived from the old days before the Mexican War. His face, brown as a berry, was thick with a grizzly beard and grey moustache; his Stetson hat was a dusty rag, and ragged grey locks escaped from under it. His buckskin clothes were old and worn, and covered with dust; his spurs were red with rust. He packed a gun; but if his gun was anything like the rest of him, it did not look like being of much service.

He hitched the white-muzzled

mustang to the rack, and stared at the buzzing crowd that swarmed outside the saloon. So many horses were hitched there that there was scarcely room for another. Horses were tethered everywhere in Frio that day; the cow-town looked as if half the population of the county had ridden in. And the old-timer stared in surprise under his shaggy grey eyebrows.

"Say, what's the rookus?" he inquired, addressing nobody in particular. "Is it a necktie party to-day, fellers?"

Some of the crowd grinned at him. Many an old-timer wandered into Frio at one time or another, but this specimen was the rustiest, dustiest specimen the Frio men had ever seen.

"Ain't seed the Kid on the trail, have you, old-timer?" asked two or three voices.

The old fellow blinked at them.

"What kid?"

"The Rio Kid, you durned old hobo," said Euchre Dick. "Ain't you heard that the Rio Kid is expected in town to-day?"

"Oh, that goldarned young firebug," said the old-timer. "Has the sheriff got him at last, then?"

"Nope!"

And as the old-timer seemed unaware of the thrilling happenings that impended, a dozen pilgrims obligingly gave him the news. The old-timer listened with interest.

"That Kid is sure some firebug," he said. "I reckon he will keep his word, you 'uns."

"That's what we all reckon."

"And the sheriff won't give him a chance to vamoose this time, I reckon," said Santa Fé Sam, of the Bar-io, "I'll tell a man. Jake Watson's got twenty men watching for him, and when the Kid moseys in, it will be him for the long jump."

"Sho!" said the old-timer. "That don't seem fair play to me, fellers, if he's coming in for gun-play with a galoot what's hunting him."

"You bet the sheriff ain't losing a chance like this," chuckled Euchre Dick. "The Kid's asking for it this time, and you can bet that he will get it right where he lives."

"And when is he a-coming?" asked the old-timer.

"Nobody knows—but he'll come."

"He'll sure come," said Santa Fé Sam. "The Kid's a galoot of his word. He warned Mesquite to quit, and Mesquite ain't quit. The Kid will come a-shooting before the day's out."

There was a roar down the street, an alarm that the Rio Kid was seen. There was a rush of the crowd. But it was a false alarm; the man riding in was only a puncher from the Cross-Bar Ranch. The old-timer stood leaning on the wall of the saloon, watching the excited crowd with interested eyes. His eyes turned from the buzzing throng to the hard-faced gunman who lounged near the door.

Mesquite Judd was there, and he was ready. His low-slung guns had been hitched forward, ready to his hands; his keen, deep-set eyes were alert.

If the Kid came—or when he came—it was doubtful whether he would get as far as gun-play with the man from the Brazos; for the sheriff's men had orders to seize him at sight, and to shoot him down without hesitation if he offered resistance. The instant the Kid was seen riding into Frio, guns would be levelled; and as nobody expected him to surrender, all Frio expected to see him fall riddled with bullets.

Mesquite Judd, threatened with the loss of the blood-money he sought if the Kid fell into the sheriff's hands

without his assistance, only hoped that he would be the man to pull trigger first on the boy outlaw.

The old-timer watched him quietly for a few minutes. The crowd came surging back to the Red Dog; the Kid was not seen yet. Many believed that he would not come till night had fallen; in the dark he would have more chance of getting away again—though the chance would be slight enough. The old-timer entered into the incessant talk that was going on in the crowd outside the saloon. Like most old-timers, he was talkative; and he confided to uninterested ears that his name was Buck Davis, and that he was called Panhandle Buck, because he had punched cows along the Panhandle in the days of his prime.

"How long ago was that, old-timer?" grinned Santa Fé Sam.

"I sort of disremember," said the dusty old puncher. "But it wasn't so long ago as you might calculate. I reckon I ain't so old as I look. But I can tell you 'uns one thing—I don't think any great shucks of this town, or of the galoots in it. You let a gunman like Mesquite Judd bulldoze you all he wants. I reckon if this was a white man's town that all-fired scallywag would be fired out of it so quick it would make his head swim."

There was a sudden hush. The taunt was irritating enough to the men of Frio; and it was uttered loudly in full hearing of Mesquite Judd, who was leaning on the wall of the saloon only a few yards from the old-timer as he spoke.

Mesquite looked round with a gleam in his deep-set eyes. But he gave a shrug of contempt as he saw who the speaker was. That grey-bearded puncher was not worth his powder and shot.

"You want to watch how you

shoot off your mouth hyer, you durned old fool!" said Santa Fé Sam. "That's Mesquite jest yonder, and if he got mad with you I reckon you'd never know what hit you!"

Panhandle Buck glanced round.

"Where's Mesquite?" he demanded, in a loud voice. "If that gunman has got all you galoots cold, he ain't got me cold, and don't you forget it! I'm spry an' ready to tell a hound like Mesquite Judd that I sure reckon he's a scallywag and a murderer, and if he don't like it I've got a gun hyer ready to back it up!"

"Oh, shucks!" gasped Euchre Dick.

The whole crowd gasped. For the moment even the Rio Kid was forgotten, and all attention was fixed on the dusty old cowpuncher who hurled that reckless defiance at the killer from the Brazos feared by every man in Frio.

Mesquite drew himself from the wall of the saloon. His dark, hard face was darker and more savage. He made a stride towards the old puncher.

"I guess I'm Mesquite Judd, you old rat of the desert!" he said grimly. "You got anything more to say?"

And the Frio crowd looked on, expecting to see the old-timer wilt and back away in fear from the anger he had roused. But the puncher from the Panhandle did not move.

"You Mesquite, are you?" he said. "You the killer that ought to have been strung up down on the Brazos? Yep! I got some more to say. I'll tell the world, if this town had any gall they'd take you and hang you on the nearest cotton-wood, for the murdering coyote that you are, Mesquite Judd."

The hand of the gunman moved to his gun. But instead of touching it he clenched his fist.

A moment more and the puncher

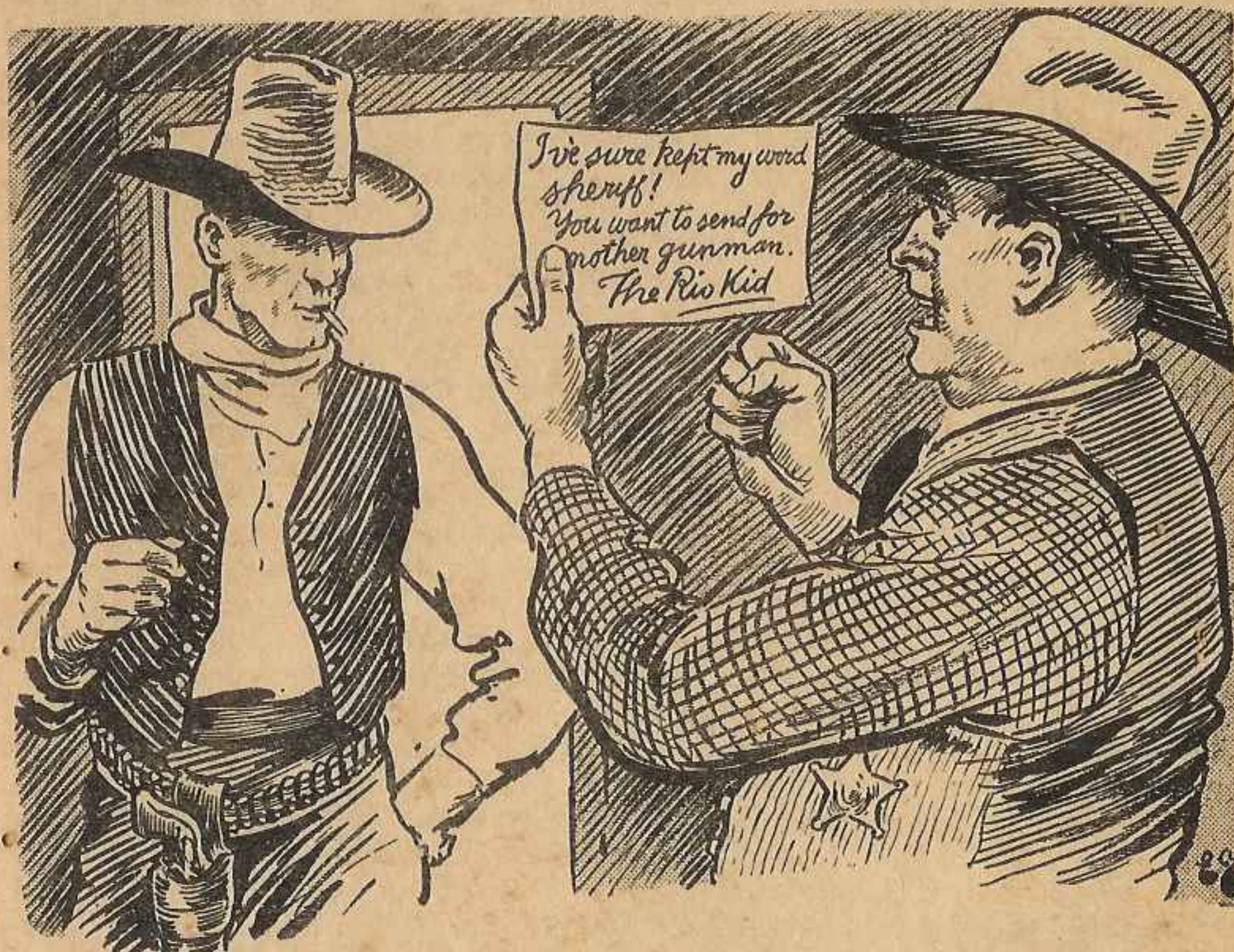
from the Panhandle would have been hurled into the middle of the street by a crashing blow.

But that blow was never delivered.

With an activity surprising in one who looked so old and grey, the Panhandle puncher side-stepped, closed in on the gunman, and struck. And there was a gasp from the Frio crowd as Mesquite Judd went staggering back, to fall at full length on the earth.

knocked down by the puncher from the Panhandle. He lay dazed; and the Frio crowd gazed on almost in terror. It was certain that there would be shooting now; and the old-timer would be filled with holes as soon as Mesquite got to his gun.

In the wild excitement of this new episode no one thought of the Rio Kid—the boy outlaw might have ridden into Frio unnoticed at that



Jake Watson stood rooted to the floor, staring at the words. "The Kid!" The sheriff of Frio found his voice. "Who gave you this note?"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER

SHOT FOR SHOT!

"GEE-WHIZ!"

The whole crowd gasped; and as they gasped they backed rapidly out of the line of fire, for shooting was certain.

Mesquite Judd lay at full length—

moment. The man feared by all the cow-town, the man reputed a ruthless killer, the man who was never known to miss his aim, had been knocked down by the old puncher, and lay panting in the dust. The old puncher from the Panhandle had recklessly evoked the trouble that every man in

Frio had been careful to avoid. And he did not seem alarmed. He was standing at ease, his hand near his gun, watching the man from the Brazos like a cat, evidently ready for what would follow. Old-timer as he looked, there was more "sand" in him than in any man in Frio.

Mesquite staggered to his feet. The look in his deep-set eyes might have made any man tremble. The old-timer grinned at him.

"You Mesquite," he jeered. "They say the Rio Kid has warned you to vamoose the ranch, and you sure better hit the trail while you're healthy. If the boys hyer ain't got enough sand to handle you, I guess I'm the galoot to do it; and if you want gun-play, you doggoned gink, I'm your mutton, with the wool on!"

Mesquite gave him a murderous look.

"You're sure goin' to get gun-play old-timer, whether you want it or not," he grated between his teeth.

The breathless crowd surged farther back. Mesquite had not reached for a gun yet—but it was coming. He backed away a few paces, his eyes on the man from the Panhandle, watching him like a cat. The old-timer backed away in his turn. Neither had he reached for a gun; but under his shaggy brows his eyes were keenly alert.

There was a pause; and the silence that fell on the swarming crowd in the plaza of Frio was like death. Every man knew that when Mesquite Judd reached for a gun his movement would be like lightning, and that swift movement would be followed instantly by a rain of bullets, riddling the man who had recklessly defied him. The pause was counted by seconds but the seconds seemed like hours to the crowd staring on with bated breath.

There was a sudden, tigerish move-

ment of the gunman; his gun was in his hand.

Crack!

Swift as he was, the old-timer was swifter. Before the gunman's hand came up to the level, a revolver appeared as if by magic in the old-timer's hand, and was turned instantly into a stream of fire and smoke.

The two reports roared like one; but one was a fraction of time the quicker.

The tattered Stetson spun from the old-timer's head and dropped behind him.

Mesquite Judd was seen to stagger. Then suddenly he crumpled up and rolled on the earth.

There was a breathless yell.

"Mesquite's got his!"

"Great snakes!"

The old-timer picked up his hat, and grinned at the bullet-hole in the tattered brim. Mesquite lay where he had fallen, his hand still grasping the Colt that he was powerless to use again. A surging, swarming crowd surrounded the old-timer—the dusty old puncher from the Panhandle, the only man ever known to beat Mesquite Judd to the draw.

"Gee-whiz!" Poker Smith glared breathlessly from the doorway of the Red Dog. "Mesquite's got his! Say, old-timer, I reckon you was some gunman in your time!"

"I reckon so!" assented the old-timer, with a grin. "I sure reckon I'm some gunman still, feller."

"Mesquite won't never get the Rio Kid now!" grinned Euchre Dick.

"He sure will not!" said the old-timer.

And at that mention of the Rio Kid the crowd remembered for what they had gathered there, and eyes were turned again on the street and the trail. The Brazos gunman, desperately wounded and almost unconscious, was

carried into his room in the Red Dog ; the old-timer slipped away quietly in the crowd.

Outside the sheriff's office the sheriff's waiting men stared at the old-timer, who came loping up on his mustang with the white muzzle and the white stockings. They grinned at the dusty old-timer ; but they grinned with respect—they had to respect the man who had faced the dreaded gunman from the Brazos, and shot him up.

" Say, fellers," drawled the old-timer, " is this here shebang the sheriff's office ? "

" You've said it, old 'un ! " answered Poker Pete.

" Sheriff at home ? "

" Yep. "

" I kinder reckon I've got a note for him," said the old-timer, fumbling in his ragged shirt, and drawing out a folded paper. " There's news in that letter, feller, about the Rio Kid, that young firebug that Jake Watson is horing to get. You hand that note to the sheriff. "

Poker Pete took the folded paper, and the old-timer rode swiftly out of the town, and, once on the open trail, spurred his mustang to a racing speed.

Sheriff Watson unfolded carelessly enough the paper that Poker Pete handed to him. But when he glanced at it a sudden change came over his face, and he gave a gasping cry. Only a few words were written on the paper :

" I've sure kept my word, sheriff ! You want to send for another gunman.

" THE RIO KID. "

Jake Watson stood rooted to the floor, staring at the words. For the moment he seemed paralysed. Poker Peter looked at him in wonder.

" The Kid ! " The sheriff of Frio found his voice. " Who gave you this note ? Where is he ? After him—— "

" I guess it was the old-timer that shot up Mesquite Judd—— "

" It was the Kid ! " roared the sheriff, mad with fury. " Follow me ! Shoot him on sight ! "

He choked with rage as he rushed from the office into the street.

" The Kid ! "

The word passed from mouth to mouth. Up and down Frio men sought the old-timer—the grey-bearded puncher from the Panhandle—out on the prairie trails, horsemen swept at full gallop, gun in hand. Like wildfire the news ran and buzzed through Frio. The Rio Kid had kept his word ; he had come—and he had gone. But Frio had not known him when he came—they knew who the old-timer was only when he had gone.

There was mounting in haste in Frio, running and riding, wild spurring on all the trails that led from the town ; but at sundown weary horsemen came loping in, unsuccessful. The Rio Kid had kept his word, and that day he had ridden into Frio and faced his enemy there and beaten him ; but the boundless prairie had swallowed him up again, and the sheriff raged and raved in vain.

Afar in the trackless chaparral, the Rio Kid had stripped off the disguise that had hidden his well-known handsome face from hundreds of eyes that knew it well, and washed the paint from the legs and muzzle of the grey mustang. Out on the darkening plain he could hear the distant, echoing thunder of galloping horses ; and he laughed as he heard it. The reward was not yet earned for the Thousand-Dollar Kid !

THE END