

**THE KID DOESN'T CARE!**

hits upon a mystery in the heart of the foothills—a big mystery—and regardless of the dangers, he investigates!

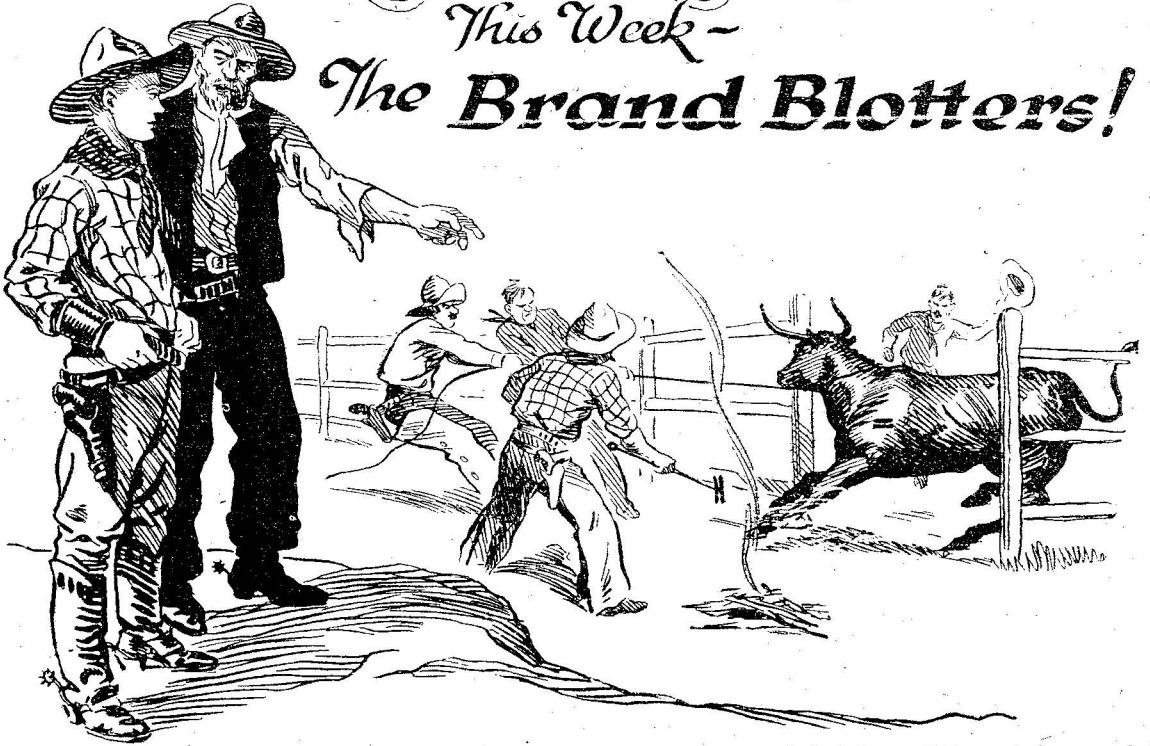
The Kid's in hot water again this week, chaps! This young dare-devil outlaw

# THE RIO KID!

By *Ralph Redway*

*This Week -*

## *The Brand Blotters!*



### THE FIRST CHAPTER. In the Staked Plain!

**A**NOTHER shot rang from the rocks high up the canyon, but the Rio Kid was already in cover. The first bullet had spun the Stetson from his handsome head, and the second followed it fast. But it was not the first time that the Kid had owed his life to his rapid perception of danger.

The bullet hummed by. The Kid, crouching behind a rugged boulder, heard it spatter on the stones a dozen yards away. The mustang was in cover with his master. Out in the sunshine lay the Kid's hat, with a hole through the wide brim of it.

The Kid laughed softly.

But he was puzzled.

On every trail in the cow country between the Pecos and the Rio Grande, there was danger for the Kid. But he had thought to leave danger behind when he headed for the Staked Plain. In that grim desert of arid thirst and solitude the outcast of the Double Bar Ranch had looked for no foe, for no company save that of the wheeling, screeching buzzards.

From the grassy plains the great table-land of the Llano Estacado rose steeply like a rampart. The narrow canyon split the steep side, and gave dangerous access from the plains to the upper country. The Kid's mustang had been picking a sure-footed way up

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**THE SECOND OF OUR NEW  
SERIES OF WESTERN TALES,  
STARRING AN AMAZING  
CHARACTER—THE RIO KID.  
MAKE HIS ACQUAINTANCE  
RIGHT NOW!**

among the strewn boulders, when the shooting started from above.

The Kid's leap into cover had occupied the fraction of a second. But he had seen a curl of smoke from a clump of pecans fifty yards up the steep canyon. There was his enemy, the unseen marksman who had pulled trigger at sight of him.

The Kid thought it out.

Some outcast of the desert, some greedy half-breed, might have shot him down for his horse and his guns. But it was not that. The man hidden in the pecans was watching the canyon; he was on guard there. Which implied that there was something beyond, that there was something afoot in the lonely desert where the Kid had expected to meet no human soul.

It would have been easy for the Kid to worm his way down among the rocks and escape again to the lower plains. But the thought of doing so did not cross his mind. He was interested to know what was going on in that desolate section of the Staked Plain;

what it was that was being guarded so carefully and so ruthlessly. And he was keen to come to closer quarters with the man who had burnt powder. The Rio Kid was not to be turned into a target for gun-practice with impunity.

The Kid lay low and thought it out, smiling. But he moved at last. Not a sound or a movement came from the clump of pecans up the canyon. The unseen man there was watching and waiting. His rifle was ready for another shot if the Kid showed himself. But the Kid did not show himself. He moved among the rocks on his stomach like one of the green lizards that crawled near him. It was an old game to the Kid. From one rock to another, by shallow gully and narrow crevice, he crawled, slow, cautious, and patient as a cougar creeping on its prey. His mustang lay motionless where he had left him. Slowly and surely, unseen and silent, the Kid wormed his way up the rock-strewn canyon, past the clump of half a dozen scrubby pecans where the rifleman lay concealed.

He was above the man now, and he came out of cover.

He knew that he had not been seen or heard. The rifleman was still watching the canyon below, and his back was to the Kid.

There was a gun in the Kid's hand as he crept into the pecans from the upper side—the side where the sentinel looked for no danger.

A big Stetson hat half hid the man who was kneeling in the scrub, rifle in

hand, watching the lower canyon, muttering curses in his impatience.

Soft-footed, the Kid stepped behind him.

The cold metal rim of a .45 pressed against the back of a brawny neck, and the kneeling man gave a sudden convulsive start.

"Drop that iron!"

The Kid's voice was soft—soft as a cooing dove; but the revolver rim grinding into the brawny neck was not soft.

The rifle was dropped.

"Gee-whiz!"

A startled stubby face was swung round at the Kid.

"Stand up!"

The man stood up. Without waiting to be bidden, he raised his hands above his head.

The Kid looked at him, smiling at the astonished fury in the stubby face. With his left hand he jerked a Colt from the ruffian's holster, and tossed it carelessly away through the pecans.

"Now what's the game, feller?" asked the Kid pleasantly.

"You've got me."

"Looks like it, sure," assented the Kid. "You've spoiled my best hat, feller. Any reason why I shouldn't spoil you—for keeps?" He made a motion with his gun-hand.

The man was staring at him hard. Recognition was dawning in the stubby face.

"By hokey! It's the Rio Kid!" he ejaculated.

"Right in once," assented the Kid.

"I've never seen you before that I know of."

"I guess I've seen you, Kid," chuckled the rustler. "I've seen you shooting up Frio."

The Kid's face clouded for a moment.

"After you was boosted off the Double Bar?" The man dropped his hands. "Put up your gun, Kid. If I'd savvied it was you, I'd never have pulled trigger. Dog don't eat dog."

The Rio Kid winced.

Every sheriff and town-marshal on both sides of the Rio Pecos would have given much to lay hands on the Kid. Yet it was the Kid's pride that he had nothing in common with rustler and cow thief. The Kid would have been a welcome recruit in any gang that ran stolen steers across the border into Mexico. But he played a long hand.

The colour mounted into the handsome sunburnt face, and his hand gripped harder on his gun. But the rustler, confident now, went on, with a grin.

"Dave Finn, that's me. I was at the Circle Cross when you was at the Double Bar, Kid. You was boosted out for—"

"Let up on that!" snapped the Kid.

The man grinned again.

"What's the game here?" asked the Kid quietly. "You're not alone on this stunt, whatever it is?"

"Six of us," said Dave Finn, "and a better game than rouncing up steers for Old Man Peters at the Circle Cross. It's the game for you, Kid, and I reckon every hombre in the gang will welcome you with open arms. It's up against the Double Bar."

"How?"

"Ever heard of brand blotting?"

The Kid nodded impatiently.

"That's the stunt."

"Steer stealing and blotting out the brands on the cattle?" asked the Kid slowly.

"Co-rect."

"Here, in the Staked Plain? There's no feed for cattle in the Staked Plain," said the Kid.

"Only in spots," said Finn. "There's a spot of feed at the top of this canyon. I guess we drive the steers here, and put the new brands on them. Then they're driven to the Cross Bar Ranch. Sabe? Two bars brands across the double bar turns a Double Bar steer into a Cross Bar. We've driven them right under the eyes of the Double Bar outfit, and they never savvied worth a cent. Old Man Dawney at the Double Bar is missing cattle, and putting it down to rustlers across the river. But his steers don't go into Mexico. They go to the rail-head and into the cars for San Antone and Austin. Savvy?"

The Kid whistled.

"And who runs the Cross Bar Ranch?" he asked.

"Dandy Smith. There's a fortune in it, Kid, till the game's up." Finn jerked his hand towards the bend of the upper canyon. "The camp's there. You sashay along with me, Kid, and the boys will give you a welcome. They'll be plumb glad to have you. You was boosted off the Double Bar. I've heered that Old Man Dawney showed you off the ranch with a gun in his fist. Now's your chance to get back on him. You was the best hand with a rope on the Double Bar, and I guess you ain't forgotten how."

The Kid's brow contracted in thought.

Finn watched him anxiously.

"You'll take a hand, Kid? I tell you there's a fortune in it. You moscy along with me to the camp. It's your chance to get back on Old Man Dawney and the Double Bar outfit. We want a good man with the lariat, and you're all that. Is it a cinch?"

The Kid burst into a laugh.

"I guess I'll think it over," he said. "I'll moscy along to the camp, anyhow, and see the boys."

Finn nodded, and his eyes glittered. If the Kid joined up, well and good; if he turned the offer down, he was not likely to get out of the cow-thieves' camp alive to tell what he knew. The Kid read his thoughts like an open book, but his smile did not change. He was taking his life in his hand, but the Kid was used to that.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### The Brand Blotters!

THE smell of burnt hair and flesh was sickening. But the Rio Kid had been used to that in the old days at the round-ups, and he hardly noticed it, if at all. Four men were at work in the camp in the upper canyon. Another had gone to take Dave Finn's place on guard below. Finn lounged with the Kid, pointing out things to him with an air of pride. And the Kid, whatever his thoughts were, admired.

Hot as the sun was, a camp-fire blazed, to heat the branding irons. Four sweating ruffians laboured, stretching steer after steer, jamming the hot iron on the squealing brute's hide, blotting out the old brand with a new one. It was hard and weary work, but there was, as Finn had said, a fortune in it. For they were not branding for an employer, like the punchers at the round-ups on the ranches. They were branding stolen cattle, to be sold for their own profit.

The Kid, as he watched and noted, could not help admiring. It was a stunt worthy of Dandy Smith, a man he had heard of but never met. The Dandy, sometimes a gambler at the river camps, sometimes a rustler on the llano, had given up wild ways and

bought a little hacienda, with a few hundred acres, from a greaser who had failed to make it pay, and who had sold it for an old song. He had named it the Cross Bar Ranch, and started to raise cattle. And he made it pay, as its previous owner had never done, for he drew on the almost countless herds of the neighbouring Double Bar.

Old Man Dawney's brand was a double bar.

Dandy Smith's brand was a double cross bar:



The punchers on the Cross Bar Ranch were rustlers when the sun was down. Stray steers from the Double Bar, on the boundless plains, stray bunches of steers, were roped in, and driven rapidly off to the canyon in the Staked Plain.

There the double bar became a cross bar, and the steers were recognisable anywhere as belonging to the Cross Bar Ranch.

Every day almost stolen steers came and went at the camp in the canyon, many a long mile from the rounds that the cowboys rode.

Old Man Dawney was a rich man, and he hardly knew the numbers of his herds. But he knew that many steers had vanished, and set down his losses to dusky cow-thieves, across the Rio Grande. Brand blotting was an old game in Texas, an old and dangerous game; but Old Man Dawney never suspected that it was going on under his nose. The Cross Bar Ranch was open to inspection. There was no sign of brand blotting there—no trail of lost steers ever led in the direction of Dandy Smith's ranch. Not till they were branded with his own brand did Dandy Smith see them at the Cross Bar, whence they were driven to the railroad.

Hundreds of steers, once the property of Old Man Dawney, had gone through the brand blotter's hands, and had been shipped off by rail by Dandy Smith, to be turned into beef for the cattle-thieves' profit. And, so far, there was no suspicion.

"Nary a suspicion!" chuckled Dave Finn. "Ask the sheriff of Frio, and he'll allow that brand blotting has been stamped out in this section. Ask any town marshal along the Pecos. It was sure a big idea of the Dandy's."

"I allow it was," agreed the Kid.

His keen eyes roved round.

At the level of the Stake Plain, the canyon, narrow below, widened out almost into a valley. A spring bubbled up among the rocks. Where there was no water there was vegetation. It was a little patch of fertility in the midst of the barren desert. Few riders of the lower prairies would ever have had the curiosity to ride up the rocky canyon. That fertile patch was probably not known to one in a hundred of the punchers in the section. There was feed for some hundreds of cattle there; but, as Dave Finn explained, there were seldom more than thirty to fifty steers at the camp. They came and went. It was safer to move them in small bunches.

The Kid watched the brand blotters at work.

There was a corral by the spring, and a steer was roped and led out of the corral, heeled over by a couple of the men, while another wielded the branding-iron, hot from the fire.

A pressure of the hot iron, a squeal from the steer, a raucous scent of burnt hide, and the double bar was changed into the cross bar, the registered brand of the Cross Bar Ranch.

The steer was roped back into the corral, and another took his place.

So it went on.

There were forty or fifty steers to be dealt with, and each, after it had been branded, was indubitably the legal property of the owner of the Cross Bar Ranch. For only by the branded sign could one steer be told from another. Old Man Dawney would never have known his own beasts, had they been driven under his ranch windows, after the brand blotters had done their work.

"Great!" said the Kid.

He laughed.

"You're in it, Kid!" said Finn eagerly. "You get back on Old Man Dawney, sabe? And we want a man who can handle a rope as you do."

The Kid's lip curled.

He understood that.

The rustlers were not good punchers. The Dandy's gang was the siffraff of the cow country. An expert with the lasso like the Rio Kid would have been invaluable to the gang. More than that. In a tight corner, with a sheriff's posse on the trail, the Kid's gun would have been more valuable still to the cattle-lifters. To run off cattle under cover of night, to shoot down any unsuspecting wanderer who happened near the camp, was one thing. To face the sheriff of Frio, or a crowd of angry punchers, was quite another. The Kid was the man for that.

"How long's it been going on?" asked the Kid.

"Three months."

"And nobody spotted this lay-out?"

Finn grinned.

"You was the third hombre that came moseying up the canyon, Kid."

"And the first two?"

"I guess they never knew what hit them."

The Kid nodded. He could guess that the desperate gang did not run any risk of change discovery. Only by way of the steep path up the canyon from the lower plains could discovery come; and there, in the clump of pecans, a man was kept on the watch. To shoot at sight. Dandy Smith did not believe in half-measures. Only the buzzards, wheeling high over the Staked Plain, knew what became of the hapless wanderers whose ill-luck led them near the headquarters of the brand blotters.

The Kid's lips set in a hard line.

There were half a dozen of the gang there, and they had welcomed him. Evidently they

looked on the outcast of the Double Bar as one of themselves, a coyote of the same colour. Perhaps it was because they had welcomed him, rascals as they were, that the Kid's gun stayed in its holster. Perhaps he was tempted to fall to Finn's proposition. It was true that he had been driven off the Double Bar at the muzzle of Old Man Dawney's revolver. It was true that a false suspicion had turned him from a care-free cowpuncher into the outcast of the Rio Grande. There was a bag of dollars in the proposition, and revenge on the ranch that had cast him adrift—revenge on the hot-headed rancher who had treated him like a Digger Indian. Perhaps the Kid was tempted. His face expressed nothing.

"You're in it, Kid?" persisted Finn.

"I guess I'm thinking it over."

An ugly look came over Finn's stubbly face.

"You gotta think one way," he said. "You're here now, Kid. Every man in this outfit packs a gun."

The Kid laughed lightly.

"If you want gun-play what's stopping you?" he asked.

The rustler shrank from the clear glance of his eyes.

"It's a cinch, Kid. The Dandy will be here to-day, and you'll see him. Talk to him soft. The Dandy isn't a good man to rile."

"I've never talked soft to a cow thief."

Finn's eyes glittered.

"What does that mean, Kid? You don't bank on bein' allowed to go free and tell what you've seen here?"

"I bank on doing just as I darned well choose," said the Rio Kid coolly.

"I guess I'll wait and see the Dandy and talk to him. If that isn't good enough there's six of you 'uns here and one of me, and my gun's ready to speak up."

"It's good enough, Kid," said Dave Finn hurriedly.

"Then I'll wait."

And the Kid idled and waited, while the burning sun sank lower and lower beyond the Staked Plain towards the sierras of New Mexico.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

#### Gun Play!

NIGHT on the Staked Plain. A strange name for a strange land.

In the old days, when the Spaniards held all the wide South-West, a trail had run across the high table-land from Texas to Santa Fe, in New Mexico, but sand and dust blotted out the track, and whitened bones in the desert told where travellers had lost their way. And then great wooden stakes had been set up at regular intervals to mark the trail. Long since had the stakes rotted away—vanished, like the Spanish conquerors who had set them up. But the name remained. The Staked Plain, or Llano Estacado, in the musical tongue of the old conquerors.

Against the black velvet of the night the camp fire in the canyon danced and gleamed. The branding was over; the rustlers were gathered round the fire, eating flap-jacks, talking or smoking. Glances were cast at the Rio Kid, lounging against a big rock at a short distance from the fire. Welcome—more than welcome—as a member of the out-cast gang, but doomed to grim death otherwise. The Kid knew it, if the dark glances of the rustlers had not told him so; he had known the chance he was taking when he came into the camp with the sentry he had outwitted. But he leaned on the big rock and hummed a tune. His mustang was tethered to the corral fence, relieved of saddle and bridle. Five men at the camp fire, and the guard half-way down the canyon, if the Kid had thought of making a rush for it. But he was not thinking of that. Yet the position he had taken up, careless as his aspect was, looked as if he knew his danger. With the big rock behind him, he had his enemies all in front, if it came to gun-play.

From the shadows of the deep canyon came a sound.

"I guess that's the Dandy!"

There was a clatter of roofs on the rock.

It was one of the gang, for had it been a stranger the sentinel's rifle would have been heard.

The Kid glanced at the horseman who rode into the light of the camp fire. The rustlers all rose to their feet. The Kid not move.

Dandy Smith alighted.

The Dandy was a well-dressed man. He looked like a prosperous rancher, oddly enough, in contrast with the ruffians gathering round him. He was about to speak, but even as his lips opened he saw the stranger in the camp. His hand was on his gun instantly. The Kid smiled, and did not stir.

"Who's that?" rapped out the Dandy.

"The Rio Kid."

"By gum!"

The owner of the Cross



CAUGHT NAPPING! Soft-footed, the Kid stepped behind the gunman in the shrubs. The cold rim of a .45 pressed against the back of a brawny neck, and the kneeling man gave a convulsive start. "Drop that iron!" (See Chapter 1.)



Bar Ranch stared at the Kid with lively interest. It was a name well known to him. But his gun was in his hand now. Still the Kid did not stir. His hands were in the pockets of his buckskin breeches as he lounged against the tall rock. He did not withdraw them.



"And you're the Kid?" said Dandy Smith.

"Correct!"  
 "How did you get here?" The Dandy's eyes gleamed round at the rustlers. "Who let a stranger pass up the canyon?"

"Don't blame your gang, Dandy," drawled the Kid. "I guess your man Finn knocked a hole through my best hat. It would have been through my head if I'd wasted time. He did his best. After that I didn't give him a chance."

"The Kid's a good man, boss," said Dave Finn. "I figured it out he would go in with us. He's sure got it up agin the Double Bar outfit."

Dandy Smith nodded.  
 "And if he doesn't?"  
 "Waal, he's here," said Finn. "He had me dead to rights down in the canyon, after I'd missed him. I guess we've got the Kid dead to rights hyer, if he don't do the sensible thing."

"That's a cinch," agreed the Dandy. But his eyes watched the Kid suspiciously. The Kid met his glance with a bland smile.

"Well, what about it, Kid?" asked the rancher. "You know the game here—"

"Cattle stealing and brand blotting," assented the Kid. "Some game?"

"We're working the Double Bar Ranch," said Dandy Smith, "where you were boosted out of the outfit, Kid. There's room for a good man, and I guess it would be pie to you to make Old Man Dawney pay for firing you."

"It would be pie," said the Kid.  
 "Then you're on?"

The Rio Kid shook his head slowly.  
 "Forget it," he said, in a drawl.  
 "I'm not on. I guess I told Finn I'd think it over."

**SOME SHOT!** "You're the only galoot that's got into this camp alive, Kid; but you're not getting out of it alive!" And Dandy Smith swung up his gun. Crack! It was not Smith's gun that barked; it was the Kid's. He had fired point-blank at the rustler through his pocket. (See Chapter 3.)

"Well?"  
 The Dandy's eyes gleamed dangerously.

"I've thought it over," said the Kid calmly. "It's not good enough. I draw the line at riding the ranges with cow-thieves."

"You're wanted for a score of hold-ups all over the State."

"I'm wanted for more little matters than you've ever heard of, Dandy Smith," said the Kid, unmoved. "But not one of them is cattle stealing. No man ever missed a steer from his herd because the Rio Kid was around. Old Man Dawney will see me again some day. But not lifting his cattle."

"Put it plain," snarled the rancher. "Are you joining this outfit and taking orders from me?"

The Kid laughed.  
 "If you knew me, Mr. Smith, you'd know that I take no orders from any galoot that ever walked on two legs."

"You'll take orders from me."  
 "I guess not," said the Kid lazily.

Dandy Smith watched him like a cat. His gun was in his hand and the Kid's hands were idly in his pockets. Long before the Kid could have withdrawn a hand and reached for a gun the Dandy could have filled him with lead. But the Kid still smiled.

"It's not good enough, sabe?" drawled the Kid. "I guess I'm going to get back on Old Man Dawney and the Double Bar outfit—in my own way. Not in your way, Dandy Smith. But go ahead with your brand-blotting game. I'm not chipping in."

"That don't go, Kid. Do you figure on getting out of this?"

"Sure."  
 "To tell what you've seen here?"  
 "Nix! No funeral of mine," said the Kid. "When I ride out of the canyon down below I'll forget it."

"Do you figure that that's good enough for us?"

"I guess that it's got to be."  
 Dandy Smith laughed, with a laugh that was like a snarl. There was a murmur from the brand blotters.

"I'm a slave of my word," drawled the Kid. "I'll forget it. I keep on telling you that it's not my funeral."

"That cuts no ice here, Kid," said the rancher. "You've been given your chance and I guess we don't trust to your keeping your mouth shut. I've sunk a bag of dollars in the Cross Bar Ranch and it's beginning to pay me back. No hombre is goin' out of this camp alive to tell a story about brand-blotting goin' on in the Staked Plain. You get me, feiler?"

"I get you," nodded the Kid. "You don't figure on taking my word?"

"Not on your life."  
 "Then I take it back," said the Kid lazily. "I'd feel pretty sick at letting this dirty game go on, anyhow. When I get out of here, I'm bumping it for the Double Bar, to put them wise about your branding game. It's up to me now."

Dandy Smith laughed again.  
 "And that's the Rio Kid—the hardest case on the border, the galoot that a  
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dozen sheriffs are plumb anxious to get hold of" he jeered. "Talking like a fool while he's looking at a gun. You're the only galoot that's got through into this camp alive, Kid; but you're not getting out of it alive. It's you for the long trail."

And Dandy Smith swung up his gun. Crack!

It was not the Dandy's gun that barked.

The Dandy's gun flew from his hand, still undischarged, as he staggered back with a yell, and crashed down beside the camp-fire. There was a hole in the pocket of the Kid's buckskin breeches now, and from it a tiny curl of smoke. His hidden hand, in the pocket, had held a tiny derringer, and he had fired through the buckskin before the Dandy could pull trigger.

But his hands were out of his pockets the next second and grasping the guns in his holsters.

"Put 'em up!"

The Kid's voice was not soft now. It grated hard, and his steely blue eyes glittered over two levelled barrels.

"Hold on!" yelled Dave Finn. "I guess I pass, partner." And Finn's hands flew up, and the other rustlers, cursing, followed suit.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Winning Hand!

THE Rio Kid laughed.

But the levelled guns never wavered, and the eyes behind them were cool and steady. Five men stood before him, eying him like wolves. But not one of them ventured to touch a gun. The Rio Kid's aim was too well known for that risk to be taken.

"I'm waiting for you 'uns," said the Kid politely. "I'd get three or four of you before you could burn powder. But the rest of the outfit would sure get me. What about it?"

There was no answer save in savage looks. Five pairs of hands were held over five heads, motionless. If looks could have killed, the Rio Kid's wild life would have come to a sudden end by the camp-fire in the lonely canyon. But looks could not kill; and there was death in the guns that stared at the dismayed outcasts of the Staked Plain.

The Kid laughed again.

"You're sure peaceable galoots," he said banteringly. "Your game's up here—you've blotted your last brand, to-morrow or the next day the Double Bar outfit will ride this way, and I guess the sheriff of Frio will drop in for a friendly call at the Cross Bar Ranch. Didn't you tell me, Dave Finn, that every hombre in this gang packed a gun?"

And the Kid's mocking laugh rang again against the silence of the starry night.

But not a hand was lowered, though teeth showed in savage snarls.

Dandy Smith stirred and growled.

He made a movement to rise, and sank back again with another growl. His face was white as chalk. His eyes

burned at the Rio Kid like the eyes of a rattlesnake.

"I guess you've got yours, Dandy Smith," drawled the Kid. "I had you covered all the time you were chewing the rag. Lie still, feller, and you'd live to be hanged yet. I guess I'm no scavenger to clean up such trash."

His eyes glinted at Dave Finn.

"You Finn, take these hombre's guns, and pitch them into the cleft yonder. And say your prayers first if you try on any gum-game."

"I guess I know when I've had enough, Kid," mumbled Finn. "I ain't backing agin the Rio Kid."

"You're wasting time."

Under the watchful eyes of the Kid, looking across levelled guns, Finn drew the revolvers from the holsters of the rustlers, and threw them into the cleft. His own followed. For a second, as his hand closed on a butt, he was tempted to take his chance. But it was death, and he knew it; the Rio Kid never missed his man. Finn's revolvers followed the others into the cleft.

"That's sure better. I guess you hombre's can sit down now," drawled the Kid. "You can tend Dandy Smith, Dave Finn. He sure needs it."

Still with eyes on the rustlers, disarmed now, and gritting their teeth with helpless rage, the Kid stepped to his horse.

In the saddle, he smiled at the savage gang.

"Any message for the Double Bar?" And as he received no reply, the Kid rode away laughing down the canyon into the darkness.

Dandy Smith raised himself on one elbow, his eyes burning.

"Pecos Pete's on guard below," he muttered thickly. "Maybe he'll get that young fiend!"

The rustlers listened tensely.

The hoof-clatter had died away into silence. But the Kid had to pass the man who watched in the clump of pecans half-way down the canyon. With straining ears they listened, and every man gave a start and a shudder of nerves as a gun rang in the night.

"Pete's got him!" muttered the Dandy, with a livid face.

Through the deep silence came faintly from afar, the echo of a horse's hoofs on the rocks. It died away. Was it the riderless mustang, plunging to the lower plains; or was it the Kid riding away care-free? They soon knew. From the shadowy canyon below a man came staggering, his right arm hanging useless at his side, broken by a bullet. It was the man who had watched in the pecans. The Kid was gone.

Bud Wash, foreman of the Double Bar Ranch, reached for a gun as a horseman rode out of a clump of cottonwoods within sight of the ranch buildings, in the morning sun.

But he did not touch the Colt. The Rio Kid's hand rested lightly on his hip, but there was a gun in it, and the Double Bar foreman knew better.

"You back here, Kid?" he said.

The Kid smiled.

"Ain't you glad to see me, Bud?"

"I guess every hombre in the outfit would be glad to see you, Kid, and to fix up a necktie party for your benefit," answered the foreman of the Double Bar.

The Kid's glance passed the butty foreman, and rested for a second on the distant buildings that had once been his home.

"I guess I haven't come here to shoot up the ranch, Bud," he said, laughing.

"I'm here to tell you a story. You've been missing steers?"

"And I reckon I know why, now that I see you around, Kid," said the ranch foreman gruffly.

"You've been missing steers?" repeated the Kid, with ever so gentle a motion of the gun resting on his hip.

"Yep!" rapped out Bud.

"Guess where they're gone?"

"Across the Rio Grande, I reckon, and I figure it out that you could tell me just where."

"That's a cinch. Look for them on the Cross Bar Ranch, Bud."

The foreman eyed him.

"The Cross Bar Ranch?" he repeated.

"With the brands blotted out," said the Kid. "Look for them with the double bar crossed with a new brand at the Cross Bar Ranch, or on the cars going to Austin. You get me?"

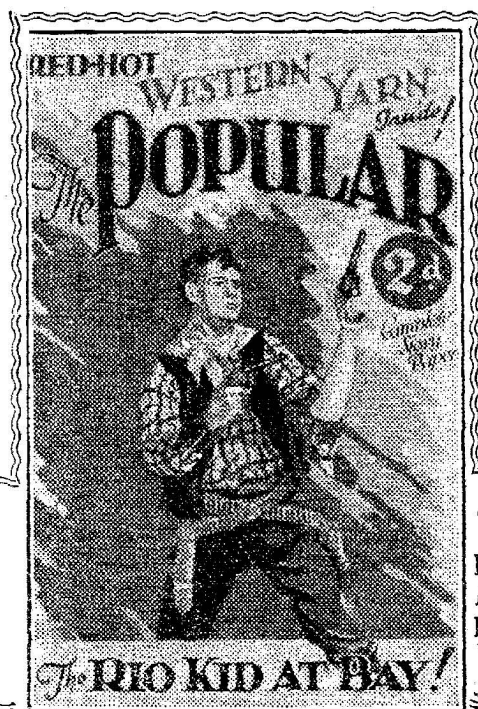
"By gum!" said Bud Wash slowly. "Brand blottin'!"

"Just that!"

And the Rio Kid swept off his Stetson in a mocking salute, whirled round his mustang, and rode at a gallop to the south, leaving the foreman of the Double Bar staring after him dumbfounded.

THE END.

(Don't miss "The Black Sack Gang!"—next week's topping yarn of the Rio Kid.)



LOOK OUT FOR THIS COVER ON ALL THE BOOKSTALLS NEXT TUESDAY!

NEXT WEEK'S BUMPER ISSUE WILL CONTAIN ANOTHER WONDERFUL TALE OF THE RIO KID!