

RED-HOT

WESTERN YARN

EVERY
TUESDAY
Week Ending
February 4th,
1928.
New Series

Inside!

The POPULAR

2d

*Complete
Story
Paper*



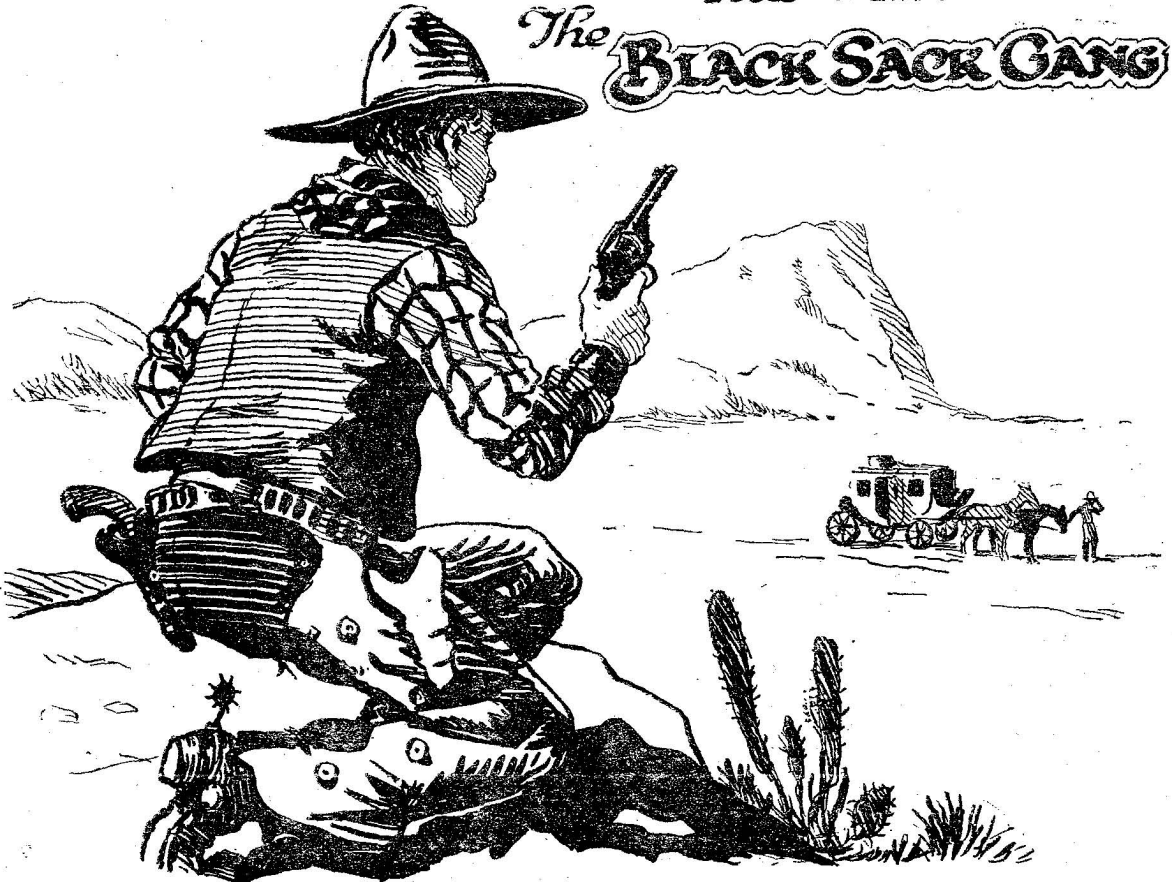
The RIO KID AT BAY!

THE SENSATION OF THE WEEK!

The Rio Kid vowed vengeance on the man who turned him into an outlaw, but, when the chance to get quits comes along, what does the Kid do?

THE RIO KID!

by **RALPH REDWAY**
This week -

The BLACK SACK GANG

YOU MUST MEET THE MOST AMAZING CHARACTER EVER CREATED—THE RIO KID—IN THIS NEW SERIES OF WESTERN TALES.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Hold Up!

THE little two-horse hack that followed the trail from Yaqui to Frio was already late. Dave Tutt cracked his long whip with a succession of reports like pistol-shots. Dave was anxious to draw up before the Red Dog at Frio before the sun dipped behind the sierra. But Dave quite forgot that he was in a hurry when a figure lounged out into the trail ahead from a thicket of mesquite and gestured to him to stop. Dave drew in his horses so promptly that they almost rolled back on their haunches.

It was an odd-looking figure that stepped into the trail. A black sack was inverted over his head, covering him to the belt. Little could be seen of him save the cowboy chaps and big spurred boots, and a pair of keen eyes that glistened through slits cut in the sack. There was a gun in his hand,

but he did not lift it. The sight of the black sack was enough for the stage-driver. Dave Tutt's view was that he was paid to drive the hack and nothing more, and he did not even pack a gun.

"Pass, pardner!" said Dave amiably, as the black-sacked figure lounged up to the halted vehicle.

"You've got one passenger?" The voice came muffled and blurred through a narrow slit in the thick sacking.

"Just one."

"Old Man Dawney, of the Double Bar?"

"Right in once!" assented Dave.

"Tell him to light down."

But Old Man Dawney, of the Double Bar, had already thrust an angry face from the door of the hack. There was amazement as well as anger in the hard, old bronzed face. It was long since outlaws had been seen on the Frio trail.

"Road agents?" he ejaculated.

"You've said it!" assented the man in the black sack.

A .45 glimmered from the hack. Old Man Dawney packed a gun, if the driver did not.

"Forget it, feller," drawled the man in the sack. "Look round before you burn powder."

"You're covered, boss," said the driver.

The rancher glanced round.

Four men had stepped from the scrub beside the trail, two on either side of the hack. Each of them was disguised by a black sack drawn over his head, and each held a lathered gun.

For a moment the rancher hesitated. The boss of the Double Bar was accustomed to giving orders, not to taking them.

"Drop that Colt!" rapped out the leader.

"Drop it, boss," urged Dave Tutt.

THE POPULAR.—No. 471.



I am always pleased to hear from my chums—a letter or postcard is welcomed at all times. Let me know what you think of the old POP and of our stories. My address is: The Editor, The POPULAR, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

SOME BOY!

THERE'S no doubt about it, chaps, this new character, the Rio Kid, whom I've introduced into the old paper, is going to make a hit! You remember me telling you, just before Christmas last year, that I had several little surprises up my sleeve—well, this happens to be one of those "little" surprises.

Ralph Redway is a new author to this paper, but he is destined to attain fame in a very short time if his tales of the Golden West are anything to go by. And, what is more important, the Rio Kid's stay in our camp is going to be a prolonged one. Loud cheers! He's too good a man to lose, and his thrilling and dare-devil adventures, written with such sparkling style by Ralph Redway, will be an added attraction to an already attractive and popular weekly.

One thing you will be certain of when you read these Western tales, and that is the originality of the

adventures through which the hero, the Rio Kid, passes. Each story contains more thrills and breathless moments than any tale of twice its size. And the Kid, too—he's something new in characters. You don't meet his kind every day, do you?

You may have a pal who doesn't read the POPULAR. If so, you will be doing him a good turn—a very good turn—if you hand him this copy containing the third of our grand new series of Western tales. I'll bet, when he's read "The Black Sack Gang" on page three, he'll add his name to the already long list of supporters of THE RIO KID.

A NEW PAPER—"THE MODERN BOY."

The "Modern Boy" will be on sale everywhere on Monday, February 6th, and will have a special appeal to all readers of the POPULAR. My advice to them is to make sure of No. 1 and the wonderful model of the champion G.W.R. engine, the "King George V."

which is given away with the first issue of the new paper. There has never been anything to equal for design this capital model of the British locomotive which fairly amazed the railwaymen across the Atlantic. The "Modern Boy" has a grand fiction programme. It leads off with the opening chapters of the finest South Seas adventure serial ever written, the authors being the great aviator, Sir Alan Cobham, and Charles Hamilton. The second fiction winner is a grand yarn by Gunby Hadath, whose name is a password for vivid interest and excellence of humour.

But the "Modern Boy" does more than supply the best stories. It is a superbly illustrated paper, and its articles on subjects of importance in the world of to-day, such as wireless, and the latest things in racing motor-cars, will be just what an intelligent fellow wants.

Then there is the magnificent model of the Great Western engine, the "King George V." which will be given away with No. 1 of the new live and all-round fascinating paper. This model is perfect in its reproduction of the engine which had its try-out at Baltimore, and caused a thrill amongst the leaders of the American railway world.

To hobbyists, to all boys who take an interest in the new inventions and the great scientific doings of the day—in fact, to every fellow worth his salt—the "Modern Boy" will have an immense appeal.

Your Editor.

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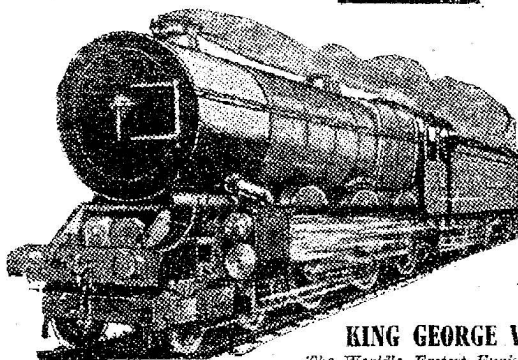
Other interesting features will include a topical budget of news and pictures—about the G.W.R. giant engine "King George V.", articles on Motor Racing, Flying, Wireless, Railways, Hobbies, etc.

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The first four numbers of MODERN BOY will each include a model of a famous Speed Giant, made of strong metal and accurately coloured. King George V—as shown above, will be given with No. 1, and this model will be followed by the Canadian National (The Empire's Greatest Engine), the famous Schneider Cup Seaplane, and Segrave's 1,000 h.p. "Sunbeam" Racing Car. Make sure of them all.

"You can't buck agin the Black Sack crowd. It's a cinch."

The rancher appeared to realize that. He flung his revolver into the seat of the hack.

"Light down!"

Mr. Dawney stepped out of the hack. There was a cold, hard light in his eyes as he looked at the Black Sack crowd.

"You'll get ten years in the pen for this!" he said quietly.

"Maybe, an' maybe not!" said the leader. "Stick 'em up!" His gun was raised now.

Slowly, reluctantly, the rancher raised his hands above his head. It was a bitter pill for Old Man Dawney to swallow. He was the lord of thousands of fertile acres; boss of the biggest ranching outfit in the county; the richest cattle-raiser between the Pecos and the Rio Grande. On his vast domain, stretching many a mile along the glimmering Frio, Old Man Dawney's word was law. His hard face was white with rage as he put up his hands at the order of a trail-thief.

"That's better! Go through him, you-uns."

Two of the trail-thieves put up their guns and stepped to the rancher. They went through Old Man Dawney methodically. A roll of greenbacks was tossed to the leader, who slipped it under the sack.

"I know you!" muttered the rancher, his eyes glittering at the captain of the Black Sack crowd. "I know you! I figured it out who you were the first time I heard of the Black Sack crowd. They were never heard of before the Rio Kid was booted off the Double Bar. I know you!"

"The Rio Kid!" ejaculated Dave Tutt, staring down at the masked man.

He shook his head.

"I guess not, boss. This hombre's a foot taller than the Kid. You're sure mistaken."

The man in the black sack laughed, and pointed up the trail in the direction of Frio.

"It's you for Frio, Dave Tutt," he said.

"And my passenger?"

"I guess we want him."

"You won't drive on without me, Tutt!" said the rancher, gritting his teeth.

"I guess he will, some!" drawled the captain. "If he don't drive on instanter he'll sure never drive a cayuse agin!"

Dave Tutt shrugged his shoulders. "This ain't my funeral, boss," he said. "I'll tell them in Frio, and I guess the sheriff will soon be arter this crowd. So long, Mr. Dawney!"

And Dave Tutt shook out his reins, cracked his whip, and the hack rolled on up the rugged trail.

Old Man Dawney made a stride after the hack; but the bluish muzzle of a Colt touching his breast stopped him.

He halted, quivering with rage.

"What does this mean?" he muttered thickly. "You've robbed me. What more do you want?"

"I guess we want you, feller. I sure reckon you're worth more than a roll of greenbacks to us. You're coming on a little paseo into the hills."

"Kidnapping?" muttered the rancher.

"Call it what you like. The Double Bar outfit won't see their boss agin till he's big paid for. Put him up, you-uns!"

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One of the trail-thieves led horses from the mesquite. There were five in the gang, but there were six horses. The spare broncho was for the kidnapped rancher.

Old Man Dawney clenched his hands. He could see that this had been planned in advance; the spare horse was ready for him. Had his gun been still in his hand, he would have resisted, heavy as the odds were. But he was powerless now.

He was lifted roughly into the saddle, and a trail-rope bound him there. Then the Black Sack crowd mounted, and pushed off the trail into the rugged hillside. Old Man Dawney glanced round him as he went, his bridle held by one of the gang. Far in the distance he could see the smoke from the chimneys of Frio; he could see the two-horse hack rattling on the stony trail, and hear the creaking of Dave Tutt's

Man Dawney, bound on the broncho, then the rest of the gang spring out behind. Darkness lay like a velvet cloak on the hills, broken only by a gleam of stars. And still the mountain riders pushed on with their silent, sullen prisoner, and the rancher's last hope died away.

THE SECOND CHAPTER. The Rio Kid Takes a Hand!

THE Rio Kid had finished his lonely supper of frijoles, washed down by a can of clear water from the spring that bubbled up among the rocks. The black-muzzled mustang was already sleeping as the Kid unrolled his blanket. It was time to bed down, but the Rio Kid seemed in no hurry. He looked to his guns, the pair of long, blue Colts, with their notched walnut butts, that had more than once done desperate work in the hands of the Kid. Stars were coming out, glinting down on the Kid as he stood there, a moody look on his handsome sunburnt face. High up in the sierra the Rio Kid had camped for the night. His blanket was ready, but the Kid was sleepless. The stars that glinted on him in the rocky heart of the Huaca were shining down on the fertile grasslands of the Double Bar, once the home of the Kid. He was thinking of the Double Bar, of riding the fences, of the cheery talk of the bunkhouse, and for once his exile hung heavily on the usually care-free Kid.

The youngest puncher on the Double Bar, but the boldest rider and the best hand with the riata. His looks were bitter, and his thoughts were bitter, as he thought of the days on the grasslands. It was injustice that had driven him out, the hot-headed injustice of Old Man Dawney; and since then—the Rio Kid did not always like to think of what had happened since then. Many of the tales told of the Rio Kid were true and many were false. The legend of him had grown, as legends will grow. Half the desperate hold-ups of which he had never heard were put down to the Kid's account in the river camps and the bunkhouses along the Frio. When the Black Sack crowd appeared on the trails, the Double Bar outfit told one another that it was the Rio Kid again on a new lay-out. Old Man Dawney fully believed it, perhaps because he chose to believe it. On the wall of the Red Dog in Frio was a picture of the Kid, with an offer, signed by George Dawney, of a thousand dollars for the Rio Kid, dead or alive.

The Kid was thinking of it as he stood in the dim star glimmer, by his sleeping horse, his face clouded.

Clink!

The Kid gave a start.

The cloud of thought vanished from his brow at once as he heard the clink of a hoof on a stony trail.

High up in the lonely sierra, far from the haunts of men, he had believed himself solitary. But the clink of the hoof was followed by another and another.

The Rio Kid dropped into the shadow of a rock, and watched and listened. His hands were on the guns in his loosely-swung holsters. If it was the sheriff's posse from Frio his guns would be wanted. The Kid's handsome lip-curved in the smile that always came in the hour of danger.

Hidden in deep shadow, he waited and watched.

A horseman came into the starlight, a dozen yards from him, riding along the bottom of the steep arroyo on the rocky side of which the Kid had camped.

And the Kid started again.

LOOK OUT FOR THIS COVER NEXT TUESDAY!



whip. There would be excitement in Frio when Tutt carried the news there that Old Man Dawney had been roped in by the Black Sack crowd. More than one desperate hold-up had taken place since the Black Sacks had first appeared on the Texas trails. But the kidnapping of the richest rancher in the section was the most daring of all. Only two miles out of Frio, he had fallen into their hands. His teeth were set hard as the trail was left behind and he plunged into the rocky wilderness of the Huaca sierra.

The sun sank lower over the western sierra. The hoofs rang sharply on stony trails, mile after mile into the depths of the hills. Sheriff Watson and his posse would soon be in pursuit; but the stony trails gave no sign, and the hope of rescue and revenge died in the rancher's breast. Long miles of barren rock and scrub lay between him and the grasslands now, and an Apache hunter could never have picked up the trail of the Black Sacks. The horsemen rode in single file now—the leader first, then Old

The black sack that covered the rider was enough for him. The man who was riding by was an enigma like himself. It was the first time the Kid had seen any of the Black Sack crowd, though he had heard much of them. He released his guns. The Black Sacks were nothing to him.

Dimly from the shadows other horsemen came into view in the deep arroyo.

The second rider wore no disguise. The Kid saw his Stetson hat, and noted that he was bound to his broncho. A prisoner in the hands of the Black Sacks. And there was something familiar in the massive form of the rider—something that the Kid thought he knew. The Kid drew a deep, quivering breath. Even before the bound rider, glancing about him, showed his face in the starlight, the Kid knew him. It was Old Man Dawney of the Double Bar Ranch.

The Kid grinned from the rocks above the riders.

Old Man Dawney, a prisoner in the hands of the outlaws, led away into the heart of the pathless Huecas. No wonder the Kid had grinned.

That was the man who had fired him from the Double Bar, who had driven him off the ranch at the muzzle of a .45. That was the man whose hot and imperious temper had turned a careless cowpuncher into what the Rio Kid had since become.

The hard, bitter anger in the rancher's face accused the Kid as he watched unseen.

The imperious temper cut no ice with these outcasts of the sierra. Old Man Dawney, tied to his horse, was carried along like a sack of alfalfa. The Black Sacks did not heed his savage looks, or the deadly glitter in the deep-set eyes under the bushy brows.

But the grin died from the sunburnt face of the Kid.

He watched.

After the bound rancher came another rider, close. After a little interval, another. Strung out a good distance behind came another horseman. Then another loomed in the shadows.

"The whole crowd, sure," murmured the Kid.

The leader had disappeared among the rocks and shadows ahead, Old Man Dawney had disappeared after him, and then the horseman who followed the rancher's broncho. Two Black Sacks rode still in view of the Kid above, and a clinking of hoofs on the stones told that still another was strung out behind on the rocky trail.

Five of them in all, as well as the prisoner. One of them turned his head and called back to the man who was straggling behind, not yet in sight of the Kid, the last of the single file.

"Look snippy, Jake! You'll sure get left."

A grunting voice came back.

"The darned cayuse's fell lame."

The first speaker rode on again, after the others. He vanished into the blackness of the shadows along the deep arroyo.

The Kid crouched motionless and watched.

Slowly the last of the crowd came clinking along the stony arroyo, a strange, eerie figure in the dim starlight, with the black sack hiding him down to the gun-belt.

The Kid stirred.

Perhaps the sight of Old Man Dawney, once his boss on the Double Bar, a helpless prisoner now in the hands of the outlaws, touched some forgotten chord. Perhaps it was the rumour that associated the Kid himself

with the Black Sacks, that stirred him to take a hand against them. Perhaps it was his sheer love of reckless adventure. Perhaps a mingling of all those things. He reached to his riata, coiled up on the saddle that lay beside his sleeping mustang.

Rope in hand, the Kid waited tensely.

The last of the Black Sacks, urging on his lame broncho with blows and curses, came abreast of the Kid, standing in black shadow a dozen yards up the steep side of the arroyo.

The Kid's arm swung.

A difficult cast, in the place, and in the uncertain light and shadow, but child's play to the Rio Kid. With rope or with revolver he had never been known to miss.

There was a whisper of whirling rope.

The Black Sack outlaw knew nothing

rough, bearded, stubbly face was revealed—the face of a border ruffian. But the Kid gave it scarcely a glance. The man was nothing to him; only a pawn in the reckless and desperate game the Kid banked upon playing.

He took the bridle of the lame horse and turned it in the arroyo. A lash of his quirt on the flank, and the horse broke into a gallop, and went clattering down the steep trail, the way it had come. Once free, the animal was not likely to stop before it reached the grasslands below in the valley of the Frio.

The Kid turned to Jake again. The man's eyes were open now, and he was groaning. He shivered as a cold rim was pressed to his cheek.

"Nary a word!" said the Kid pleasantly. "Nary a boot! It's you for the long trail if you yaup, partner!"



ROPED IN! The Black Sack outlaw knew nothing till the loop of the lasso dropped over his head. A sharp jerk at the rope, and the man was plucked from the saddle.

(See Chapter 2.)

till the loop of the lasso dropped over his head.

Then it was too late.

A sharp jerk at the rope, and the man was plucked from the saddle, falling with a crash on the rock.

Swift and active as a cougar, the Kid was bounding down the steep the next second. The lame horse stood pawing. The man who had fallen to the lasso lay senseless, stunned by the crash on the hard rock. The Kid bent over him, gun in hand. But the gun was not needed. The man in the black sack did not stir.

Tensely the Kid listened, gazing after the horsemen who had vanished. Afar, a faint clink came back to his ears.

They were riding on.

If they had heard the fall of their comrade, which was doubtful, they had not heeded it. In the lonely, pathless Huecas they were not likely to suspect the advent of a foe.

The Kid smiled.

Quickly he drew the black sack from the fallen man. In the starlight a

The man's dizzy eyes glared at him; but he did not call out.

"Who—" he panted, in a whisper.

"I guess I'm called the Rio Kid."

"Gee! Your game, Kid!" said the ruffian laconically. "I ain't asking for nothing. You roped me?"

"Sure!"

The Kid cut a length of trail-rope and bound the man's arms behind him.

"You've got Old Man Dawney?" he said.

"Correct!"

"Where did you get him?"

"Picked him out of Dave Tutt's back on the Frio trail."

"And what's the game?"

"Twenty thousand dollars."

"Ransom?" said the Kid.

"Yep."

"Old Man Dawney will never pay a cent. Don't I know the ornery old cuss?" grinned the Kid. "He will camp in the sierra for keeps rather than cough up a Continental red cent."

"I guess the captain will make him

hand it out, Kid. I've seen him afore at the game—injun tricks."

The Kid's brow contracted.

"Putting him to the torture till he signs the draft on the Frio bank," said the Kid. "That's the game, is it?"

The man nodded.

"Let me git on, Kid. This ain't no funeral of yourn. Old Man Dawney ain't got a glad hand for you."

"I guess I know it."

"He's put a thousand dollars on you, Kid. It's stuck up in the Red Dog at Frio, with your picture."

"I don't want you to tell me that. You're out of this game, pard." The Kid rose to his feet. "I'm borrowing your sack."

"What for, Kid?" muttered the ruffian uneasily.

"Fancy dress," chuckled the Kid. "Got any objections to make?"

The Colt touched the ruffian's face again.

"Nary a one. But you can't leave me tied up, Kid," beseeched the outlaw. "You can't do it! I guess you might as well let daylight through my cabeza at once."

"You'll sure work loose by morning," said the Kid coolly. "I know how I've tied you. By morning the Black Sack crowd will be over the range, or else they'll never hear any more in the camps of the Rio Kid. You pass out of the game here, and I reckon you're lucky. You'll follow your cayuse back to the plains, with your hands tied and your mouth shut. I'm going after your pard, and if you come after me, remember that I shall shoot on sight—and shoot to kill. You've got your chance."

"Kid—!" began the ruffian.

"Nuff said!"

The Kid jerked off the man's dirty neck-scarf and gagged him with it. He secured the gag coolly and scientifically. "Now git!"

The man scrambled clumsily to his feet. The Kid's gun was looking at him and he did not hesitate. Silent, save for a panting mumble, he stumbled away down the arroyo in the direction that his horse had taken. Already, as he went, he was wrodding savagely with the rope that bound his arms. But the Kid knew that he was safe; his hands were secure till morning, and until his hands were free the gag held him silent. A crash from the butt-end of a Colt might have kept him safer, but the Kid was not the man for such deeds.

He dismissed the fellow from his mind as he stumbled out of sight, mumbling in the shadows.

A soft eail, and the Kid's mustang joined him. Already the Kid was donning the black sack he had taken from the outlaw. He belted the open end of the sack round his waist and adjusted the eye-holes and the mouth-slit to his satisfaction. Then he mounted the black-muzzled mustang and followed on the way the Black Sack crowd had gone with their prisoner.

Under the black sack the Kid was grinning.

He had taken the place of the last man in the file, and the outlaws, if they looked back and saw him, would indubitably take him for their own comrade. Only the cowboy chaps, the sparrd boots, and the gun-belt showed below the sack. For the nonce the Kid had become, what all Frio believed him to be, a member of the Black Sack crowd.

On the rocky trail the Black Sacks were riding slowly; but the Kid put his mustang to speed. A quarter of an hour later he was in sight of a black-sacked figure riding ahead of him.

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The man looked back at the clink of his horse's hoofs.

"You Jake—" he called back.

"Git on!" grunted the Kid.

He slowed down, and kept his distance in the rear of the Black Sacks as they rode on under the stars.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Kid Gets Back!

"H ALT!"

The leader of the Black Sack crowd slipped from his horse. Old Man Dawney stared before him in the dim light of the stars. Behind the captured rancher four figures in black sacks gathered. They had stopped in a wide canyon, far up the Huecas, and the leader had dismounted at what looked like a solid wall of rock, patched here and there with scrub pines and straggling pecans. The rancher guessed that the destination of the outlaw gang had been reached, but he could see no signs of a camp.

Taking his rein over his arm, the Black Sack captain went forward on foot. Only the rancher remained mounted. Men and horses plunged into a thicket of scrub, and it seemed to the rancher that they were heading for the solid wall of the canyon. But beyond the tangled thicket a deep fissure opened in the rock, and the Black Sack captain led the way into it, with the sure step of one who knew the path well.

Singly the rest followed him, with barely room for a horse to pass in the rift between the sides of rugged rock. But a dozen yards further on the fissure widened, opening out into a gulch. It was a "locked" gulch, shut in on all sides by precipitous rocks, accessible only by the fissure hidden behind the scrub thicket. The rancher's heart sank as he emerged into the open gulch. No trailer from Frio would ever find him there. The last of the file of Black Sacks grinned under his disguise. Even the Rio Kid, keen as an Apache on the trail, with an unflinching eye for sign, would never have tracked down the Black Sack crowd to their secret lair by other means than those he had adopted. Long miles of rocky hillsides and arroyos that bore no sign lay behind them, and the scrub thicket, growing apparently by a solid wall of rock, told no tale. The Black Sacks had chosen their refuge well.

The moon was rising now; a silver crescent showed over the pine-trees that capped the rocky walls of the locked gulch. In the faint light the black-sacked figures looked ghostly, eerie. At a little distance was a spring, with a belt of vegetation by it, and near the water stood several roughly-built jacas. This was the camp of the Black Sacks.

Old Man Dawney was unbound and jerked from the bronco. The horses were cast loose, and the rancher, with his hands and feet shackled by a trail-roppe, left standing.

The Kid breathed hard under his disguise.

He had ridden into the outlaws' lair with the gang, as yet unsuspected. But at any moment suspicion might rise. It was four to one when trouble started. But the Rio Kid had faced odds before.

Old Man Dawney's eyes were gleaming at the outlaws. Perhaps he expected them to doff their disguises now that they were in camp, and he was prepared to memorise each face, to store in his memory the identity of each man, to be hunted down later without mercy. But the outlaws did not remove the black sacks.

They built a camp-fire by the group of

jacas; the night was cold high up the sierra. They gathered round the camp-fire to their meal of flapjacks and cold beef, washed down by fire-water that had doubtless come from the Red Dog in Frio. The rancher knew that, without their disguises, these outcasts trod the streets of Frio; it was likely enough that he knew some of them by sight.

He shook his head savagely when food was offered him.

"I guess you can please yourself, feller," chuckled the captain of the Black Sacks. "You'll be glad of it to-morrow."

The rancher made no answer.

He was scanning the man, but he was unwillingly satisfied now that the outlaw leader was not, as he had believed, the Rio Kid. He little guessed how near the Rio Kid was to him, and for what purpose the Kid was there.

Their supper over, the outlaws banked up the fire with logs cut from the thickets in the gulch. The hour was growing late, but the Black Sack crowd evidently did not intend to bed down yet.

The leader made a sign, and the gang gathered round the bound rancher.

"I guess it's business now, Mr. Dawney."

"You can cut that out," said the rancher coldly, his eyes hard as steel.

"You'll get nothing out of me."

"Forget it, feller," grinned the leader.

"You're going to give me your draft on the Frio bank."

"Never!"

"Take your time, Mr. Dawney. I guess I don't want it till the morning," said the Black Sack captain. "Before morning I reckon you'll be howling out to sign it, if it was twice twenty thousand."

The rancher's lips curled contemptuously.

"Put him to the fire!"

Dawney started.

"You low-down scoundrels," he said, between his teeth.

"I guess you'll be in a more reasonable frame of mind by the time your boots have charred off."

"You villain!"

"Can it, feller! Put him to it!" The rancher was dragged along to the camp-fire. Bound and helpless, he was flung down there, with his feet only a few inches from the glowing logs.

There was sweat on his face now; but there was indomitable determination, too. Even "Injun tricks" could not overcome the arrogant obstinacy of the owner of the Double Bar.

The Kid breathed hard.

He had expected the outlaws to bed down, and in the hours of darkness to find an opportunity to release the rancher and guide him to safety. But the prompt action of the outlaw leader forced his hand.

Yet for the moment the Kid made no move.

He had the advantage that the Black Sacks did not even suspect that there was an enemy among them. But there were four desperate men at close quarters when the shooting began. And for what was the Kid taking such a desperate chance? For the man who had boosted him off the Double Bar and made his name a by-word in all the cow country along the Rio Grande and the Pecos. The Kid cursed himself for a fool as he stood looking moodily on. But his resolution did not falter. He was a fool to chip in, he guessed bitterly that he was going "loco," but he was chipping in, all the same.

The steam rose from the rancher's boots. Already he was feeling the heat of the fire, and the sweat thickened on his hard face. But from his lips there came no word.

IN MERCILESS HANDS! The leader made a sign, and the gang gathered round the bound rancher. "By the morning I guess you'll be howling to sign that draft of twenty thousand on the Frio bank!" grinned the leader. (See Chapter 3.)



The captain of the Black Sacks bent over him.

"Say the word, feller."

The rancher's eyes glistened at him, but he did not speak.

"You'll go back to Frio when the dollars are in our hands. You know that. Old Man Peters at the Circle Cross went home safe after we was through with him. You heard of that?"

No answer.

The Rio Kid moved farther away from the camp-fire.

He preferred to have the outlaws clear against the blaze, himself with the darkness behind him. When it came to gun-play there would be some desperate moments.

He stood looking on grimly, his hands resting lightly on the guns in his holsters. Still he did not chip in. Old Man Dawney had bags of dollars; twenty thousand would not hurt him. But the Kid shook himself, and pulled himself together.

Quietly his guns came out, glinting in the flickering light from the camp-fire. His eyes gleamed through the eye-holes in the black sack that hid his face.

"I guess that's enough," drawled the Rio Kid. "You'll let up on this game, sure."

The captain spun round towards him.

"What the thunder—"

The rancher twisted round a furious face to look. Well was that soft, drawing voice known to his ears.

"The Kid!" he choked. "The Rio Kid! I knew it—I knew you were in this, you young coyote."

The Kid laughed.

The rustlers were all on their feet now, grasping their guns. The name of the Rio Kid on the rancher's lips electrified them.

The Kid's levelled guns threatened them.

"It's not Jake!" yelled one of the outlaws. "It's Jake's sack, but they ain't Jake's chaps, nor yet his boots. It's—"

"It's the Rio Kid!" The Kid's voice rang like steel now. "Put them up, the lot of you, or—"

But the captain of the Black Sacks was already pulling trigger. And the roar of the Rio Kid's .45's woke every echo in the locked gulch.

The Black Sack captain, as he pulled trigger, went down to the first bullet. Heavily he sprawled across the bound rancher, pinning him to the ground.

Old Man Dawney's hard face was fixed in amazement. The Rio Kid—one of the Black Sack crowd, as he had suspected—but what did this mean? For the lithe figure in the black sack was engaged in savage conflict with the other Black Sacks.

The Black Sack captain did not stir. Inerr, he lay across the helpless rancher. But three men were shooting, though not so fast as the Rio Kid. Hoarse yells and cries awoke the echoes.

For a long minute it seemed that pandemonium had broken loose in the locked gulch high up the Hueca sierra.

Then it was over.

Two men, desperately wounded, lay groaning, and a third was fleeing wildly for the shelter of the rocks. The rancher saw the lithe figure stagger. But the Kid straightened up again, and his revolver barked once more, and the running man threw up his hands and dropped with a bullet in his leg.

The Kid had won through. But blood was trickling from under the black sack that covered his face.

He stood unsteadily.

"Kid" muttered the rancher.

The Rio Kid laughed, and threw off the black sack that had disguised him. His face was pale now, and there was a trickle of blood from under the thick hair.

"I knew it was you, Kid," said Old Man Dawney.

The Kid bent over him, dragged aside the inert form that pinned him down, and drew the rancher away from the fire. His bowie glided over Old Man Dawney's bonds, and the ropes fell apart. The rancher was free. He staggered to his feet.

"You're wounded, Kid."

The Kid's hand went to his brow.

"A scratch, I guess." The rancher's eyes were on a patch of crimson that was welling through the Kid's shirt. The Kid's lip curled. "Yep, it's in the shoulder. What do you care, feller?"

"You've saved my life, Kid," muttered Old Man Dawney.

The Kid grinned.

"I sure said I'd get back on you for boosting me off the Double Bar, feller. I've done it—this a way."

"I knew you were in the Black Sack crowd—"

"Oh, cut it out!" jeered the Kid. "The man that sack belonged to is aashaying along somewhere down the mountain, with his hands tied and a neckscarf in his mouth. I borrowed his sack to trail these coyotes home."

"And why?" asked the rancher very quietly.

"Because I was a plumb fool!" said the Kid, with a laugh. "And I've got what comes to a plumb fool when he asks for it." He gave the soft cail that his mustang knew, and his horse trotted up.

"Kid, you're not—"

The Kid pointed to the grazing bronchos by the spring.

"Take a mount and light out," he said. "I guess you'll find your way down to Frio. The Black Sacks won't stop you now, I guess; especially their captain. He's got his. Light out while you've got the chance."

The rancher drew a deep breath.

"Kid! After this—"

"Nuff said. So-long, Old Man Dawney."

The Kid reeled for a moment, but he climbed into the saddle of the mustang. His teeth were set hard.

"Kid, you're hurt! Let me—"

But the Kid was already riding.

There was a buzz of interest in the Red Dog saloon at Frio the following evening, when Old Man Dawney lighted down from his claybank outside, and walked in. All Frio knew by that time of the kidnapping of the rancher, and the wiping out of the Black Sack by the Rio Kid. All eyes were fixed on Old Man Dawney as he strode up the saloon. He stopped at the wall where the placard hung, with the picture of the handsome Kid and the offer of a thousand dollars for him alive or dead. The crowd watched him breathlessly as he tore down the paper, tore it across and across again, and scattered the fragments.

THE END.

(Don't miss: "GAME TO THE LAST!" next week's story of the RIO KID!)