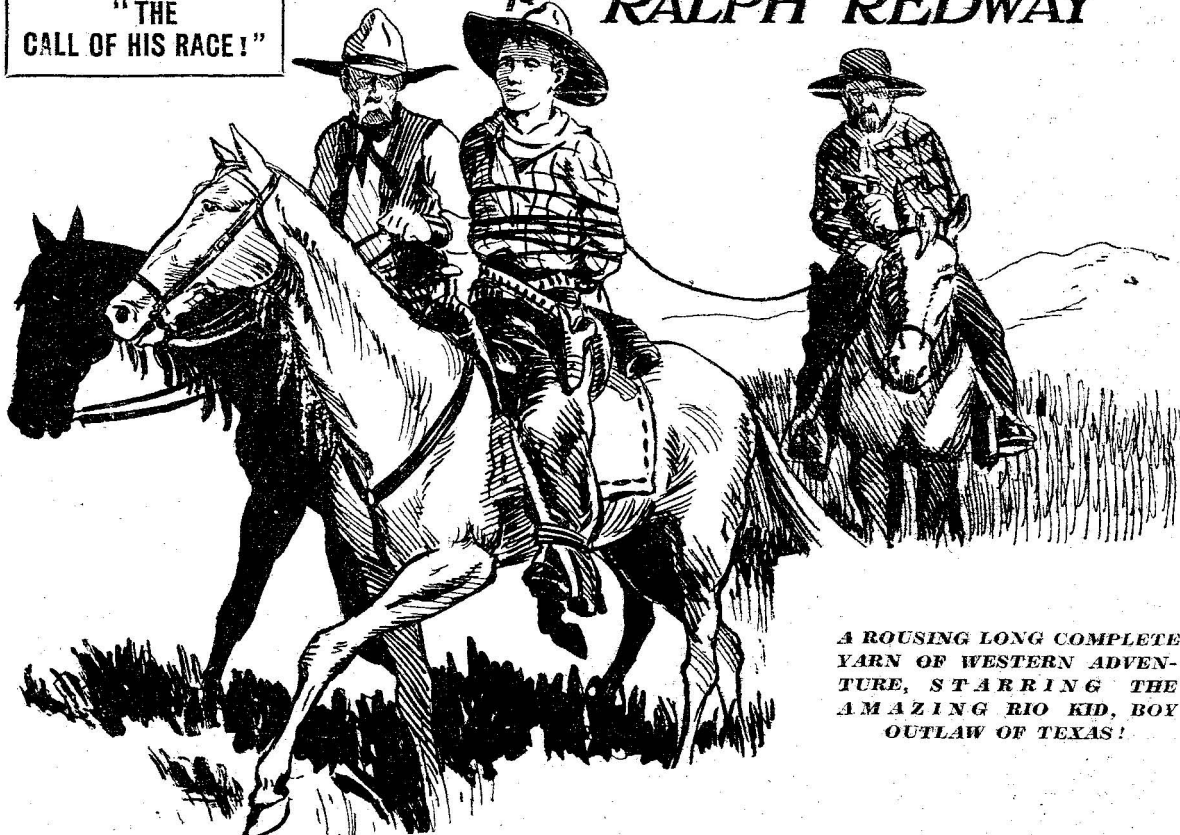


CAPTURED! The Rio Kid is captured at last—roped in on the plains. But the Kid's not dismayed at the grim prospect before him. Many things can happen, he knows, before he is shut off from the world by iron bars!

The Rio Kid!

This week:
"THE
CALL OF HIS RACE!"

BY RALPH REDWAY



A ROUSING LONG COMPLETE
YARN OF WESTERN ADVENTURE,
STARRING THE
AMAZING RIO KID, BOY
OUTLAW OF TEXAS!

THE FIRST CHAPTER. Roped In!

THE Rio Kid could, have laughed at the grim irony of it, only the affair was rather too serious for laughing.

At long last, after many doubts and much debating with himself, the Kid had made up his mind. He was tired of the whole game—tired of being hunted by Texan sheriffs, tired of riding lonely trails, tired of solitary camps in the chapparal. Texas, as he told himself, was not the whole wide world; outside the borders of the Lone Star State there were lands where the name and fame of the Rio Kid were unknown; where the arm of the law was not stretched out to seize him; where he could look his fellow-man in the face without gripping a gun at the same moment.

To turn his back on his own land was not easy to the Kid; though in his own land he was an outcast. But he had resolved on it at last; resolved to ride to the west, and seek a new country beyond the desert. He had faced the setting sun and ridden. The lonely

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wastes of the Staked Plain, the drifting sand that hid the trails, the savage Redskins that wandered in that last refuge of the native, had no terrors for the Kid. And when the grasslands of Texas dropped behind him he gave little or no thought to the sheriffs and town marshals who wanted him, or the bills that were stuck up on nearly every dead wall between the Pecos and the Rio Grande, offering five hundred dollars reward for the Rio Kid, dead or alive. The old life was thrown behind the Rio Kid; or so he thought. But it was not so easy to shake off the past, as he grimly reflected now—now that he was riding back with his face to the east, his feet tied to his stirrups, his hands bound to his belt, his guns in the keeping of the two burly men who rode, one on either side of him.

Three days before the Kid had ridden through the last camp on the edge of the desert, and there he had seen, and read, with a smile on his face, a bill posted on a tree in the street, offering five hundred dollars for his capture. In a playful mood, the Kid had shot that bill to pieces under the eyes of a staring score of men who did not ven-

ture to touch a gun while the Kid sat his mustang there with a .45 in either hand. It was the Kid's last defiance to the law that had made him an outlaw by no fault of his own; and he had forgotten the episode as he rode on his lonely way by desert trails; but others had not forgotten.

Perhaps the Kid had grown a little careless in his belief that he had left Texas and all his foes behind him. Perhaps, thinking of the new life before him, he had dismissed the old too soon and too easily. Certainly he had not reckoned that he would be followed from that camp on the Rio Toro where he had shot the bill to pieces on the tree, neither would he have guessed that any man could trail him for three days in the desert unknown to him. But Hank Harker, town marshal of Toro, knew his business; he had tracked many a rustler in the Staked Plain; and now he had tracked the Kid. In his solitary camp at the bottom of a rocky valley, sleeping beside his mustang, rolled in his blanket, the Kid had been awakened by the cold touch of a Colt on his forehead; and he did not argue. The Kid

knew when he had a chance to draw—and when he had no chance. And on the present occasion he had not the ghost of a chance.

And now he was riding back to Texas, tied on his horse. Many times the mustang turned his muzzle round, and his intelligent eyes stared at his master, as if in perplexity. It was the first time that the Kid had ridden the mustang, bound hand and foot, a prisoner, his reins held by another rider. Not only was the Kid bound, and his reins held by Hank Harker, but a lariat was looped round him, and grasped by the man on his other side. The Kid was well known to be a slippery customer, and the town marshal of Toro was taking no chances with him.

There was a smile on the Kid's handsome face as he rode between his captors, under the blazing sun; but black care was in his heart. In the very hours when he had thrown his old life behind, his old life had risen against him like this and smitten him down. A bound prisoner, he was being led back to answer to the law he had defied and derided more recklessly than any rustler or gun-man in Texas.

It was a ride of two days back to Toro; and the first day of blazing heat and dust was drawing to its close. The Toro marshal and his man, Buck Carson, were fatigued, grimed with the dust of the desert, and still uneasy lest their prisoner should slip through their fingers. Bound as he was, helpless in their hands, each of them kept a gun handy, ready to shoot him dead at the first effort to escape. They were going to take him in alive if they could; but, dead or alive, they were determined to take him.

But the Rio Kid made no effort to escape. It was futile to make any such attempt, and he was not the man to waste his energy. If a chance came that was a different matter. But what chance was likely to come? There was no one to aid him in the lonely desert; and when he came to the haunts of man no hand would be raised for him—all would be raised against him. The chapter of chances held nothing to which the Kid could pin the slightest hope; and yet he had not abandoned hope. Hope and confidence were a part of his nature.

The sun was sinking towards the sierras of New Mexico; the few stunted pecans that dotted the arid plain were casting long shadows. The town marshal and his man still rode on doggedly. The Kid glanced from one to the other with a mocking smile. He knew how gladly they would have ridden right on, with never a halt till they had landed him safe in the calaboose at Toro; but it was not in horse-flesh to do it. Already their horses were weary and slacking; even the black-muzzled mustang showed signs of fatigue. They had to camp one night in the desert; there was no help for that. Camp they must, and take the chance of the Kid slipping through their fingers in the hours of darkness. But not till the rim of the red sun touched the sierra to the west did Hank Harker unwillingly draw rein.

"Light down, Buck!" he said gruffly. "I guess the cayuses are ready to drop. We hit the trail again at dawn."

"Sure!" assented Carson.

"You're sure going to let me loose in the night, marshal," said the Kid, with a grin. "I reckon I should lose in heavy sleep, roped up like this." "Forget it," said Harker curtly. "I'm sure taking no chances with you,

Kid. You've given us the slip too long and too often."

The Kid laughed, still sitting bound on his horse, while the others had dismounted. His eyes, keen and searching as an eagle's, roved over the darkening plain. He had worn a smile while black care sat at his heart; but now the care was lifted, and his laugh rang with a joyous note. Perhaps on the shadowing plain the Kid's eagle eye had picked up some sign that was unseen by the town marshal of Toro and his man—thinking only, as they were, of their weariness, and of their anxiety to keep their prisoner safe for the calaboose.

Harker stared at the Kid suspiciously. "You want to remember that you're our meat, dead or alive, Kid," he said, with menace in his voice. "You lift as much as an eyelid, and you get yours. I've told you we're taking no chances."

"I reckon I shan't be in a hurry to part company with you, marshal," smiled the Kid. "I like you too much, feller."

The marshal grunted. "You sure won't have a chance of parting company," he answered.

And the town marshal of Toro made very sure of that.

The Kid was released from the saddle and lifted to the ground. His ankles were tied to two pegs driven into the ground. His hands were released to let him share the supper of his captors, but while he ate a revolver was held to his head, with a finger on the trigger. One suspicious movement, and a bullet would have been driven through his brain. But the Kid was not the man to throw his life away, and he made no suspicious movement. He ate and drank with a good appetite; cold bully beef and biscuit, washed down by lukewarm water from the bottles. Harker did not care to light a camp-fire, lest its light should attract any of the lawless wandering outcasts of the Staked Plain.

After his supper the Kid's hands were roped behind him, and both Harker and his man examined the knots of the rope with care. The lasso was looped round him again, the rope twisted round the town marshal's arm when he lay down in his blanket. Not a movement could the Kid have made without awakening Hank Harker. And all through the night one or the other was to keep watch, gun in hand.

Harker rolled himself in his blanket, and slept almost as soon as he closed his eyes, so weary was he from the long trail after the Rio Kid, and the hard day's ride that had followed the capture. Buck Carson was keeping the first watch, and he sat with his back to a stunted pecan, a revolver in his hand, his eyes on the prisoner. Weary as he was, he did not close his eyes. But the Kid, lying bound in his blanket, unable to move hand or foot, closed his eyes and slept as peacefully as ever he had slumbered in the bunk-house in the old days at the Double Bar ranch.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Kid's Last Chance!

STARS were gleaming in the sky when the Rio Kid awakened. He did not stir.

It still wanted an hour to midnight; and the Kid had awakened then, because he had determined to waken then, before he closed his eyes in slumber.

To the watchful eyes of Buck Carson, sitting against the pecan, with his gun in his hand, his gaze fixed on the

prisoner, it seemed that the Kid was still sleeping.

But never had the Kid been wider awake.

He was very careful not to stir; he did not desire to awaken the town marshal of Toro, breathing heavily a few feet from him.

From the shadows, the Kid's eyes, half-opened, watched. The glimmer of the stars showed him the recumbent figure of the sleeping marshal, and the watchful face of Carson. The gun, resting on Carson's knee, caught the star-light and gleamed.

The Kid lay still—and waited.

From the darkness round the lonely camp in the heart of the desert, came the faint hoot of an owl.

It was answered by another hoot, as faint, on the other side of the camp, and then by another and another.

The Kid smiled, with his half-closed eyes on Carson.

The marshal's man was heavy with fatigue and the desire to sleep; but he was grimly remaining awake and watchful, till midnight, when Hank Harker was to take his turn to watch.

The faint hooting of the owls did not disturb him.

The Kid felt a twinge of compunction. He knew what the faint, almost inaudible hooting meant, if the marshal's man did not. He knew that death was stealing through the darkness upon the man who watched, gun in hand, the prisoner who could not harm him. It was on the Kid's lips to utter a warning whisper. But he checked it. His own life was at stake; he might save Carson a dozen times over, and yet he would be led a bound prisoner into Toro. The ropes that bound him irked him terribly; he was aching with their cramping grip; yet no pleading would have induced his captors to loosen an inch; even a movement to ease his cramped limbs might have drawn a hasty shot. The Kid was not in a position to play the Good Samaritan to the men who were leading him to death, tied up like a wild beast. He felt compunction, but he was silent and still. The hooting of the owls had died into silence.

The Kid knew what that meant.

His keen eyes had read the sign of the desert, before his captors had halted to camp. A turkey-buzzard rising from a gully, a shadow that stirred where other shadows were still, had been enough—more than enough—for the Kid. He knew that some savage crew of desert outcasts had sighted the party from afar, and tracked them—waiting only for the cover of night to close in on the lonely camp. So wary, so cunning, was the trailing, that even the Rio Kid, watchful for the slimmest chance that might stand between him and the calaboose at Toro, doubted once or twice whether he had read the sign aright. But in his heart he was sure; yet till he heard the hooting of the owls, he could not tell whether the hidden trailers were white men or red.

Now he knew!

Some gang of redskin outcasts—some crew of savage Apaches who had never bent their necks to the white man's yoke—ferocious, greedy, ruthless, were closing round the solitary camp in the desert of the Staked Plain. Whether he had more mercy to expect from them than his captors had to expect, the Kid could not be sure. As likely as not, they would kill him as ruthlessly as the others, and his scalp would hang as a trophy at a Redskin belt. Better that than the calaboose at Toro, and the triumph of the enemies who had so long

hunted him in vain. But it was on the cards that, finding him a prisoner in the hands of their foes, the Apaches might spare him—at least, only make him a prisoner; and the change of captors would be a change for the better. In the remotest recesses of the desert to which they might bear him, there would be hope of escape—the Rio Kid was a hard man to hold. At the very worst, better to join the Redskin gang than to be handed over to the sheriff's rope.

It was a chance—a slim chance, but it was all that the Kid had. Life or death hung on the passing minutes for him. He was coolly prepared for whatever might befall; ready to face it when it came, whether it was freedom, or a change of captivity, or the thrust of an Apache knife. With such thoughts in his mind, the Rio Kid had slept peacefully, knowing that he could rely upon himself to waken when he would; and knowing that the attack, which was certain to come, was not likely to come before midnight. And now it was coming.

Those faint, almost inaudible, hoots from the silent night were the signals of the Redskins to one another, as they surrounded the camp in the dense darkness. When the circle was complete, and all was ready, the rush would come, as the Kid knew. He had not seen one man—not a shadow of one—but he knew that at least a dozen savage foes were circling round the camp, closing in, closer and closer.

Buck Carson stirred and yawned. He had not noted the faint hoots of the night-owls; had he noted them, he would never have recognised them as human imitations. His ear was not trained to the sounds of the desert like the Rio Kid's.

But now the hooting had ceased; all was silent. The circle was complete; and close—close at hand now, though the darkness still hid the savage rovers of the Staked Plain.

The Kid waited grimly.

If the creeping Indians noticed him at all, they believed him sleeping, as he lay motionless, as Buck Carson believed. But the Kid was not sleeping; he was watching tensely.

Behind the stunted pecan against which the marshal's man sat, a shadow stirred among other shadows.

The Kid felt a pang.

A few moments more, and he knew that a stealthy hand would reach round the slender trunk, and a knife would be driven between the shoulders of the man who sat there unsuspecting.

The man was taking him to his death; but the Kid was a white man. To see a white man slaughtered helplessly, treacherously, by a lurking savage, was not possible to him. For the moment he forgot that he was the Rio Kid, hunted by all Texas; and remembered only that he was a puncher of the Double Bar ranch, a white man bound by all laws to stand by his race against foes of another colour. He lifted his head.

At the movement, Buck Carson's hand came up, with the gun in it, his finger on the trigger. But the shadow behind the pecan, which had been stirring, was stilled. The creeping Apache had paused. The Kid yawned, and smiled at the watchful, suspicious face of the marshal's man—watchful where no watch was needed, unguarded where his life depended on his guard.

"No games, Kid," said Carson. "I'd save be sorry to blow your cabeza into little pieces, but you get yours if you try it on."

"Mayn't a man speak a little word, feller?" yawned the Kid.

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"Can it, and go to sleep!"

The Kid laughed.

"You ain't interested?" he asked.

"Nope."

"I guess I'd sure be interested if a galoot was telling me that a Redskin was just behind my shoulder, with a knife in his paw," drawled the Rio Kid.

Carson did not stir.

"Cut it out!" he grinned. "You don't draw me so easy as that, Kid. I guess there ain't no Redskin nearer than a day's ride."

"You dog-goned loco galoot, I'm warning you that there's Redskins all round the camp, and that your life ain't worth shucks!" said the Rio Kid contemptuously.

"Forget it, Kid," grinned Carson.

Hank Harker stirred at the sound of voices and sat-up in his blankets. His gun was in his hand.

"Midnight, Buck?" he asked.

"Nigh on, marshal."

"Chewing the rag?" The Marshal of Toro glanced from Carson to the prisoner. "I guess you'd better sleep, Kid. You ain't got to keep watch."

The Rio Kid laughed.

"You've got me tight, feller," he said. "You ain't letting up on me at any price, not if I save your life ten times over—what? But you're a white man, marshal, and I guess I'm white. There's the Injuns round the camp as thick as fleas on a Mexican dog."

Buck Carson chuckled, evidently taking no stock in the Kid's warning. But Hank Harker was on his feet with a bound. His eyes glared into the thick shadows round the lonely camp; his finger was on his trigger.

"The Kid's foolin', marshal!" said Carson. "I guess there ain't no Redskins around without my knowing it. I— Oh!"

The marshal's man broke off with a choking cry and pitched headlong to the ground. He did not stir after he touched the earth, and as he lay on his face the feather of an arrow could be seen sticking from his neck. From the darkness the arrow had sped, winged with death, and the marshal's man lay dead at the feet of the Marshal of Toro.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Surrounded!

BANG! Bang! Bang!

With a gun in either hand, the Marshal of Toro blazed away into the darkness round the camp.

But he was not standing now.

He had thrown himself on the earth, taking what cover he could—his horse, and the stunted pecan, and the blankets, and the body of the man who lay prone. With the roar of the marshal's revolvers came a wild yelling from the Apaches, like a chorus of demons bursting out in the darkness. Five or six arrows whizzed through the air and two or three bullets—some of the Redskins had rifles. Then for a minute shadowy forms showed up in the night, rushing in.

But only for a minute. The blazing Colts drove the Apaches back, three or four of them yelling with the pain of wounds, one of them falling as he went and never stirring again.

The shadowy figures faded into the darkness again, and demonic yells came ringing back.

Then there was silence.

But the silence did not mean that the Apaches were gone. The Town Marshal of Toro knew that only too well. The camp was ringed by foes, watchful, ferocious, ruthless, waiting for a chance to feel the white man with an arrow or a bullet, or screwing in their

courage for another rush in face of his revolvers.

The marshal panted as he crammed fresh cartridges into his Colts. The Kid grinned at him from his blanket.

"Feel like letting me loose, marshal?"

No answer.

"I reckon you're in a close corner, feller. You know I can handle a gun," said the Kid persuasively. "You can't stall off a gang of Apaches on your own, marshal! Have a little hoss-sense!"

"Shut up, Kid! Chewing the rag will draw their arrows! They can hear you!"

"What do I care!" grinned the Kid. "A Redskin arrow is no worse than the rope of Judge Lynch, feller!"

"You warned me!" muttered Harker. "If you hadn't warned me, Kid, I'd be lying beside Carson this minute!"

"I warned Carson, but he knew too much!" said the Kid. "I was a fool to do it, but a feller can't forget his colour! I reckon if you go up the hume, marshal, I stand a better chance with the Injuns than with Judge Lynch!"

"You do," agreed the marshal.

"Well, then, you durned galoot, let me loose and give me a gun!"

Harker shook his head.

"I'm taking you back to Toro, dead or alive, Kid! I guess I'm obliged to you for putting me wise about the Injuns, and I'll make things as easy for you as I know how. But you're my prisoner, and you're staying my prisoner!"

"I guessed you'd say just that," assented the Kid. "I knew I was a durned fool to put you wise! But you ain't got me to Toro yet, feller! Them Red bucks will have a word to say about that!"

Harker made no reply.

He was straining his eyes into the darkness of the night, and straining his ears to listen.

At any moment the rush of the Redskins might come, and he knew now that he had more than a dozen foes to face.

Gladly enough he would have had a man like the Rio Kid at his side, gun in hand, to withstand the rush when it came. But with a gun in his hand, the Kid was not the man to be taken to Toro afterwards. And the marshal was hanging on to his prisoner so long as life remained.

Whiz! Whiz! Whiz!

Arrows were dropping into the camp.

The Apaches were shooting into the camp so that the arrows dropped almost vertically on the camp, and, in spite of the darkness, their aim was uncannily good.

An arrow passed through the Kid's blanket, but its force was spent, and it barely scratched him.

He heard a muttered curse from Harker as another barbed shaft grazed the marshal's neck.

There was a sudden squeal from Carson's horse, and the animal struggled up, an arrow sticking in its flank. The terrified horse trampled away into the darkness, and a yell from the unseen Redskins told that they had caught it.

Hank Harker ground his teeth savagely.

He had followed the Kid far into the wilderness of the Staked Plain, thinking only of his capture, reckless and heedless of the lurking dangers of the desert, which he had faced many a time unheeding. The Kid was in his hands now, and the unheeded dangers of the desert had closed in on him. A gang of thief-Apaches—outcasts, half-famished wanderers of the desert—held him at



UNDER FIRE! A shower of arrows dropped into the camp, one pinning the Kid's blanket to the ground. The Redskins were shooting into the air with an aim that was uncannily good. "Wake me when they've finished," yawned the Kid from his bed, and he turned over and went to sleep. (See Chapter 3.)

lay, and well the Marshal of Toro knew that only a miracle could save him.

Buck Carson lay dead, and ere another sun rose over the Staked Plain Harker expected to join him. There was no help a day's ride from the nearest white man's camp, no chance of succour, and not the remotest chance that the Apaches would relinquish their prey. The guns and horses alone were a great prize to the ragged thieves of the desert.

The Rio Kid yawned.

"You staying awake, marshal?" he asked banteringly.

Harker grunted.

"Wake me half an hour before dawn, then!" grinned the Kid. "I'm going to sleep. They'll finish just before daylight."

"You know a lot, Kid?" snarled the marshal.

"I guess I know Injuns and their ways," drawled the Kid. "They'll keep up this game with their arrows to get you rattled, but they won't keep it up after dawn. Just before sun-up, feller, there'll be a rush. You're a good man, marshal, and you'll pot three or four, and the rest will carve you into small pieces! Wake me for the finish, feller!"

The Kid closed his eyes.

Harker did not heed him; he was watching with painful intensity. He knew that the Kid was right—that the threat of attack was to hang over him till day was near to keep his nerves at full tension, and that the last fatal rush would come before the new day gave him light for sure shooting.

In the meantime, a chance arrow might disable him and throw him, an easy prey, into the hands of the Apaches. He knew it well enough, and

he knew that he would never ride into Toro again, with or without his prisoner. But he was still dogged and determined, still inflexible.

That the Kid was sleeping he did not believe, but after a time he peered at the prisoner in the darkness. The Kid's eyes were closed, his breathing was soft and regular. Harker stared at him in wonder. The Kid was sleeping as peacefully as a child, while round the camp lurked the savage Apaches, and arrows still dropped from the air. Yet when the Redskins' final rush came, the chances were that the Kid, prisoner as he was, would share the fate of the Marshal of Toro.

"Some nerve!" muttered the marshal.

He watched again.

Twice dim shadows flitted in the darkness, and he fired. Once a yell told that the lead had taken effect.

Still the rush did not come.

Harker lay between his horse and the body of his follower, crouching in whatever cover there was, watchful, savage, bitterly resolute.

But as the stars paled, he knew that the end was drawing near.

It wanted half an hour to daylight; and within the next fifteen minutes, at most, his fate would be decided. And it would only be decided one way.

He did not waken the Kid. But a mocking voice at his side told him that the Rio Kid had awakened.

"Saying your prayers, marshal?"

Harker made no answer.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Kid Keeps His Word!

THE Rio Kid sat up in his blanket. He was stiff and cramped; yet in spite of the discomfort, he had slept soundly. Now he was wide awake, and there was a gleam of amuse-

ment in his eyes. Just before the dawn it was darker than ever; he could scarcely make out the figure of the Marshal of Toro so close to him. The Kid was thinking now.

He knew what the end must be—Hank Harker, fighting to the last, would go down under the rush of the Apaches. The Redskins, finding a bound prisoner in the camp, might spare him, as a foe of their foes. The Kid could speak to them in their own tongue; it was likely enough that the Apaches had heard of the Rio Kid, more than likely that they would welcome him into their gang if he cared to save his life by turning Redskin—for a time. At all events, the Kid's only chance, his only hope, lay in the victory of the outcasts of the Staked Plain. Yet he had deliberately postponed, if not frustrated, that victory, by warning his captors of the impending attack. And now—the Kid smiled at his own weakness, but the call of his race was too strong for him to resist.

"Marshal," he drawled.

Harker peered at him.

"Forget it, Kid," he said. "I'm not letting you loose. I'm holding on to you as long as I can."

The Kid laughed.

"I guess you know I'm a man of my word, marshal. They say a lot of things about the Rio Kid, but no galoot ever figured out that my word wasn't good enough for him."

"I know that, Kid."

"Well, then," drawled the Kid. "Let me loose, feller, and give me my guns; and when the circus is over, I'll sure hand you the guns again, and let you rope me up."

Harker was silent.

"I reckon I've got a chance if the Redskins wipe you out, marshal. But it sure

goes against the grain to let a gang of dirty Apaches wipe out a white man. I'll stand the racket with you, marshal, and afterwards I'm your prisoner again. Is it a cinch?"

Still the marshal hesitated.

Not that he doubted the Kid. He knew that the Rio Kid's word was as good as gold; that he would do exactly as he promised, if he survived the fight. Well he knew, too, the difference it would make, with a man like the Rio Kid fighting at his side when the rush came. But to owe his life to the Kid—and still to take him a prisoner into Toro—that was what made the marshal hesitate. And he had his duty to do—the Kid was his prisoner, and his duty was clear.

"Is it a cinch, feller?" yawned the Kid. "There ain't much time for chewing the rag—they'll come any minute now. I reckon you can trust me to keep my word."

"I guess I can trust you, Kid," said the marshal slowly.

"Then it's a cinch?"

"I can't let you go, Kid," said the marshal huskily. "You know that. If we beat the Apaches, I've got to take you into Toro, alive or dead."

"I guess I'm wise to that, marshal."

"If you mean business, Kid—"

"Sure thing!"

"It's a cinch, then," said the marshal at last.

His knife glided over the ropes that held the Rio Kid.

The Kid was a free man. The marshal pushed over to him the two notched, walnut-butted guns that had been taken from him when he had been captured. The Kid did not touch them for a moment. He was chafing his cramped limbs, stiff from the ropes.

But at last he grasped the guns. He examined both of them with care, and gave a soft chuckle.

"What a chance, marshal," he murmured, "if a man wasn't a man of his word. I reckon one ball would give you your ticket for soup; and once on my mustang, I'd take my chance with all the Apaches in the Staked Plain. What a chance I'm missing!"

And the Kid sighed.

Hank Harker did not speak. He was watching. Dawn was drawing near, and he knew that the rush impended.

Some faint sound from the darkness made the Kid alert. A glint came into his eyes, and he gripped his guns hard. "They're coming, marshal! You want to watch out," he drawled.

The rush came.

From the silence and the darkness there broke out a sudden storm of savage yells, and from all sides the shadowy figures of the Apaches rushed in on the camp.

More than a dozen of them, knife or tomahawk in hand, leaping out of the darkness like phantoms, yelling like fiends.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The Rio Kid grinned over his guns as he fired. Hank Harker was firing, too; but the fire of the Kid was like lightning. He seemed to be able to see like a cat in the dark—and every time he pulled trigger, a death-cry answered the shot. Shadowy figures, fiendish, painted faces, yelling mouths, and snarling teeth, surrounded the two white men, as they stood and faced the desperate rush—a rush that would have overwhelmed the marshal, alone, in a few seconds. But good man as the marshal was, the Rio Kid was worth five or six of him in a desperate affray of this kind.

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Bang! Bang! Bang!

It was more than the Apache gang had counted on.

For little more than a minute the scene was like pandemonium, and it seemed that the two white men must be overwhelmed by the yelling demons that had leaped out of the darkness. And then—

Then three or four screaming savages were fleeing wildly in the darkness, and the fight was over. The Rio Kid, laughing, pumped out lead after the Apaches as they ran.

"Our game, marshal," he chuckled.

He caught Hank Harker as he reeled. Blood was streaming down the marshal's face.

"Hurt, feller?"

Harker dabbed away the blood.

"I guess that tomahawk went close," he said coolly. "Not close enough, though. We've licked them, Kid."

"We sure have," assented the Rio Kid.

The marshal bound his neck-scarf round his head, where a tomahawk had made a deep gash. The sounds of the fleeing Apaches had died away in the desert. From the east came a glimmer of light. Dawn flushed up over the desert of the Staked Plain.

Two groaning Apaches were crawling away, unheeded. The Kid glanced carelessly at the dead Redskins sprawled round the camp; the slain men who might have saved him, had he passed unheeded the call of his colour. He hardly knew whether he regretted the line he had taken. But the die was cast now, regret or no regret. The sun that was rising over the edge of the barren desert, was to see him a prisoner in the calaboose at Toro before it set.

Hank Harker looked at him grimly.

"You've saved my life, Kid."

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

"I've got to take you into Toro."

The Kid looked thoughtfully at the guns in his hands, the guns that had dealt death to the Apaches, and that were now empty. Deliberately he had fired his last cartridge after the fleeing Apaches, and left himself defenceless. Slowly the Kid reversed the guns in his hands and took them by the barrels, extending the walnut butts towards the marshal of Toro.

The marshal took them from him.

"I'm plumb sorry, Kid," he muttered.

"But I've got my duty to do; I warned you, Kid."

"What's the good of chewing the rag?" drawled the Kid. "I'm your prisoner, marshal."

The Kid's hands were still free, as he breakfasted with the Marshal of Toro on stale flapjacks and lukewarm water. With his free hands he saddled the black-muzzled mustang, while the marshal was piling the desert sand over the body of Buck Carson. And when Hank Harker was ready to hit the trail, the Rio Kid mounted his mustang, with a mocking smile on his face.

Harker hesitated.

"I guess if you give me your word to ride quiet, Kid, I'll let you off the ropes," he said.

"I guess not," smiled the Kid. "I'm your prisoner, marshal, but you won't get me as far as Toro if I can help it. Put on the ropes, feller."

And it was with his feet tied to his stirrups, and his hands bound to his belt, his reins held by the Marshal of Toro, that the Rio Kid rode away under the rising sun.

THE END.

(There will be another grand Rio Kid yarn in next week's issue, entitled: "A LIFE FOR A LIFE.")

A WORD WITH YOUR EDITOR!

CHEERS FOR THE RIO KID!

"H AS the Rio Kid come to stay?" That question appears in scores of readers' letters of late, and it just shows how successful this new series of stories is. Everyone wants the Kid to become a fixture with the old POP, and readers are not slow in making this demand at the source of affairs.

Of course, there's no doubt about it, our Western yarns are the finest of their kind that have ever been written. You can read any other story of the roaring Wild West and you won't find as many thrills and surprises in them as you will in one of the Rio Kid yarns. And there's the local colour—it's there, plain to the eye, and vivid to the imagination. As you read the stories you feel just as if you were yourself charging across the rolling prairies, camping in the chaparral, and watching the golden sun sink behind the sierra.

When a story makes you feel like this, it proves it's the "real goods." But I have wandered off the main question: "Has the Kid come to stay?" Well, he'll stay some time yet, anyway, for I dare not take him away, even if I want to, and I certainly don't want to. So will my many reader-chums be satisfied with that answer for the moment—the Kid's here, anyway, and that's all that matters, doesn't it?

NOT 335 DAYS.

"I'm certain that I've dropped a few days out of this last year," writes P. I., of Islington. "Here we are in April, and it seems only a few weeks ago that I was arranging last year's Easter vac."

Of course, P. I., if you have been working and playing hard this last year, you will certainly not notice the rate the days fly past. But I agree with you; it is somewhat disconcerting when you suddenly realise that twelve months have sped away when you've had your back turned, so to speak.

But take a look back on those days, and you'll see, after a little reflection, the profit of your hard work and hard play. You mightn't notice the time, but you will notice your little progress in this great wide world, and then you'll feel glad, and you'll want to go through this coming year in the same way. Good luck to you!

NEXT WEEK'S STORIES.

Now turn to page 11 of this issue for a complete announcement of next week's school, detective, and Western stories. They're all tip-top yarns, and if you're wise in your generation, you'll see that your newsagent has your order for next week's issue well in advance.

Cheerio, chums!

Your Editor.