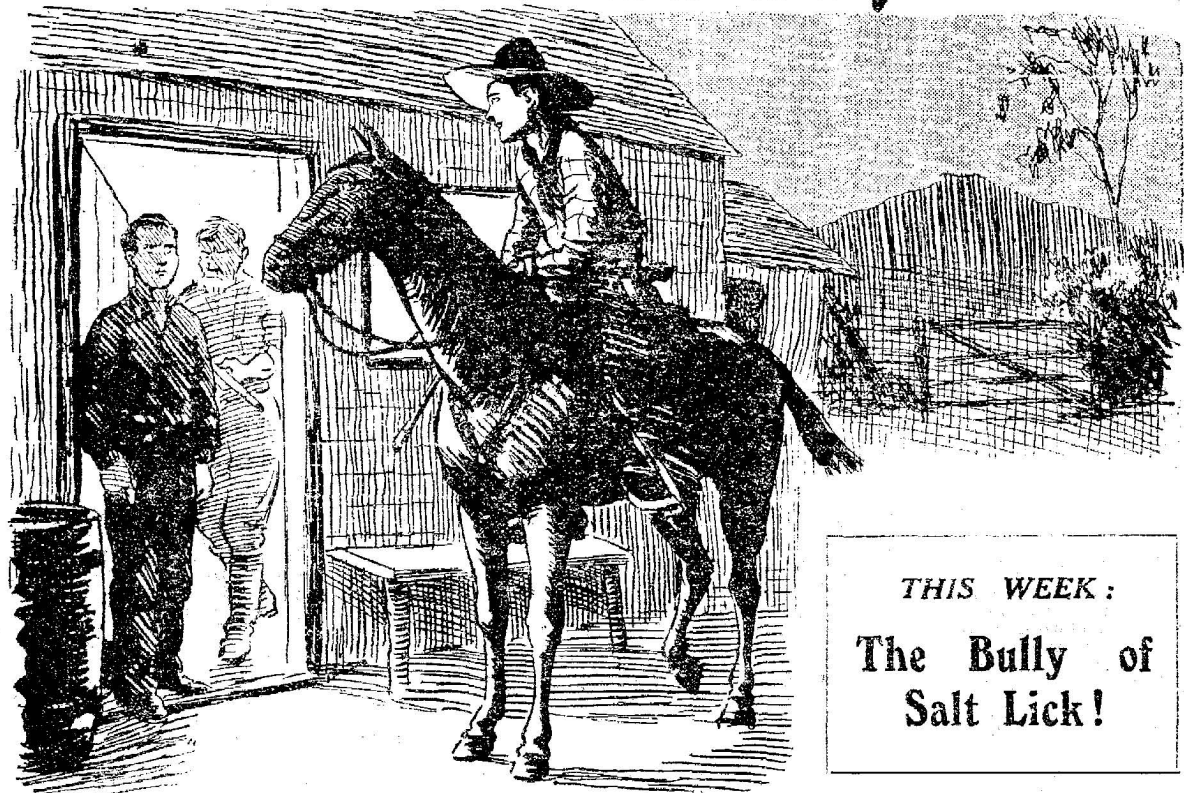


THE BOY WITHOUT FEAR! Jeff Blake, gunman and bully, was feared by all men in the little township of Salt Lick—until the Rio Kid rode into the camp! The coming of the Kid spelt trouble for Blake, for the Kid feared no man alive!

The Rio Kid!

BY RALPH
REDWAY



THIS WEEK:

The Bully of
Salt Lick!

A ROARING LONG COMPLETE WESTERN YARN, DEALING WITH THE ADVENTURES OF A DARE-DEVIL BOY OUTLAW—THE RIO KID!

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Kid Dodges Trouble!

THE Rio Kid, when he rode out of Texas, had no idea whatever of lingering in New Mexico. He rode into New Mexico simply because it was on his way to Arizona and the gold country. The Kid was, in fact, anxious to get through that stage of his journey, and to leave the land that had known him far behind. He was tired—for the time, at least—of his outlaw life in the cow country, keen to try his luck in a new land. Luck had been against him in the valley of the Rio; faithless fortune had made him an outlaw sorely against his will; but far across the sierra they knew nothing of the Rio Kid. There he was resolved that he would make good, and stand by the law instead of standing against it and outside it. He vowed that he would learn to mind his own business, to keep out of trouble, to let the walnut-butted guns, which he was, perhaps, too ready to handle, rest in their leather holsters unused. New Mexico was but a stage in his journey to the west, and he intended to lose no time there. And yet, as it happened, the Kid was booked for a much longer stay in that country than he had anticipated.

The Rio Kid had no use for railroads; his wiry, black-muzzled mustang that had carried him so long and so faithfully over the Texan grasslands, was able to carry him as far as he wanted to go—a good many hundreds of miles this time. By road and trail and mountain pass, the Kid headed westward, day after day. It was a new experience for the Kid to ride through towns and camps where he was unknown, where no notice of a reward for his arrest was posted on trees or dead walls; where he could put up at inn or posada and no questions asked, no curious or suspicious glances turned on his handsome sunburnt face. But he knew that as likely as not, pursuit was still on his trail, and wherever he stopped, his halt was brief. He went by lonely roads and unfrequented trails, and this, so far as making good speed on his journey to Arizona was concerned, was his undoing. It really seemed as if the Kid, with all his good resolutions, could not help horning into trouble if there was any trouble to be found. He was following the bank of Salt River, aiming to stay the night at Salt Lick, when the trouble came along. The sun was below the sierra, and a glimmer of moon showing in a dark sky, when the figures of three

shadowy horsemen loomed out of the dusk on the trail ahead, and a voice shouted to him to halt.

The Rio Kid halted.

His hand fairly itched to drop on the butt of a gun. There was a sharp, bullying tone in the voice that called to him; and the Kid was not the man to take orders from anyone. But he checked his impulse, true to his resolve. It was not a hold-up, he could see that; the horsemen were not road-agents or rustlers. No gun was leveled, but the three riders blocked his way. What they wanted the Kid could not guess; but he resolved to have no trouble if he could help it. So he reined in the black-muzzled mustang with a prompt obedience that was very unlike the Rio Kid.

"Hallo to you 'uns!" he called out cheerily.

The three horsemen came closer in the dusk, peering at him from under their Stetsons. The Kid was little more than a shadow to them; they were little more than shadows to the Kid. But he could see that they were armed, and carried their guns low-slung, and he guessed that they were gunmen, and he guessed further that they were watching the trail for some

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personal enemy, and had taken him for that enemy in the dusk. There was no need, after all, for the walnut-butted guns to come into play; and the Kid was glad of it; at least, he tried to feel that he was glad. He sat his horse and looked at them.

"I guess you're our mutton," went on the bullying voice. "I guess I've cinched you at last, Bud Wilson."

The Kid wondered who Bud Wilson might possibly be, and reckoned that, whoever he was, he was fortunate not to be riding that trail just then.

"Get off that critter!"

"Hold on a leetle," drawled the Kid. "I guess you've got the wrong steer by the tail, stranger."

"That sure ain't young Bud, Jeff Blake," said another of the riders. "If it is, he's sure got a new voice on him."

"He looks like him," grunted the first speaker.

"I guess you must be some cat, to see what a pilgrim looks like in the dark," smiled the Kid.

"He don't talk like young Bud, either!" chuckled the other horseman. "Bud wouldn't hand out back-talk like that to you, Jeff."

Jeff Blake pushed his horse closer.

In the pale glimmer of the rising moon, the Kid could make out a big and powerful man, with a hard, harsh face. Two sharp eyes glinted at him from under the Stetson hat.

"You ain't young Wilson?" growled Blake.

"Nope!"

"Who are you, then?"

"Jest a cowpuncher from Texas."

"I guess we'll take a closer look at you, Mister Cowpuncher from Texas!" growled Jeff Blake. "Strike a match, Dave Butt!"

The man named fumbled for matches.

"You keep still, Mister Man from Texas," went on Jeff Blake. "If you ain't the galoot we want, you can ride on, I guess; only don't give me any lip. If you ain't a stranger to this country, you'll know that Jeff Blake don't take lip from any galoot."

"I guess I'm a stranger," said the Kid cheerily, "and I disremember ever hearing of you, feller. But I sure reckon you're some powerful big medicine in this country, from the way you talk."

"Not so much chewing the rag!" snapped Jeff Blake.

The Kid set his lips a little.

He was not accustomed to listening to talk like this without making the talker sorry for himself.

But he kept to his resolution.

This gang of border gunmen and their quarrel with the unknown Bud Wilson were nothing to him; and he would not seek trouble. He asked nothing better than to go on his way in peace. Quietly he sat in the saddle while Dave Butt extracted a box of matches from his pocket, and struck one.

Jeff Blake peered at the Kid's handsome face in the flickering light of the match. He gave a disappointed grunt.

"It ain't Wilson!"

"I guess I mentioned that," smiled the Kid.

The match went out.

"What you doing on this trail?" growled Blake, evidently in a quarrelsome mood in his disappointment.

"Jest riding."

"That ain't an answer," said the gunman, in a tone of menace. "You don't want to fool with me, puncher!"

"I'm sure riding for Salt Lick, to put up for the night," said the Kid civilly, though civility went against the grain in this matter. "I'm from Texas,

and heading for Arizona. Anything more you want to know, Mr. Blake?"

"I guess you're t—
durned fresh," grunted the gunman.

"I was sure born fresh," sighed the Kid. "It's led me into a lot of trouble. But I ain't looking for trouble now."

"I guess you might find some without looking for it," growled the gunman.

The Kid's eyes sparkled. His whole nature was yearning for trouble with this bully. He longed to wade in and try his hand at cleaning up this gang of night-riders. But he checked himself again. What was the use of a good resolution if a pilgrim fell to the first temptation?

"Give it a miss, pardner," he said mildly. "I guess what I want is a supper and a bed, not a rookus with a galoot I've never seen before. You fellers through?"

The bully of Salt Lick growled again; but the quiet civility of the Kid checked even his readiness for trouble.

"I guess you can ride on," he grunted. "You seen a man on this trail?"

"Not a man till you galoots woke me up."

"A kid about your own age and size, most likely riding a pinto," said Jeff Blake. "That's the galoot we want."

"I'm sure sorry; I guess I ain't seen hide or hair of him," said the Kid. "If he knows you galoots are laying for him, I reckon he'd be a wise man to keep off this trail."

"I guess that's a cinch," said Jeff Blake. "I'll tell a man that Bud Wilson is a pesky coward, and he don't dare show his face in Salt Lick, and I'm hunting him. I'll get him, too!" The big man gritted his teeth. "I guess all the town is laughing at him for a durned coward; he can ride some, but he can't shoot worth a red cent. Anyhow, he don't dare pull a gun."

"You got some bad trouble on with the guy?" asked the Kid, rather curious now.

"Sure! You see him any time, and you tell him that Jeff Blake is hunting him!" growled the gunman. "You tell him I figure to quirt him in the street at Salt Lick, with all the town looking on, if he don't dare to pull a gun like a man."

"I guess it wouldn't help him none if he did pull a gun on you, Jeff!" grinned Dave Butt.

The Kid's lip curled.

He could figure out now fairly well how the matter stood—a quarrel between the gunman, skilled and ruthless in the use of deadly weapons, and some lad who was, perhaps, plucky enough in his own way, but no use in a "rookus" with a professional gunman. It was not to be wondered at that Bud Wilson, whoever he was, was keeping clear of this dangerous bully. Once more temptation strongly assailed the Kid. The gunman had no terrors for him, and he was sorely tempted to take up, here and now, the quarrel of the man he had never seen, and give



Jeff Blake all the trouble he wanted, and a little over. It needed all the Kid's resolution, this time, to resist the temptation.

"Ride on, cowboy!" grunted Blake, quite unaware of the thoughts in the Kid's mind. "You happen to see that Bud Wilson, you tell him the boss is waiting for him at Salt Lick, hitched to the rail outside Donovan's place, if he dares to fetch it. He won it in the rodeo, and he allows he won it fair and square; but I guess that cayuse will die of old age afore Bud Wilson lays a hand on his rein. Now git!"

The Kid got. Three shadowy horsemen disappeared into the darkness, and the Kid rode on, with a thoughtful brow. He had kept to his resolution; he had avoided trouble. But he was dissatisfied. His thoughts wandered to the unknown Wilson, who apparently had won a horse in a riding contest, and dared not claim the prize for fear of the gunman. Fear was an unknown quantity to the Rio Kid; and he could not savvy what the fellow Wilson was like—what he could be like. But he was sorry for the fellow, all the same, and tempted to ride back and talk trouble with the gunman.

He laughed a little—it was his old weakness; he never could mind his own business, he told himself. Bud Wilson was nothing to him—he had never heard the name before—what call had he to take up a quarrel for a stranger he had never



LIGHTNING
the crowd as
grasp closed
the bully of
beer

seen? He shook his head and rode on; but he was feeling more and more dissatisfied.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Fate!

"OLD boss, I guess we've hit the wrong trail!" yawned the Rio Kid.

He pulled in his steed.

It was a new country to the Kid, but he had the cowboy's knack of finding his way in any country. But the trails were dim and scarcely marked, and the Kid realised at last that he was not on the route to Salt Lick. Darkness surrounded him; but he knew that long ago he should have sighted the lights of the town, had he been on the right road. He was keen to get to Salt Lick—he wanted to look in at Donovan's place, which the gunman had mentioned, and look at the prize horse that was hitched to the rail there, waiting for a man who dared not claim it. But it was growing clear to the Kid that he would not reach camp that night.

his route. The mountain air was keen; but the night was fine, and the Kid decided at last to look for a camp.

It was then that he discerned a faint light gleaming through the night from afar.

The Kid looked steadily at the twinkling light in the distance.

It evidently came from some lonely dwelling; perhaps some solitary ranch-house; possibly the hut of some "native" New Mexican.

Whatever it was, wherever it came from, the Kid decided to head for it. He wanted to pass the night under a roof if he could.

"That's our way, old boss!" he said cheerily.

And he rode steadily towards the distant twinkling light.

He found himself following a path through an alfalfa field, and then he had to lean down and hitch open a gate. Then he rode up to the little building, dim and shadowy in the faint light of a crescent of moon. It was a timber ranch-house, and it was closed for the night. The door was fast; the window shuttered. It was from a crack in a wooden shutter that the glimmer of the light came that had drawn the Rio Kid to the spot.

With the butt of his quirt the Kid struck on the door.

There was the sound of a movement in the house at once. The Kid's keen ears detected voices within. But the occupants of the house were not in a hurry to open.

"Who knocks?" called out a voice at last.

"A stranger wanting to bed down for the night," called back the Kid.

"I guess you can bed down in the barn and welcome!"

"Many thanks!" said the Kid. "There must sure be rustlers in this section, rancher, if a man's afraid to open his door at night."

There was a sound of a bar being removed.

"Stop that, boy," said the voice again.

"It's a stranger, father," said a younger, fresher voice, "and no man in New Mexico is going to say that I'm afraid to open the door."

There was a pause.

"Right, my boy," said the older voice. "Right! And I guess I've got the shotgun ready, if it's a firebug from Salt Lick."

The old man peered at him.

"Name?" he said.

"I guess you can call me Carfax."

Since he had ridden across the Straked Plain out of Texas, the Kid had used that name wherever a name was needed. The name as well as the past of the Rio Kid was left behind him in the land of the Rio Grande.

"Light down, Mr. Carfax, and come in," said the boy. "It's not a rich ranch here, but I guess we can lodge a stranger for the night."

"Look here, I guess the barn will be good enough for me," said the Kid good-humouredly. "I never figured that I'd startle the house when I rode here. In Texas, where I come from, a puncher can always ask for a roof over his head in the cow country. You look as if you're figuring on an Indian raid, I guess, and I don't want to make you uneasy. Me for the barn."

"Come in, and let up on the chin-wag," said the boy impatiently. "The door's open for you."

The Kid dismounted.

"I'll show you where to put up your horse," said the boy, stepping out of the doorway.

"Bud!" exclaimed the old man in anxious tones.

"I guess it's all right, father."

The Kid stared and stared at the boy. The name uttered by the old rancher startled him.

"Blazes!" ejaculated the Kid. "I guess there's plenty of Buds cavorting around; but does it happen that you've Bud Wilson, by any chance?"

"That's my name," said the boy.

"Oh, holy smoke!" said the Kid.

There was fate in it, the Rio Kid felt that. He had resolved to ride on his way, giving no further thought to Jeff Blake the gunman, or the enemy he was hunting. And here he was, asking a shelter for the night from the Bud Wilson for whom the gunman had been seeking on the trails. The suspicious watchfulness at the lonely ranch was explained now; the Wilsons had feared a visit from the gunman of Salt Lick.

"You know my name?" said the boy, looking at the Kid. He was a tall and rather handsome lad, about the Kid's own age and size.

"Yep!" said the Kid. "I heard it from a firebug back on the trail two or three hours ago. Galoot named Jeff Blake."

"Looking for me?"

"Yep."

"I guess I wish he'd found me," said the boy. "Bring your horse this way, Mr. Carfax."

The Kid, in a good deal of wonder, followed the boy and put up his horse. Then he was led into the little ranch, and the door carefully bolted and barred behind him. The old rancher had hung up the sawed-off shotgun now, and his manner to the unexpected guest was courteous and hospitable enough; but the signs of uneasiness and trouble in his face were only too plainly to be seen.

The Kid supped with the father and son, and little was said. The old man was in troubled thought, the boy restive and ill-at-ease. Trouble brooded over that household, as the Kid very easily saw, and he knew that it was due to Jeff Blake, of Salt Lick; yet the boy did not strike him as a coward, as the gunman had called him. The Kid guessed that he was chafing under some restraint, and he guessed at last that the old rancher was the restraining influence. It was a silent and uncomfortable meal, and the Kid was not displeased when it was over and the boy took him to a room to bed down for the night.

The Kid put in some thinking before he went to sleep.

He had sworn that he would ride clear of trouble—that he would even take rough words in silence, rather than lift a gun from his holster. But his besetting sin was upon him again; the Rio Kid was born to trouble as the sparks fly upward. Before his eyes closed in slumber the Kid's mind was made up; his good resolutions were thrown to the winds, and he knew that he was going to horn into the trouble that was going on at Salt Lick.



ON THE DRAW! There was a sudden, swift backing of Jeff Blake reached for his gun. But before the gunman's got the butt, the Rio Kid's colt flashed. Bang! Blake, Salt Lick, went crashing to the ground! The Kid had quicker on the draw once again! (See Chapter 4.)

Not that that was a matter of concern to the Kid to any great extent. He had his bed-roll, and he was accustomed to camping down anywhere on

You-uns look as if you're figuring on an Indian raid, I guess, and I don't want to make you uneasy. Me for the barn."

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

To Save Another!

"I GUESS I'll walk a piece with you, Mr. Carfax."

Bud Wilson made that remark after breakfast the next morning when the Kid had saddled his horse.

There was an anxious call from the old rancher at once.

"Not out of sight of the house, Bud!"

The boy made an impatient gesture.

"Father, I'm shamed before all the section! Don't shame me before a stranger!" he exclaimed.

The old man winced.

"Bud, have a little hoss-sense!" he said. "If it was a rookus with a man of your own weight I wouldn't stop you. What chance have you got with a gunman who's killed more men than he's got fingers and toes? You're a dead man before you get your gun out if you meet Jeff Blake! You're a dead-man if you ride into Salt Lick!"

"Better dead than afraid!" muttered the boy.

"I'll sure be glad if you'll walk a piece with me," said the Kid, breaking in—"just as far as the farther gate!"

"No farther, Bud!" said the old man.

"It's your say-so, father," said the boy. "I'll turn back at the gate."

"I trust you, Bud!"

The Rio Kid looped the reins over his arm and walked beside the black-muzzled mustang, and the boy walked on his other side. His face was flushed, his eyes downcast. The Kid glanced at him once or twice. He felt a friendliness towards this unhappy young fellow that he was keen to put into deeds rather than words.

"I guess it ain't my business to horn in, feller," said the Kid softly. "But you've treated me white, and I'm sure sorry to see trouble around on this shbang. Anything a galoot can do?"

They stopped at the gate, and the boy leaned on it, with a black and bitter brow.

"I guess you couldn't talk my father round," he said. "And even if you could, I ain't sure that's what I want. I know I ain't a chance against Jeff Blake; he would riddle me with lead before I could get a bead on him. And what's to become of the popper if he's left alone on this ranch? It's a hard living with me to help him."

The Kid nodded.

"Tell a man the trouble," he said. "I was sure riled by that bully from Salt Lick when I met him on the trail last night. He's what we call in Texas a bad man!"

"He's sure bad!" said the boy. "If you'd lighted down in Salt Lick, you'd have heard the story soon enough." He coloured. "You see, we had a rodeo in this section last week, and I can sure ride my pinto with any man in Mexico. I won the big race, and beat Jeff Blake by a neck, and he was sure mad. The prize is a hoss, and he's some beauty, and the winner has to fetch him from Donovan's place in Salt Lick. I've heard that Dan Donovan hitches him to the rail at his place every day, ready for the winner to come and take him away. But—"

The boy broke off, his cheeks crimson. "But—" asked the Kid softly.

"Jeff Blake can't claim the hoss, but he's put it round the town that I never rode fair. All Salt Lick knows it's a lie, but they don't argue with Jeff; he's too sudden on the draw. He allows he's going to quirt me when I show up to take the prize cayuse. If you quirt a man, he pulls a gun on you in this country."

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"Sure!" assented the Kid.

"Pulling a gun on a fire-bug like Jeff Blake is asking for sudden death. He's quicker on the draw than any other galoot from the sierras to the Rio Colorado. He's never missed a man. Where do I come in? I reckon I can handle a gun, but I'm no gunman. He will fill me with lead afore I can pull trigger! Popper knows it, and he won't let me go and claim the hoss. But— It's hard luck on popper, but I'm goin'! I can't let them say in Salt Lick that I'm afraid to face a man, even a pesky gunman like Jeff! I'm sure riding my pinto into the town this afternoon and taking my chance!"

The Kid looked quietly at him.

Remembering the hard-faced, desperate gunman he had met in the dusk of the river trail, he knew what the boy knew—that he was going to certain death. He understood the feelings of the old man on the little lonely ranch.

"I guess your popper's right in riding herd over you, feller, in this matter," said the Kid.

"Like enough. He knows I go under if I go to Salt Lick after that prize horse. And he's an old man, and he's got only me!" The boy's face quivered.

"But I got to go! The Wilsons ain't cowards!"

"And you're going?"

"The popper will be busy in the alfalfa field this afternoon, and I figure on slipping away then!" said the boy.

"I got to go!"

The Kid nodded.

"You got to go!" he agreed. "Better die a brave man than live a coward!"

"That's what I'd like the popper to get on to," said the boy. "Jeff don't dare to come to the ranch for me; the popper would riddle him with slugs if he showed up here! But he brags in Salt Lick that I'm afraid to face him, and, from what you say, he's riding the trails with his friends looking for me. It's bound to come, even if I don't go for the hoss! I ain't riding from any man! I've been putting in some practice with my gun these last three days—not that it will be much use. But I'm goin'! That hoss at Donovan's place is mine, fair and square, and I'm goin' to fetch him home or die tryin'!" He looked at the Kid. "You're goin' on to Salt Lick?"

"Correct!"

"You drop in at Donovan's place and tell Dan Donovan I'm coming for the horse this afternoon, then."

"I'll do that."

After a few more words they parted, the boy walking back slowly to the ranch, the Kid mounting his mustang and riding onward towards the distant town. The boy had directed him to the right trail, and the Rio Kid headed in a bee-line for Salt Lick.

Out of sight of the Wilson ranch, the Kid drew the walnut-butted guns from his holsters and examined them carefully.

There was a smile on his face as he slipped them back.

Those guns, which he had determined should never burn powder in New Mexico, if he could help it, were to see service again, after all. That boy was not going to his death at the hands of a ruffianly gunman if the Rio Kid could prevent it, and the Kid thought he could. Bud Wilson was riding into Salt Lick that afternoon. But the Kid was riding in that morning, and the Kid knew what he was going to do in Salt Lick.

"I guess the boy'll be O.K. this afternoon, old hoss!" he said to the black-muzzled mustang. "I sure reckon he'll have good luck, unless I have bad luck,

critter! I guess I ain't a galoot to mind his own business, and never was!"

The Kid laughed as he galloped on the trail.

The bully of Salt Lick had stirred his anger the previous evening, but the Kid, true to his pacific resolves, had taken Jeff Blake's rough talk quietly. He knew that he had given the gunman the impression that he had a yellow streak in him, and he had cared little. Now the matter was different. The Kid, who would not have pulled a gun on his own account, was going to horn into another man's quarrel, and, at the same time, give Jeff Blake something back for his rough talk. The man was what they called in Texas a "killer." But if he terrorised Salt Lick, he had no terrors for the Rio Kid.

The Kid's face was bright and cheery as he sighted the town at last. With a smile on his handsome face he rode into Salt Lick, and pulled in his mustang outside Donovan's saloon.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Gun to Gun!

DAN DONOVAN stood in the doorway of his saloon, looking out into the rugged street of Salt Lick.

There were half a dozen horses tied to the hitching-rail; among them a splendid black horse, which all the town knew to be the prize Bud Wilson had won in the rodeo, and which he had not yet claimed.

For three days that horse had been regularly led round from the stables and tied to the rail, ready for his owner to take him. At night, still unclaimed, he was led back to the stables.

Every day there was a crowd gathered about Donovan's place, in anticipation of the trouble to come. Jeff Blake was generally there; and when he was not, some friend of his was there, to carry him word at once if Bud Wilson was seen riding into the town.

Donovan glanced at the young stranger who rode up.

"I guess this is Donovan's place?" asked the Rio Kid.

"Yep."

"You Donovan?"

"Yep."

"Then you've got Bud Wilson's hoss hyer, I reckon?"

Dan pointed to the big black horse at the rail.

"Some cayuse!" said the Kid, gazing at it admiringly. "Bud is sure a lucky man to get that critter."

"Lucky if he gets it," grinned Donovan. "Jeff Blake is goin' to talk to him when he comes for it—and I reckon he won't come."

"Wrong in once," said the Kid. "I've got a message from him. He's sure coming to-day."

"I guess, if you're a friend of his, feller, you want to give him the office to keep clear," said Donovan. "Jeff's going to quirt him, and drill him if he puts up a hand to stop it. The hoss is a good cayuse, but he ain't worth it."

"This Jeff is sure some big fire-bug. I hear," said the Kid. "I met him on the trail last night, and I allowed he was as ugly a man as ever I saw!"

Donovan stared at him.

"You come to Salt Lick looking for a place in the town cemetery?" he asked.

The Kid laughed.

"Nope. Why?"

"If you shoot off your mouth in that style here, you'll sure be fixed for a funeral," explained Donovan. "Jeff is

in my place now, and if he hears you call him fancy names he will step out."

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid. "I guess I'll call an ugly man an ugly man if I choose, and that galoot Jeff is the ugliest critter I've ever woke up. Anyhow, I've got a message for him, and if he's hyer I want him to hear it."

The Kid slipped from his mustang, and hitched the animal to the rail. Five or six men were looking out of the saloon now, and others were gathering in the street. The Kid's manner was cool and unconcerned. There was a smile on his face, but the glint in his eyes belied the smile.

Donovan stared at him again, and then called into the building:

"You, Jeff! I guess there's a man come in with a message for you."

The burly gunman stepped out into the sunlight at once.

"Oh, you!" he said, recognising the Kid at once. "I've sure seen you afore."

"You have," agreed the Kid. "You had the durned impudence to stop me on the trail last night, and put questions to me. Remember?"

There was a thrill in the gathering crowd. Talk of this kind to a man like Jeff Blake meant the burning of powder.

The gunman stared hard at the young puncher from Texas. The Kid faced him smiling, his hands down at his sides, within easy reach of the walnut butts that peeped out of his low-slung holsters.

"I've got a message for you," went on the Kid. "I seen young Bud Wilson, and he allows he's riding into Salt Lick this afternoon to take away that cayuse that belongs to him."

"He don't dare!" sneered the gunman.

"He does dare, and he's sure coming. He allows that if you say he never won the big race in the rodeo fair and square, you're lying!"

"What?" roared Blake.

"Lying," said the Kid cheerily. "That's young Wilson's word. You're a liar, according to his say-so."

The gunman's brow grew black. "Let him come and tell me so," he said. "I guess he won't know what happened to him afterwards."

"You're sure a big man with your mouth," said the Kid. "If talk could frighten a man, I guess you'd have all New Mexico starved stiff!"

There was a chuckle from some of the Salt Lick men gathering on the scene. All of them were very carefully keeping out of the line of fire between this cool young stranger and the big gunman. That shooting was to follow talk like this was a foregone conclusion.

"Bud Wilson gave you that message for me?" asked the gunman between his teeth.

"He sure did."

"And you reckoned that you could deliver a message like that and ride away afterwards?" asked Blake.

"Why not?" asked the Kid cheerily. "But it ain't jest a message from Bud; it's endorsed by me, feller, if you get me. Bud allows that you're a liar, and I sure allow the same. You was beaten in the rodeo because you can't ride, feller, and you're jest blowing off your mouth in tall talk about quiring the man that beat you. I guess you'll be howling for cover when you see Bud Wilson riding into town. If you got the sand to face him when he comes, I shall sure stand around and watch him fix you for a funeral!"

A breathless silence followed the Rio Kid's words.

Amazement was mingled with rage in the hard, harsh face of the gunman. It was many a long year since the bully of Salt Lick had listened to talk like this. This lad, hardly older than the boy whom he had resolved to shame before all the camp, and to shoot down if he resisted, was defying him with cool unconcern; and it dawned upon the bully's mind that the young puncher, so far from fearing trouble with him, was asking for trouble. The Kid stood at ease, smiling, but watching the ruffian like a cat. Jeff Blake was known to be quick on the draw, but the Rio Kid was not slow. His supple hands hanging carelessly, were almost touching the walnut butts of the guns low-slung at his sides.

"And that ain't all," said the Kid easily. "You allow that Bud Wilson never won that hoss fair. You got to take that back."

"I got to take it back?" gasped Jeff Blake.

"Sure! Else Bud Wilson is going to drive it back down your iving throat, with his fists after it," said the Kid. "I'm going to see him do it."

"I guess you won't see much happen in Salt Lick, feller," said the gunman hoarsely. "I guess your eyes will be shut when Bud Wilson rides in!"

"Forget it, feller," jeered the Kid.

Next Week's Programme!

"THE ST. JIM'S RUNAWAY!"

A Rollocking Long Complete Tale of Tom Merry & Co., of St. Jim's.
By Martin Clifford.

"GUNNER PLAYS THE GOAT!"

A Rousing Long Complete Story of Jimmy Silver & Co., of Rookwood.
By Owen Conquest.

"MICK, THE UNTAMABLE!"

A Thrilling Long Complete Story of Harry Wharton & Co., the Chums of Greyfriars.
By Frank Richards.

"THE RIO KID!"

Another Roaring Western Tale, featuring this Amazing Boy Outlaw.
By Ralph Redway.

"THE FORTUNE HUNTER!"

A Gripping Long Complete Story of Ferrers Locke, Detective, and his Boy Assistant, Jack Drake.

"Why, I'd wade in now and shoot you up, only that would disappoint young Bud. But if there's anything left of you after he's through, I'll sure lay my quirt round the remains!"

There was a sudden swift backing of the crowd as the gunman, with a blaze of murderous rage in his eyes, reached for his gun.

Every man there expected to see the cool young stranger roll on the rugged strag at the next instant, with a bullet in his brain.

But swift as the gunman's action was the Kid's was swifter. His gun flashed out even as Jeff Blake's grasp closed on a butt.

Bang!

The roar of the .43 was followed by another; but the bully of Salt Lick was falling even as he pulled trigger, and his bullet missed the Kid by inches.

Crash!

Jeff Blake went down crashing, the smoking revolver gripped in his hand. There was a roar from the crowd. The Rio Kid, with his left hand, jerked the Stetson from his head, and smiled at a bullet-hole in the brim.

"I shall sure want a new hat," he remarked.

"Great gobbers!" murmured Dan Donovan, staring down at the fallen gunman.

"Jeff's got his!" said an awed voice from the crowd.

The Rio Kid glanced round swiftly. He was fully prepared for gun-play on the part of Jeff Blake's associates. But no gun was pulled. There was more awe and admiration in the looks that were bent on the Kid than hostility. The fellow who had shot up Jeff Blake was a fellow Salt Lick could admire and with whom no man there wanted trouble.

The Kid unhitched his horse from the rail.

Under the stare of a hundred eyes he mounted the black-muzzled mustang, lifted his Stetson politely to the staring crowd, and rode away down the street.

"Gum!" said Dan Donovan. "That galoot is sure some gunman!"

And every eye stared after the Rio Kid until he was out of sight.

It was two or three hours later that Bud Wilson rode into camp.

He stopped at Donovan's place and dismounted.

His face was pale and set. He had come, as he believed, to face certain death; but he had come.

There was a buzz in Donovan's place as he entered.

"I guess I've come for my critter, Dan," he said; and, in spite of his courage, there was a faint quiver in his voice.

Dan Donovan looked at him.

"You'll sure find him hitched to the rail, Bud," he answered.

The boy stood very still.

All eyes were fixed curiously on him. It was clear that he did not know what had happened at Salt Lick.

"Ain't Jeff Blake around?" he asked at last.

"I guess not," grinned Donovan. "Jeff Blake was shot up this morning, Bud, by a puncher from Texas."

The boy gasped.

"Shot up?"

"Sure. Jeff's got his," said Donovan.

"I reckon there's a good many galoots in Salt Lick kinder glad that that feller from Texas rode this way. You won't see any Jeff cavorting round this burg again."

"Dead?"

"Sure."

The boy gasped with relief. He had relieved himself to the ordeal, and the relief made him almost giddy.

"A reglar kid firebug, that puncher," said Donovan. "He jest came in and asked for trouble with Jeff, and wouldn't take no for an answer. Never seen a galoot so sudden on the draw. Jeff was sure quick, but the puncher beat him to it."

Then the boy knew. It was Carfax who had horned in—for his sake.

"Where is he now?"

"I reckon he nit the trail after he shot up Jeff. I reckon he was aiming for Arizona."

Bud Wilson rode back to the ranch on the prize horse, leading his pinto. An old man's blessing followed the Rio Kid as he rode on the Arizona trail, and perhaps it brought him luck. The Kid needed it, for the trouble he had woke up at Salt Lick was not done with yet, and he was not destined to be clear of New Mexico so soon as he figured.

THE END.

(Don't miss next week's story of the Rio Kid!)