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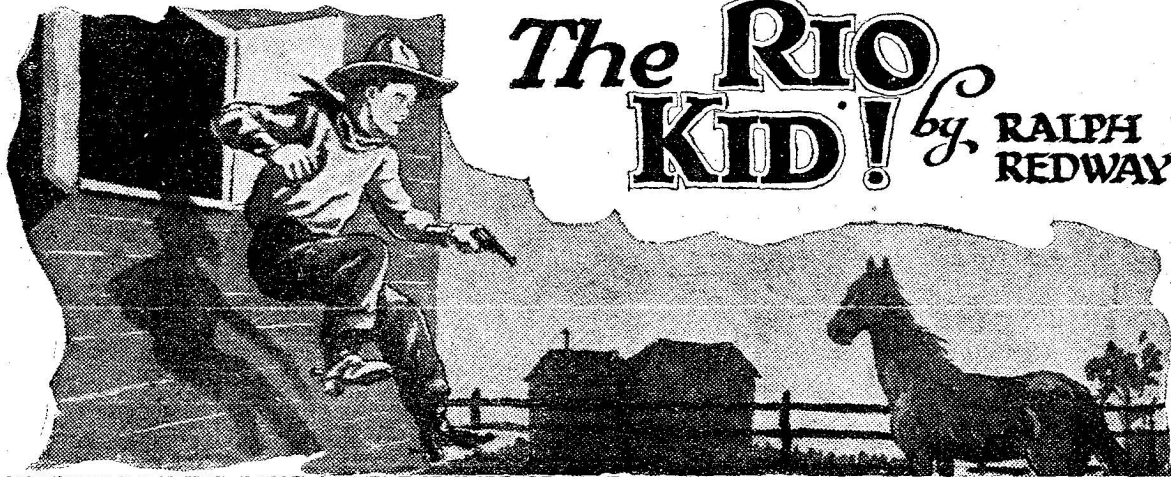
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IN A TIGHT CORNER!

With bars and locks bolted against him, and a lynch mob howling outside his prison, it looks as though the Rio Kid has ridden his last trail. But this amazing boy outlaw has been in tighter corners than this AND managed to dodge out of them!



The RIO KID! by RALPH REDWAY

ANOTHER ROARING, LONG COMPLETE TALE OF THE WEST, STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

His Last Chance!

"LYNCH him!" "Sho!" murmured the Rio Kid.

"Have him out!"

"Lynch him!"

It was a deafening roar round the timber calaboose in the town of Pawnee Ford.

Night had fallen—a soft, starry night. A myriad stars glimmered and twinkled over the Squaw Mountain and the Squaw River of Wyoming.

For hours the mob had growled and shouted round the gaol, and at nightfall the growl became a deep, threatening roar, mingled with the cracking of revolvers fired in the air or at the timber walls of the calaboose. Round the little building the sheepmen of Pawnee Ford and the surrounding country were crowding, howling for the life of the cowpuncher within. The Rio Kid, in a little room ten by eight, between a barred window and a locked door, listened to the voice of the mob.

The Kid was cool as ice, but his handsome, sunburnt face was serious. He had heard the roar of a lynch mob before, but never had he been in so tight a corner as now.

"It's a cinch this time, Kid!" he told himself. "I guess it's you for the long trail, sure!"

He shrugged his shoulders. The Rio Kid had escaped the sheriffs of Texas, and many a peril by sierra and llano, to find his fate at last in a little sheep town in the sheep country. That was the unkindest cut of all; the Kid felt that was an unnecessary gibe of Fate. Sheepmen he disliked and despised; sheep towns he detested. And it was a mob of sheepmen who were going to lynch him to the branch of a cottonwood in the street of that little sheep town in the back country of Wyoming. Had they been a mob of punchers, the Kid would not have hated it so much. But to fall at the hands of sheepmen got the Kid's goat.

"Lynch him!"

The roar was fiercer and deeper; there were hammering blows on the door of the calaboose.

In the outer room—there were only two rooms in the little building—were the sheriff of Pawnee Ford and several

THE POPULAR.—No. 498.

This Week:

The Kid's Close Call!

of his men. It was the duty of the sheriff, and of his men, to keep off the lynchers and to save their prisoner for trial. That was a duty they were not likely to perform. Men had ridden into Pawnee Ford from all parts during the afternoon, and there was a mob of hundreds surging round the gaol now. If the sheriff and his two or three men resisted, their resistance was certain to be swept away.

"If a galoot had a gat in his grip!" sighed the Rio Kid.

Crash! Crash!

The stout timber door shook and creaked under the hammering blows from without which made the whole building shake.

"Open this here door, sheriff!" It was the voice of Jim Ward, the leader of the lynch mob. "Open this here door before we make splinters of it!"

The Kid heard the sheriff's voice reply.

"You ain't coming in, Ward! Look out for my gun if you bu'st in that door!"

The sheriff's threat was an empty one, and the Kid knew it, and the lynchers knew it. The sheriff would not shoot, not that shooting would have stopped that wild mob.

The door of the gaol shook and groaned again under crashing blows.

A key turned, and the door of the Kid's cell was opened. In the outer room a lamp burned, shedding a dim light; against the light the burly figure of the sheriff of Pawnee Ford loomed up, staring into the Kid's room. The Kid stood in the darkness, save for a faint glimmer of the stars at the barred window.

"They're coming, hombre," said the sheriff. "I reckon you gotta make up your mind to it. I can't stand off that crowd."

"You sure can't, feller!" assented the Kid. "And you sure ain't got the sand to try, neither!"

The sheriff scowled. It was his duty to defend the calaboose against a lynch mob at the cost of his life, as he well knew. But to go down under the bullets and trampling feet of the crowd

was not to the taste of the sheriff of Pawnee Ford. Neither was he disposed to pull trigger on his fellow-citizens, men he knew and lived with, for the sake of an unknown cowpuncher. Cowpunchers were not popular in the sheep town, anyway, and this particular cowpuncher was accused of having shot up a sheepman. The sheriff was going to let the mob work their will unresisted, but he had a sense of shame in doing so and he was glad of an excuse to be angry.

"That sort of talk won't do you no good, puncher!" he snapped. "You sure asked for it when you came to Pawnee Ford. I reckon it was you who shot up Billy Ward for sure, and they want you, and they're going to have you!"

"I guess I never shot up a sheepman in my life, feller, though I sure would like to shoot up a few now!" said the Kid. "You going to open the door to them jaspers?"

"Sure! They'll bu'st it in otherwise."

"You're sure some sheriff, ain't you?" said the Kid admiringly. "Good enough for a sheep town, I allow."

"That's enough of chewing the rag!" snarled the sheriff. "You've got a couple of minutes, puncher; I guess you won't have ten seconds arter that crowd git in hyer. Make the most of it!"

Crash!

The outer door shook and rattled.

"They sure sound as if they mean business," said the Kid coolly. "I never was wise to it that sheepmen had so much gall. They're sure an ornery bunch of herdners in this hyer little cent town of yours. With a gat in my hand, and half a dozen punchers to help me, I'd undertake to clean up this camp and wipe it off'n the map, sheriff. I sure hate to see sheepmen getting their ears up in this style."

"You're a cool cuss!" said the sheriff. "Keep up your sass, if you want, till they string you up. I— Oh!"

The sheriff broke off with a gasp. The Kid was standing six feet from him, his hands hanging idly by his sides, his manner cool and unconcerned. The sheriff was armed; there were armed men in the outer room behind him. But with a spring like that of a mountain cougar, the Kid suddenly crossed the space between him and the sheriff, and the burly man reeled in the Kid's grip.

"You——" he panted.

His hand grabbed at a gun in his belt.

A clenched fist that was like a solid rock crashed in the sheriff's face, and he dropped like a log at the Kid's feet. His gun was in the Rio Kid's hand the next moment.

Bang!

Peterson, in the outer room fired. But the Kid dropped on his knees in the dark cell as he gripped the gun, and the bullet flew over him.

He returned the fire the next instant, and Peterson dropped with a bullet through his shoulder.

There were two other sheriff's men in the room, but, with their hands on their guns, they paused as the Kid leaped out into the lighted room with his revolver raised, and his eyes gleaming over it.

"Hands up!"

He spat out the words.

There was a moment's pause, and then their hands went up. It was only just in time to save them.

Crash! Crash! came the hammering on the outer door. But, as yet, the stout timber was holding.

"Get into that cell!" the Kid rapped: "Take that galoot with you! Pronto's the word!"

"You durned cuss——"

"You tired of life?" asked the Kid unpleasantly. "You dog-goned gink, I'd shoot you up as soon as look at you. This hyer town is going to see some fireworks before they string me up, and don't you forget it. If you don't want a front piece in the funeral, step lively!"

The two Pawnee Ford men eyed him like wolves, but they obeyed, the levelled gun and the gleaming eyes over it daunted them. And they had not the slightest doubt, too, that in a few minutes the reckless puncher would be in the grasp of the lynch mob. They picked up Peterson and tramped in furiously, and the Kid slammed the cell door after them, locked it, and dropped the key into his pocket.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

For Life or Death!

"SHUCKS!" murmured the Rio Kid.

He knocked over the lamp in the outer room, and the interior of the Pawnee Ford calaboose was plunged into darkness.

Crash! Crash! Crash! came on the outer door.

The Kid did not lose a second.

The firing in the gaol had apprised the mob without that something was wrong, and in a few moments, at the most, enraged men would be yelling from the barred window of the cell to tell them what had happened, to warn them that the puncher was in the outer room and armed.

But a few seconds were the Kid's.

He had given one swift glance round before knocking the lamp out; one glance was enough for the Kid.

At the back of the long room, facing the door, was a window, shuttered, and the shutters secured with wooden bars in iron sockets.

That window looked out of the back of the building; the raging mob was gathered in front.

What lay beyond the Kid did not know, and cared little; there lay, at all events, a chance of escape and life.

He dragged the bars from their place, and dragged open the shutters. There were no sashes or glass to the window.

Outside, under the window, lay a

fenced corral, and in the corral was grazing a broncho; the horse that the Kid had seen the sheriff riding that day, when the posse had roped him in on the trail.

The Kid's eyes danced.

One rapid spring carried him through the window into the corral, and he ran for the horse.

The animal threw up its head and shied, but the Kid's grasp was upon it in a moment. Saddle and bridle there were none, but it was not the first time, by many a one, that the Kid had ridden bareback. He leaped upon the back of the startled broncho.

"Now you hit it lively, hoss!" grinned the Kid.

There was a roar of voices, a sound of running feet. Yelling voices from a barred window had warned the lynchers, and they were spreading round the calaboose on either side, running along the fences of the corral, or clambering over them.

"Hit it, hoss!"

The broncho obeyed the hand of a master. With his knees gripping the broncho's flanks, the Kid drove him to a mad gallop down the corral, to the fence at the further end.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Men had sighted the wild rider, and were firing furiously, but the hasty shots flew wild round the fleeting figure in the starlight. Some of the lynchers, realising that the puncher was escaping, rushed for their horses. Others swarmed over the fences into the corral, yelling with rage. Almost in the twinkling of an eye, the Kid reached the fence at the further end of the long corral, and with his knees gripping, put the broncho to the leap. It was a six foot fence, and the broncho fairly flew over it, and came crashing down with thundering hoofs on the other side. The Rio Kid was on the outskirts of Pawnee Ford now, close by the bank of the Squaw River, beyond which rose the mighty mass of Squaw Mountain against the starlit sky.

Crack! Crack!

Bullets whistled through the air, and there was a thundering of hoof-beats behind. Already a number of the lynchers had got to their horses and were giving chase. Pawnee Ford was a pandemonium of men riding and running, roaring and firing.

The Kid drove on the broncho fiercely. He gripped with his knees to guide the horse, in the manner of a cowpuncher, and he had a gun in either hand as he galloped.

The wide waters of the Squaw River stretched before him; and to ride along the bank was to be cut off by the swarming mob behind. Without a second's hesitation, the Kid put the horse to the river, and plunged headlong in. That plunging leap took him far out from the bank, and then the horse swam desperately onward in deep water. The Kid shoved the guns into his belt now, he heeded all his care to make that desperate swim in safety. Round the base of Squaw Mountain, the river ran hard in a deep bend. Somewhere there was a ford, from which the town took its name, but the Kid had not struck the ford. In deep water he fought and struggled onward.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Men were on the bank behind him now, rifles as well as revolvers rang out in a deadly hail. Bullets spattered in the water round the dim figure in the starlight.

There was a sudden scream from the broncho, and the animal sank under the Kid. Two bullets had struck it at the

same moment, and the next instant the broncho was floating away half-submerged, leaving the Rio Kid in the water.

He plunged on desperately towards the further bank. The swim was nothing to the boy puncher who had swum the waters of the Rio Frio in flood. But round him as he swam the bullets pattered on the water, and further down the river, at the ford, a bunch of horsemen rode hard to cut him off when he landed.

With set teeth, the Rio Kid dragged himself out of the stream, up the steep bank that rose towards Squaw Mountain. Once he gained the deep arroyos and draws of that wild and broken hillside, he would be safe—and without a second's pause, the Kid ran on.

Strong and sturdy as he was, the Kid was sobbing for breath, when he plunged into a deep rocky draw, a few hundred yards from the river, and dropped breathless into a clump of mesquite.

Hoof-beats rang on the rocks. The lynchers had lost sight of him in the shifting shadows of the broken country, but they knew the direction he had taken, and they knew that he was on foot now. Five or six horsemen came thundering furiously down into the draw, and the Rio Kid lay low in the bunch of mesquite as they thundered by. There were two guns in his belt, but they were soaked with water, and he had no fresh cartridges. He lay silent, while the horsemen rushed past the mesquite.

Horsemen, and more horsemen, came sweeping into the draw. Another bunch began to spread round among the rocks and bushes in the draw, realising that the fugitive might have stopped and taken to cover. Then the Rio Kid stirred. Softly as a panther he crept away, keeping in cover of rough rocks where it was difficult for a horseman to follow. From rock to rock, and thicker to thicker, the Kid glided, stealthily as an Apache. It was an old game to the Rio Kid, which he had played for his life many a time in Texas, with enraged sheriffs and their men on his trail. The trampling of hoofs and the shouting of the disappointed lynchers sounded fainter and more afar. From the rocky draw the boy puncher gained a rough and broken hillside, too steep for horsemen, where there was cover for a hundred men among the rocks and stunted bushes. And there, at last, he stopped, even his iron strength worn down by his efforts, and threw himself down in a deep crevice between two huge boulders to rest, and wait for the hunt to slacken.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

On Squaw Mountain!

THE Rio Kid grinned breathlessly as he lay in the crevice of the rocks, resting, gazing up at the starry heavens, and the towering mass of Squaw Mountain. He could hear sounds of search and pursuit, but in the far distance. It was obvious that the enemy had lost all track of him, and they were not likely to find it till daylight. Sheepmen, he reflected, would never be able to pick up a light trail over rocky ground at night. Even an experienced plainsman might have been perplexed to pick up the Kid's trail, as a matter of fact.

For the present, at least, he was secure from pursuit; and he lay there resting, content, with a cheery grin on his face, waiting for the dawn. At the first gleam of daylight he intended to pick his way up the mountain, where a refuge awaited him among the cow-

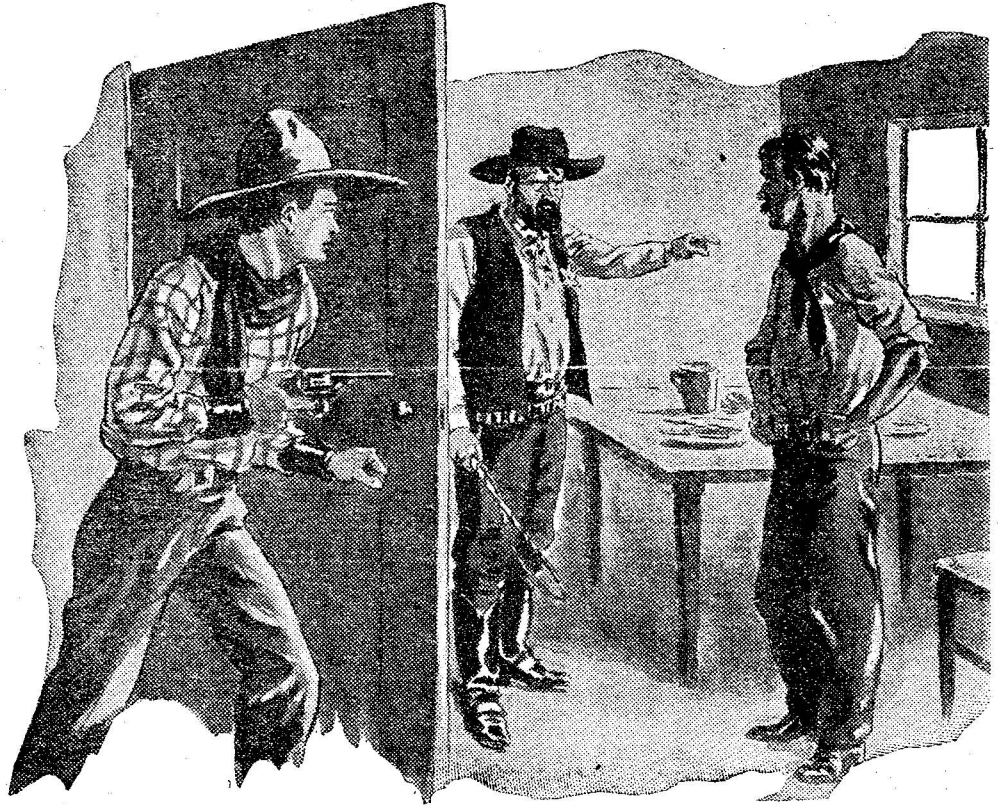
men who were at almost open war with the sheepmen of the low country. The breathless peril through which he had passed left no effect on the Kid, save to make him smile. Sheepmen were not fated to get the Texas puncher; he snapped his fingers at the whole sheep country.

At dawn he would try finding his way to the cow-country higher up the great mountain. Along trails he had heard many stories of the cowmen of Squaw Mountain, and their feuds with the sheepmen. Most of the stories, it was true, were to the discredit of Squaw Mountain and its denizens—the men of the plains looked on them as a nest of gunmen and border ruffians. But the Kid did not believe all he heard, all the more because his sympathies naturally ran to the side of the cowmen. Cow-country on those rugged mountain slopes was not the cow-country the Kid knew, of vast grassy plains and endless mesas. Little valleys and patches of pasture at the bottom of arroyos fed the scanty herds of the Squaw Mountain cowmen; right or wrong they had been driven from the low plains by the all-devouring sheep. It was said on the trails that Squaw Mountain was the refuge for desperadoes from all parts, evading the law; but if it was so, the Kid had no kick coming on that subject.

He was an outlaw himself in his own country. The Squaw Mountain punchers were said to pack guns and to be only too ready on the draw; but the kid could find excuses for the wrath of the cowmen who saw the ranges eaten up by sheep, and beef driven out by mutton.

He grinned as he thought over the situation. He had left his own walnut-butted guns behind when he rode into the sheep country—a peaceable country where he did not need to pack a gun. And this was the outcome of that! He had lent his horse to Jud Starbuck, the puncher of Squaw Mountain who had shot up a sheepman and was hunted for his life, and had been arrested in the place of the fugitive—and all Pawnee Ford was still hunting for him with deadly intent. If this was the peacefulness of the sheep country, the Kid opined, it hadn't much on the cow country. But he told himself that it was just his luck to be riding through the sheep lands when a range war was on, and to get mixed up in it. If there was any trouble stirring, the Rio Kid seemed fated to horn into it, whether he liked it or not.

He was more than fed up with sheep and sheepmen, and he asked nothing better than to ride out. But first he had to reclaim the black-muzzled mustang,



LOOKING FOR THE KID! The sheriff stepped into the doorway. Of the Rio Kid he saw nothing—the open door hid him. "You seen anything of that firebug?" asked the sheriff. The Rancher shook his head grimly. "Mind how you talk, my man!" cautioned the sheriff. "I guess I've seen the trail of a cowman's boots jest outside your gate, which weren't there this morning." (See Chapter 3.)

which he had lent Starbuck to escape upon. And not till dawn could even the keen-eyed Kid pick his way up the mountain and find out Starbuck's ranch. So he lay and rested, and listened to the distant sounds of pursuit far into the night, till they died away at last, and all was silent save the wailing of coyotes in the brush—though the Kid was quite assured that the hunt was still going on, and would go on for a long time yet.

Starbuck of Squaw Mountain, had shot up Billy Ward the sheepman, and the Kid was wanted for the shooting; they had the Kid's description, and not Starbuck's. What had happened at the calaboose could not fail to convince all Pawnee Ford that the boy puncher was the right man; they had more than half believed it to begin with, and now they would be certain. Once more the Kid was on the wrong side of the law, hunted by the sheriff; and he told himself that he might as well have stayed in Texas, where matters were no worse.

But that reflection did not dash the cheery spirits of the Kid. Under the stars, he lay at rest, and did not stir till dawn was glimmering from the eastern sky. Then, in the earliest light, refreshed by his rest, the Kid rose, and shook himself, and started up the mountain, keeping in all the cover he could, and with his eyes warily about him.

It was not long before he struck a well-marked trail; the trail of countless hoofs of cattle. This was the way, he figured, that the cattle drives came down from the ranches on the mountain uplands; and it was therefore the way to the ranches. It was certainly also the way by which pursuit would be made from Pawnee Ford, and the Kid was very wary as he tramped onward and upward.

When he looked back, he could see

the great plains spread below, and the Squaw River winding, a streak of silver in the distance under the rising sun. Pawnee Ford was a collection of shacks that looked like toy buildings in the distance. Moving dots in that direction were horsemen, he knew. Pawnee Ford had awakened to an excited morning; and scores of men were out in all directions hunting for the puncher who had so narrowly escaped the lynch mob; and the Kid guessed that it would be shooting on sight if they found him—even the sheriff was not likely to make a prisoner of him, after his handling in the gaol. And the Kid unarmed, save for two useless guns which he regarded with a sorrowful shake of the head.

Higher up the trail, which ran up a wide valley that split the mighty side of the mountain, the Kid began to pass bunches of cattle—evidently belonging to the Squaw Mountain ranchers. There were no sheep on the uplands; the cowmen, driven from the low ranges, still had the mountain slopes. Bunches of pasturing cows gladdened the Kid's eye: in the clear sunny morning he would have been happy, had he been astride a horse. But no puncher could be bappy on foot. He came suddenly in sight of a building—a ranch. He reckoned these north-country galoots would call it; it was what the Kid called a shack. It was a rough building of boards, nailed to beams, repaired here and there with more boards taken from packing-cases; here and there even with flat sheets of tin, cut from old beef-cans. A spring bubbled and rippled near the building—the reason for its location there. There was a rude fence and a tumbling gate before the shack; and past it ran the trail up the mountain—and on the trail, as the Kid did not fail to observe, were the fresh prints of hoofs. Horsemen had ridden past the shack before him;

which meant to the Kid that Pawnee Ford pursuers were ahead of him, doubtless knowing full well what refuge he would seek.

The Kid paused at the gate, and looked across at the shack. He was hungry and thirsty; and this was a cowman's shack; and no cowman would hand over a fugitive puncher to sheepmen, if all he had heard of Squaw Mountain was true. The sun was well up now, and the window of the shack was open, showing that the occupant was astir; and the Kid vaulted over the shaky gate and walked up to the building.

"Say, fellers!" called out the Kid.

A bearded face looked from the open window, and a shotgun aimed at the Kid. He grinned at the ranchman.

"Put it away, feller," he said, good humouredly. "You don't want that shotgun, sure. I figured that I should wake up a cowman here, and I was sure right."

The ranchman eyed him doubtfully, but the chaps, the Stetson, the high-heeled boots and spurs of the Kid, all proclaimed the cowpuncher, and he lowered the shotgun at last.

"You the galoot they're after?" he asked.

The Kid did not need to ask who "they" were. He nodded and grinned. "Sure!" he assented. "Seen 'em pass?"

"The sheriff of Pawnee Ford and six men rode by at sun-up," said the ranchman. "They stopped to wake me and ask arter you. They searched the house afore they went on. You shot a sheepman?"

"They figure that I did," answered the Kid. "It's a gol-darned mistake, but I guess they don't want a lot of proof before they string up a cowman at Pawnee Ford."

"You've said it," grunted the ranchman. "You step right in, stranger; but I tell you, you ain't safe here; they'll hunt hard for the man who shot up Billy Ward, and they reckon you was that man." He grinned. "You needn't tell me nothing; I ain't gone on sheepmen, nohow. Hustle right in."

The Kid nodded and entered the shack, and he sat down there to breakfast, the best the lonely ranchman could offer him. He was out of the enemy's country now, that was plain; from now on, all the inhabitants that he met would be on his side, all the more if they believed that he had shot a sheepman; though they might not venture to assist him openly in the face of the sheriff of Pawnee Ford and his posse. The authority of the sheriff extended over Squaw Mountain, in theory at least; and resistance to him was resistance to the law, which the ranchmen would hardly care to undertake; but all the help they could give him, the Kid knew they would give. And when he had breakfasted, his first request was for cartridges; but his new friend shook his head.

"I guess I uses a shotgun, and I ain't a Colt cartridge nohow," he said. "You'll get 'em further up the mountain. Where you heading for?"

"Ever heard of Jud Starbuck?" asked the Kid.

The man started.

"Starbuck, of Hidden Hollow. You bet! He's the biggest rancher of Squaw Mountain, and the quickest man with a gun, too. You don't want no trouble with Jud Starbuck, stranger."

The Kid laughed.

"I ain't hunting trouble with him," he said. "I lent him my horse yesterday to get clear of the sheepmen, and I'm after that cayuse, feller."

"You'll find him at his ranch, I guess, in Hidden Hollow. Any galoot farther on will tell you where that is. Great snakes!" ejaculated the ranchman suddenly, staring from the window.

The Kid leaped up from his bench.

A horseman had stopped at the gate and hitched his horse there, and was already entering, evidently to come up to the shack. It was the burly sheriff of Pawnee Ford. The Kid whistled softly. The sheriff was alone, having apparently left his men still on the hunt to return to Pawnee Ford. The Kid, keeping out of sight, eyed him from the window. The sheriff's face was suspicious, and it was clear that he did not know that the man he sought was in the shack. But in two minutes he would know it. And the Kid was unarmed. There was a deep growl from the ranchman. The Kid looked round as the man unhitched the shotgun from the wall.

"Forget it, feller," said the Kid hastily.

"That dog-goned sheriff ain't taking

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a puncher out of my shack to be strung up by sheepmen!" growled the ranchman.

But the Kid shook his head.

"I guess I won't let you rope in all that trouble, feller," he said. "Put that gun away. I guess the bang of it would bring a dozen of the galoots on to you, and you'd be shot up before you could say 'no sugar in mine!' Leave him to me. And if they ask you afterwards about me, you allow that you couldn't say 'No!' to a puncher with two guns in his hands." The Kid grinned. "Leave that galoot to me, feller!"

"But you sure told me you ain't got no cartridges in them guns!" said the cowman.

"But I ain't told the sheriff that!" grinned the Kid.

The man stared, and then grinned. "Oh, shucks!" he said. "You go it, stranger. It's your game."

The Kid nodded, and stood beside the door, so that it would conceal him as it

opened. A minute later the sheriff of Pawnee Ford struck the door with his riding-whip.

"Hallo, you'uns!" he shouted.

The cowman threw the door open.

The sheriff stepped into the doorway. Of the Rio Kid he saw nothing; the open door hid him. He stared at the ranchman.

"You seen anything of that firebug?" he demanded. "Mind how you talk, my man! I guess I've seen the trail of a cowman's boots jest outside your gate in the mud, and they wasn't there when I passed with my men this morning. You get me? We know that scallywag is on foot now. You seen him?" The sheriff's glance rested on the rough table. "Who's been feeding here?" he demanded, with a sudden flash of suspicion, his hand dropping to a gun.

"I guess a galoot with two guns can ask for breakfast, sheriff, without getting 'No!' for an answer," said the cowman. The man whose little herd of cows pastured within three miles of Pawnee Ford did not want to quarrel with the sheriff, in spite of the impulse that had made him take hold of the shotgun at sight of the disliked official.

"He's been here!" snapped the sheriff, his eyes gleaming. "That darn firebug broke out of gaol last night, and shot up my man Peterson, and knocked me senseless, too. How long since he went? Where is he? Lively!"

"Here, sheriff!" drawled an easy voice, in the soft drawl of the south, as the Rio Kid stepped from behind the door, and the muzzle of a revolver touched the sheriff's neck. "Let go that gun—pronto!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Hands Up!

"PUT 'em up!" smiled the Rio Kid.

The sheriff of Pawnee Ford gripped the butt of his Colt convulsively. But he did not draw it. The cold rim of steel touched his brawny neck, and the Kid's eyes gleamed menace at him. Slowly, reluctantly, the sheriff released his hold of the gun in his belt, and put his hands above his head, his bearded face convulsed with rage.

The Squaw Mountain cowman stared on at the scene, silent, holding the mirth that was within him. The Kid's gun was empty, and he knew it; but the sheriff did not know it.

The Rio Kid's manner did not indicate that it was an empty gun that he held to the sheriff's neck. His face was set and dark with threats; his eyes gleamed at the man he covered with an empty gun. The official from Pawnee Ford trembled with rage as he put up his hands, but he did not think of resistance with a muzzle pressing on his skin. And the Kid, who would have been shot down like a prairie rabbit had the sheriff taken the chance of pulling, smiled serenely.

"That's better, hombre," he said. "You're sure a good little man, and have learned to do as you're told. Keep 'em up, feller."

The sheriff ground his teeth, and cast a desperate glance out of the open doorway. At any moment men might come riding up from the plain; parties of searchers might emerge into sight from any draw or canyon that split the mighty mass of the mountain. But for the moment he was alone with the Rio Kid, and his rage was impotent.

"You'll hang for this!" he articulated, in choking tones.

"I guess that's a cinch, anyhow, if

"Your crowd get me," grinned the Kid. "Keep them paws over your head, feller!"

With his left hand the Kid drew the gun from the sheriff's belt. A glance showed him that it was loaded in every chamber, and he thrilled with the satisfaction of being armed again. He tossed his own gun into a corner of the shack, and gripped the sheriff's in his right.

"This hyer gun of yours is plumb full," he grinned. "A Colt forty-five. Jest the gun I love, sheriff! You lending me this gun?"

The sheriff's eyes blazed.

"You want to answer, pronto," said the Kid.

"Yes," panted the sheriff.

"That's O.K., then," said the Kid. "I sure hate to take a man's gun agin his will; but if you're going to lend me this gun, all right. You can have my gun in change, sheriff. I reckon you'll find some cartridges for it when you get to home. There ain't any in it jest now."

"What?" yelled the sheriff.

At the discovery that he had been held up and disarmed with an empty gun, the sheriff of Pawnee Ford almost raved. He made a furious stride towards the Kid, and his own gun almost touched his face.

"Forget it, feller," said the Kid. "There'll sure be a vacancy for a sheriff in this country, if you don't keep good. This here gun of yours ain't empty, feller."

The sheriff controlled his rage.

"You durn coyote!" he gasped.

"Swallow it, hombre!" said the Kid. "I'll borrow that belt and holster of yours to go along with the gun. I guess I want all the cartridges you've got. Your Pawnee Ford galoots are getting so fresh that I figure on having to do some shooting to-day. Don't make any objections. I'd sure hate to spill your vinegar all over this shack." He laughed lightly.

"You woke up the wrong cayuse when you started in to hunt me, sheriff. I tell you again that I never shot up Billy Ward, and never heard of the man till you told me you wanted me for drilling him. But I'll tell you this, too. You warn your sheepmen that they want to pack their guns and look lively if they come after me. I sure ain't going back to Pawnee Ford for a necktie party. I guess there will be some shooting before they rope me in. I'm letting you off cheap, sheriff, because I hate to buck in agin the law." The Kid grinned. "But you go home and stay there, like a good little man. I reckon you'll lend me your horse?"

The sheriff quivered with rage.

"You dog-goned hoss-thief—"

"I guess I'm borrowing that cayuse, sheriff, and I'll send him back home," assured the Kid. "I reckon when a galoot is fixed like I am, he can't be too particular. You're getting off cheap, and you know it. You'd have shot me at sight if you'd knowed my gun was empty. Now, you walk out to that hoss in front of me."

"Leave me here! I—"

"Walk!" rapped the Kid; and the sheriff took his longing glance from the shotgun hanging on the wall, and strode furiously out of the shack.

He stared round savagely in the hope of seeing some of the horsemen who were scouring Squaw Mountain for the fugitive. But there was none of the Pawnee Ford riders in sight for the moment.

The sheriff tramped down to the gate, foaming with rage, and under the threatening gun, unhitched the horse and handed the bridle to the Kid.

"I guess I'll get you yet!" he said, in a choking voice. "I'll get you yet, durn your hide, and—"

"You want to beat it," said the Kid placidly. "Nope, you ain't going back into the shack. I never did care for pot-shooting in the back from a shot-gun. I should sure hate to be peppered

all over by buck-shot, sheriff. You want to walk down the trail, and if you're in sight after I've counted four, sheriff, I begin shooting. Hit the trail, feller!"

"I—I—I—" the sheriff foamed.

"One!" said the Kid.

The sheriff gave a desperate glare, and turned to stride down the trail towards Pawnee Ford. He would not run.

"Two!" came the Kid's clear, drawling voice. "Three!"

The sheriff quivered, but he strode on resolutely, still disdaining to run.

"Four!"

Involuntarily, the sheriff quickened his pace. He was in the open trail, far from cover, and under fire if the Kid chose to pull trigger. And the time of grace had expired.

Bang!

A bullet spattered the dust from the trail within an inch of the sheriff's boot.

Bang!

He leaped clear of the the ground in startled alarm.

Another bullet grazed his leg.

It was too much for the sheriff of Pawnee Ford. Dignity was thrown to the winds, and he broke into a desperate run, and ran for his life. The Kid, grinning, fired again, and shot the hat from his head, and the running man did not stay for the Stetson that spun along the trail. Running like a deer, he disappeared at last round a bend in the trail, leaving the Rio Kid chuckling, and the cowman, in the doorway of the shack, roaring with laughter.

The Kid waved his hand in farewell to the cowman, leaped upon the sheriff's horse, and rode up the trail, gun in hand, eyes on the alert for a foe at every step of the horse, further and further, higher and higher, into the rocky recesses of Squaw Mountain.

THE END.

(Next week's roaring Western yarn contains hundreds of thrills. You must not miss it!)

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