

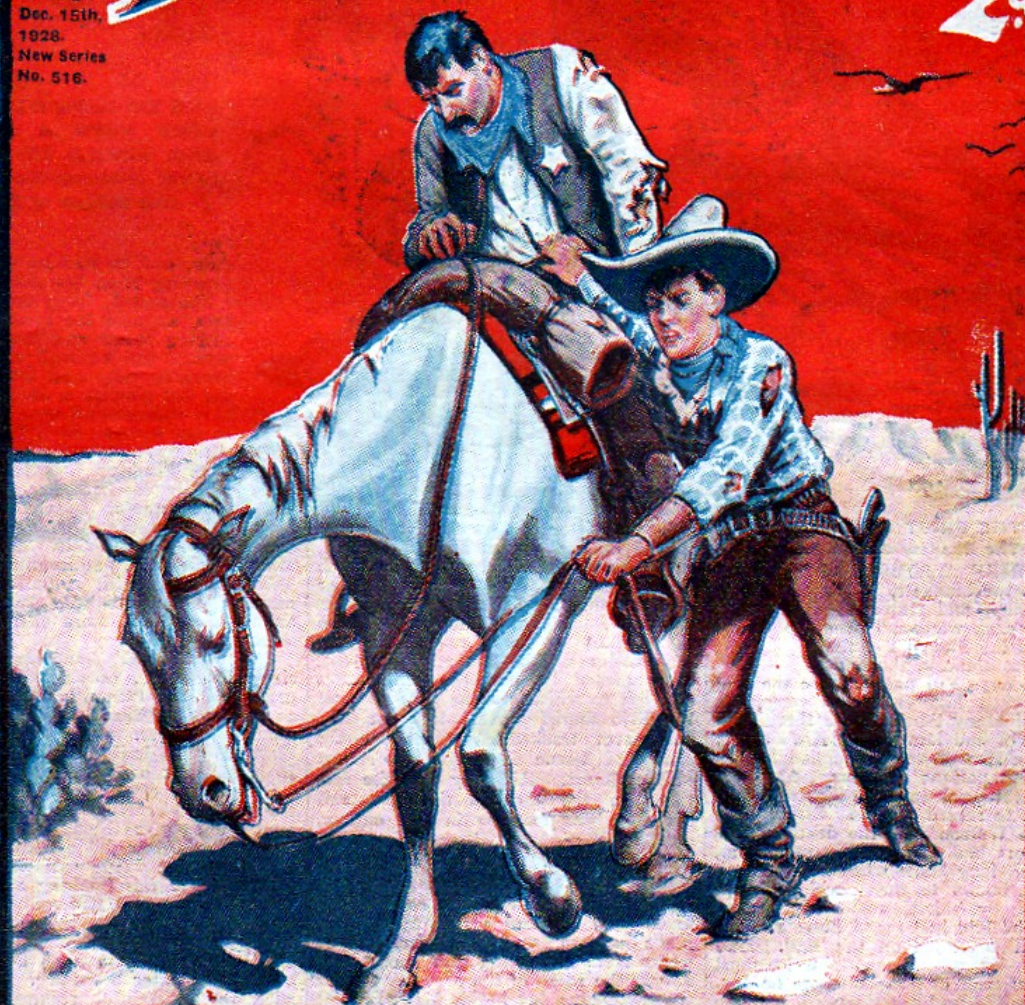
X TREAD THE TRAIL WITH THE RIO KID-BOY OUTLAW! X

The **POPULAR**

Week
Ending
Dec. 15th,
1928.
New Series
No. 516.

EVERY
TUESDAY.

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LOST IN THE DESERT!

A WOUNDED SHERIFF and a NOTORIOUS BOY OUTLAW.
Companions in a Terrible Adventure!

Mile on mile of burning, arid desert to traverse—no water—and a wounded, helpless companion to succour. That's the terrible peril in which the RIO KID finds himself as a result of an heroic act!

The OUTLAW who Kept

By RALPH REDWAY



OUR ROARING WESTERN
YARN WITH A PUNCH
AND THRILL IN EVERY
LINE. Starring the Rio Kid
—Boy Outlaw of Texas!

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Shadow of Death!

SHERIFF WATSON, of Frio, lay in the blankets, in the Rio Kid's camp, and stared at the sun as it sank westward over the desert waste of the Staked Plain.

He was alone in the camp. Three days had passed since the Kid had rescued him from the vengeance of Chief Many Ponies. For three days the sheriff had lain in the Kid's camp, in the sheltered arroyo, tended by the Kid with patient kindness. And still he was too weak to leave the camp and attempt to return to Frio. Strong man as Jake Watson was, the death-ride in the desert had told heavily upon him, the long, long hours when he had been carried, bound to the broncho's back, tortured by thirst, under a blazing sun. The Kid had saved him; and his life still depended on the Kid. Had the boy outlaw deserted him he must have perished of hunger where he lay. But the Kid had not deserted him, he had tended him as he might have tended a comrade in the old days when he rode with the Double-Bar bunch.

Not until food was giving out had the Kid even left him for an hour. He had shared all he had with the helpless man who was on his hands, caring nothing that he was an enemy. Now the Kid was gone to look for game among the scrub; and he had been gone for some hours. The sheriff of Frio lay alone, a prey to bitter reflections.

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It was bitter to him to owe his life to the outlaw whom he had hunted, whom he was resolved still to hunt. It was bitter to depend on the Kid for the food that kept life in him. It was bitter to know that if the Kid left him to his fate he would perish there in the wastes of the Staked Plain, his bones picked by buzzards and coyotes and left to whiten in the sun. Almost the Frio sheriff wished that the Kid had never tracked down the broncho that had borne him into the heart of the desert. His duty was the first thing in the sheriff's thoughts, and his duty was to rope in the outlaw, dead or alive. And it was the outlaw who had saved him, and was saving him now.

The Kid had left him comfortably fixed when he went out to hunt. The Kid's canteen lay beside him, full of water from the spring that bubbled up among the rocks of the arroyo. One of the Kid's guns lay beside his hand, lest wandering coyotes should nose into the camp. And the Kid had promised to return as soon as he could—as soon as he had something for supper for both. Three days had passed, and under the Kid's care Jake Watson's strength was reviving. In two or three days more he would be able to shift for himself—at least, make an attempt to get back to the cow country. And then—to resume the hunting of the boy outlaw! Sheriff Watson was a hard man, and a determined man, but the thought gave him discomfort. Yet it was his

duty, and he had no thought of swerving from his duty.

The sheriff, lying on the blankets, watched the round red sun sinking lower and lower in the west. He watched it idly, his thoughts busy and bitter. He did not observe a dark, aquiline face that peered over a boulder in the arroyo; he did not know that two glittering, black eyes were fixed on him from a distance. He had almost forgotten the vengeful apache who had bound him to the broncho and sent him on the death-ride. But Chief Many Ponies had not forgotten him.

Behind the sheriff, as he lay staring moodily to the west, the Apache crept among the rocks, more silent than a stealthy coyote.

Close by Watson's hand lay the Kid's six-gun, and at a sound he would have grasped it and turned his head. Weak as he was, the sheriff was well able to handle the gun and send a bullet through the brain of the creeping Redskin. But he heard no sound.

Closer and closer the Indian crept, till he was almost within reach of the man lying on the blankets.

Still the sheriff did not stir. His bronzed face was wrinkled in thought. He was thinking of his long pursuit of the Rio Kid, of the defeats and humiliation the boy outlaw had piled on him, of the derision that awaited him in Frio when he returned once more, after a failure. The Kid, with the disdainful recklessness that was a part of his nature, had trusted a six-gun in his hand for his protection while alone. It would be easy to turn that gun on the Kid when he came back from the hunt.

Jake Watson drove the black, treacherous thought from his mind. In spite of himself it would return. He was sheriff of Frio, and it was his duty to rope in the outlaw. To ride the Kid back to Frio a prisoner, or to leave him dead in the desert, to be able to tell all the cow country that the boy outlaw had been cinched at last.

HIS WORD!



Like a jaguar within reach of its prey, Chief Many Ponies made his spring.

The six-gun was snatched from the sheriff's reach and thrown a dozen feet away. The sneaky knee of the Apache was planted on his chest, pinning him down in the blankets. Jake Watson, with starting eyes, looked up at the dark, coppery face, and looked at his death.

"You durned Injun!" he muttered huskily.

Chief Many Ponies grinned down at him.

The sheriff lay utterly at his mercy, disarmed now, and too feeble to struggle. And there was no hint of mercy in the dark face of the Apache.

"Wah!" said Chief Many Ponies, in his guttural tones. "The chief of the Apaches has found his enemy!"

"You pesky Apache horse-thief—"
"My little white brother saved Chief Watson from the broncho," said the Redskin. "But he is far away now. He will return to his camp to find Chief Watson eaten by the coyotes. I have spoken!"

The sheriff made no answer. He knew that it was the end, and the feeling was upon him that it was a judgment for the treacherous thoughts that had been in his mind. He had dallied with the thought of turning treacherously upon the man who had saved him, even while death was creeping close upon him. And now it had reached him.

The Indian's hand groped in his girdle, and a long knife flashed in the light of the sinking sun.

It circled over the upturned face of the sheriff.

"Let the white man sing his death-song," said the Apache, with gloating triumph. "He wounded the Apache chief and drove him from the town of the palefaces. Now Chief Many Ponies has found him."

The knife was poised in the air. But the Apache was in no hurry to strike. With the savage vindictiveness of the Red Indian he was bent on prolonging the torment of his victim. The sweat started out on the sheriff's forehead. His eyes were fixed on the dark, deadly face above him, and on the poised blade. In those long, terrible moments he tasted again and again the bitterness of death.

"You Injun thief!" muttered Jake Watson at last hoarsely. "You dog-goned Redskin skunk, get it over!"

The Apache grinned evilly.

"Is the paleface in haste to tread the paths of the happy hunting-grounds?" he asked.

Clink! It was the sound of a loose stone falling in the arroyo.

Watson caught his breath. If it was the Kid returning—

The same thought was in the mind of the Apache. His eyes glittered and he threw up the knife higher for the death blow. A second more, and

it would have descended upon the helpless sheriff.

Crack!
There was a yell from Chief Many Ponies as a bullet struck the gleaming blade and dashed it from his numbed hand. There was a sound of running feet, and a ringing voice:

"Hands up, you durned Redskin cuss!"

The Rio Kid had returned.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

In Camp!

THE Rio Kid ran up, his eyes blazing, the still-smoking rifle in his hand. His eyes blazed at the Redskin.

Chief Many Ponies leaped to his feet. He did not put up his hands at the Kid's bidding. He crossed his arms on his brawny chest, his tattered blanket draped round him, and faced the boy outlaw with the dignity of a chief.

"You hear me, Injun?" rapped the Kid savagely.

"Chief Many Ponies hears his little white brother," answered the Apache calmly. "Let him shoot. Chief Many Ponies will not raise his hand against his brother."

"Dog-gone your red hide!" growled the Kid, lowering the rifle. "I guess I came near putting that ball through your head instead of knocking away your sticker! What you doing here?"

The Indian's eyes flashed at Jake Watson.

"Chief Many Ponies found his enemy and came to kill him!" he answered briefly.

"I reckon you've slipped up on it, Injun. I sure guess that I ought to fix you for the buzzards!" growled the Kid.

"Let my white brother shoot, if it is his wish!" answered Chief Many Ponies.

"Oh, shucks! Git!"
The Apache hesitated.

"Now, jest chew on this, Injun," said the Kid. "We've camped together, and I allow you've got a grouch against Jake Watson for drilling you in the laig. But this hyer hombre is under my protection—savvy?—and you've got to ride clear. I'm riding herd over this galoot. You want to hit the trail;

and by the great horned toad, if you come cavorting round again, I'll let drive a bullet through you! Git!"

"My white brother has spoken!" said the Apache, with dignity.

And, gathering his blanket round him, Chief Many Ponies stalked away out of the rocky arroyo and disappeared into the desert.

The Kid dropped his rifle and grinned at the sheriff.

"I reckon I didn't come home any too soon, hombre," he remarked. "You sure had a close call, Jake Watson!"

The sheriff nodded.
"Where's the gun I left you?" demanded the Kid. "You sure wanted to keep it handy, Jake. Was you asleep?"

"Nope!" muttered the sheriff. "There's the gun—among the donicks yonder! I've sure had a close call, Kid!"

"You sure have!" said the Kid. "You woke up a lot of trouble when you fanned that Injun with bullets and drove him out of Frio. I reckoned the pesky cuss would hunt cover in the Staked Plain, but I never figured on his hitting my camp. Injuns are sure pizen!"

The Rio Kid dismissed the subject with a shrug.

"I guess I've brought in meat for supper," he said. "That Injun won't worry us any now. I guess I'll start the fire."

Sheriff Watson lay on the blankets and watched the Kid building the campfire to cook the meat he had brought in. The Kid had tossed the six-gun over to the sheriff again, and it lay by his side. Again and again the sheriff's eyes turned on it, and at last he spoke hoarsely.

"Kid!"
The outlaw looked round from the fire.

"Cinch that gun, Kid!" said the sheriff.

"What's biting you now?" asked the Kid carelessly.

"I reckon you're plumb loco!" snarled the sheriff. "I guess if you leave that gun handy you're asking for a bullet through your heart, Kid! Take it away while you're safe!"

The Kid stared at him and burst into a careless laugh.

"Oh, shucks!" he said. "You're a white man, Jake—you wouldn't go for to pull a bead on the man that's tending you, sure?"

"Take it away, I'm telling you!"

"Sure, if you want."
The Kid picked up the gun and slid it into his holster. The Sheriff of Frio breathed more freely.

"Still thinking of trailing down a galoot my size when you get back to the cow country, sheriff?" asked the Kid banteringly.

"Yep!"

"Ain't you an all-fired, hard-baked cuss?" grinned the Kid. "Well, it don't cut no ice with me. I'm tending you till you can hit the trail, and then I reckon I'm putting your feet down in the cow country afore I quit you. After that you can hunt me all you like; I reckon it won't keep me from sleep o' nights!"

And the Kid laughed again.
The sheriff's eyes gleamed.

"Your luck will turn, Kid! I'll get you yet!"

"Forget it, feller," said the Kid carelessly. "Hyer's your supper, sheriff, and I reckon you'd not get a better in Poker Smith's joint at Frio. Quit chewing the rag, and eat, hombre!"

The sun had sunk behind the sierras of New Mexico. Darkness lay on the wild wastes of the Staked Plain. In the arroyo the firelight gleamed and flickered, casting light and shadows on the handsome face of the Rio Kid, the haggard, tanned visage of the Sheriff of Frio. The strangely assorted companions ate their supper and lay down to sleep, feet to the fire, under the glittering stars that shone down on the lonely desert.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Through the Desert!

"TURNING daylight!" called out the Rio Kid cheerily.

Three more days had passed, and the Sheriff of Frio was looking something like his old self once more. Another morning had dawned on the Staked Plain, and the Kid was turning out of his bed of sand and leaves, ready to hit the trail. Camp was to be broken up at last, and the sheriff was keen to see the last of the lonely arroyo where for a week he had camped with the outlaw. And the Kid, patiently and carelessly good-natured as he was, certainly was not sorry that the end had come. Had the sheriff's recovery taken longer the Kid would have stood by him—for weeks, had it been needed. But he was glad that it was not needed.

Jake Watson turned out of the blankets. The embers of the fire were raked together; the last breakfast cooked over the red glow.

Watson stood watching the Kid, with a moody brow, as he made his preparations cheerfully for breaking camp. The Kid made up his bed roll, packed all his fixings in the slicker pack, and secured the pack on the back of the black-muzzled mustang. He filled his canteen at the spring.

"Take a long drink, sheriff," he said, with a grin. "I guess we shan't strike water again till we hit the water-hole in the sage desert, and that won't be to-night at the rate we'll travel. This hyer canteen is all we'll have till then."

The sheriff drew a deep breath.

"Kid, I guess I can kick for myself now," he said. "I can walk, I reckon, and I'm ready to take what's coming to me if I don't have luck. Pull out, Kid, and leave me to it!"

The Kid laughed.

"You'd leave your bones hyer, sheriff! You can make a leetle pasear on your own, I allow, but you can't hoof it out of this desert alive. You're taking a front seat while I hoof!"

"I ain't!" growled Watson.

"You sure are!" said the Kid cheerily. "Feller, you make me tired! I reckon I ain't honing for your company any more than you're honing for mine. I guess I'll quit you the minute I can quit you safe. But I ain't looked after your durned old carcass for a week to leave you to the turkey buzzards at the finish! No, sir! Git on that cayuse!"

For a long minute the Sheriff of Frio hesitated. Then, without a word, he mounted the Kid's mustang.

Cheerily, though he hated walking, and hoofing it came hard in cowboy boots, the Kid started on the long trail. He swung along under the sunshine, cracking his quirt at the flies and mosquitoes that buzzed about them. Stones and sand and baked earth glided under their feet as the sun rose higher and higher in burning blue.

The sheriff rode without a word. He was well on the way to recovery, but the seat in the saddle meant life to him

instead of death. He knew, at the bottom of his heart, that had the Kid taken him at his word, he would never have got out of the desert alive. Yet it was bitter and galling to have obligation heaped on obligation at the hands of the boy outlaw.

In contrast to his grim and silent companion, the Kid hummed snatches of Mexican fandango tunes, and sang old Spanish melodies of the border as light-hearted as any cicada that chirped in the sunshine from the crevices.

Travelling was slow, and it was weary work afoot, and the Kid was glad to rest for noon in the shadow of a great rock. The noonday meal was sparingly washed down with the precious water.

In the afternoon the way was resumed. It was a mystery to the sheriff, good plainsman as he was, how the Kid picked his way through the trackless waste, but the boy outlaw never seemed at a loss. Night fell when they were on the verge of the Staked Plain, looking down on the last gleam of the sun at the sage desert that lay below.

The Kid pitched the camp, the cold meat was eaten, a still more sparing drink was taken, and they slept. With the first gleam of dawn the Kid was up again.

By a winding ravine they descended from the high tableland, and reached the desert below. By sandy plain, dotted with sage and stunted cacti, they went on, the Kid heading for the water-hole that he knew. The black-muzzled mustang's head was drooping now, thirst intensified by the bitter dust of the desert; the Kid's throat was dry, and he no longer hummed fandango tunes. But a single drink of water only remained in the canteen, and there was none for the horse, and none for the Kid; he was saving that last precious gulp for the sombre-faced man who rode.

Mile on mile of sage and sand and scrub; while the sun rose higher and poured down burning rays on their heads. At noon this day there was no halt. Fatigue and heat, thirst and dust; but it was necessary to get to the water, and there was no time to halt.

The sheriff of Frio swayed at times in the saddle, his face haggard, his throat burning with thirst. He swayed at last so that he would have fallen; but the Kid's ready arm caught him and steadied him, and the canteen was placed to his lips. Hardly conscious of what he did Jake Watson drained it to the last drop.

The Kid slung the empty canteen on the horse. The last drop of water was gone, and it was neck or nothing now. And the water-hole still lay miles distant in the dry, burning desert.

The sheriff's haggard eyes turned on him. The water had revived him, and he knew what the Kid had done.

"That was the last, Kid?"

"Yep."

"You're plumb loco."

"Sure!" grinned the Kid.

They pursued their weary way. The Kid's strong limbs were aching with fatigue, his throat burning. A pitiful whinny came from the mustang, and the Kid patted him gently.

The sheriff rode silent, assailed again by thirst, dizzy with the dust and the glare. The Kid shaded his eyes and stared across the sandy plain.

"Sheriff, I reckon you better hustle," he said. "That cayuse can sure find his way to the water-hole; I guess he's as knowing as any cayuse in Texas. He'll sure take you to the water, sheriff. Get on with it!"

Jack Watson looked at him dully.

"And you, Kid?"

"I guess I'll follow on; I'm hoofing

it, anyhow. We're near enough now to the water-hole for the critter to find it on his own. Beat it, sheriff!"

Jake Watson eyed him. He saw the haggard lines of fatigue and suffering in the handsome face, belied by the whimsical smile. The Kid was game—game to the backbone; but he was perilously near the limit now.

"I'm not leaving you behind!" muttered the sheriff.

"Oh, shucks!" snapped the Kid.

"That's fool talk! I ain't hoofing it any quicker for your company, Jake Watson. I keep on telling you the cayuse can find the water-hole now, he's smelt it already; and you can sure wait there for me to come up. You'll see me walkin' in soon after you. Get on with it, feller!"

The Kid spoke a word to the mustang and patted him. For a moment the intelligent eyes searched the Kid's face, as if the animal did not understand. Then he understood and broke into a gallop, carrying the sheriff of Frio on to the distant water-hole.

In a few minutes horse and rider vanished from the Kid's sight in the sage and dust.

The Rio Kid tramped on.

Thirst was tormenting him, embittered by the dust that flew on the hot wind of the desert. Bitter fatigue ached his strong limbs. And still the distance seemed endless before him. On the back of his mustang the Kid would have reached safety long, long ago; but for the helpless man he had burdened himself with the Kid had been in no danger. Now the danger he was in was close and terrible; and it was borne in upon his mind that he needed all his luck if the desert was not to claim one more of its countless victims.

The Kid was swaying as he walked now; in spite of courage and determination, his pace was slow—almost a crawl. Once he stumbled and fell on his knees in crackling sage, and it was a full minute before he pulled himself to his feet again.

No man dismounted in the desert had ever emerged from it living. Was the Kid to perish there, as so many others had perished, whose bones bleached in the sun amid the dreary sage? Slowly, but doggedly, the outlaw who was risking his life to save his enemy tramped on, dazed and dizzy, almost insensible now to his surroundings.

It was a shrill whinny from a horse that brought the half-conscious Kid back to himself. He dashed his hand across his almost blind eyes, and stared round him. It was the water-hole at last! Beside it lay Jake Watson, where he had slid from the back of the mustang to drink; the little spring bubbled and sparkled and sang in the sunlight. The black-muzzled mustang had trotted back to meet his master.

The Kid gripped the saddle and dragged himself half across it, too wearied to mount.

"Get on, old hoss!" he muttered thickly.

And clinging with his last ounce of strength to the mustang, the Kid was carried on to the water-hole. He slid from the horse, and fell, with his face in the bubbling water, and drank and drank as if he would never cease drinking!

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Fallen Among Foes!

"THAT was sure some pasear!" said the Rio Kid.

Night had fallen on the desert.

The Kid and his companion were

camped by the water-hole. Hours had passed, but the Kid's strong frame was still aching from the efforts he had made. Even the iron-limbed Kid was glad to lie beside the tinkling spring and rest.

"We've made it!" said the sheriff. "We've sure made it," agreed the Kid. "I reckoned the desert had got me, Jake—I sure did! It was as close a call as I ever want." He grinned faintly. "Where'd you be now, Jake, if I'd let you hit the trail on your lonesome, like you wanted?"

In the morning the Kid was up with the rising sun.

"Burning daylight!" came his cheery call to the sheriff of Frio. And Jake Watson turned out.

The Kid, as if led by some instinct as sure as that of a dumb animal, picked the way through the trackless desert, where there was no sign that the sheriff's eyes could discern. Even yet, in the last stage of the weary journey, the sheriff of Frio was a lost man, if the Kid abandoned him.

But late in the afternoon the sage

lightly. "Anything more I can do to oblige you?"

Abe Harrigan chuckled with glee. "The Kid!" he repeated. "By the great horned toad, the Kid!" Abe seemed scarcely able to believe his good luck. "The Kid—and we've cinched him!"

"We've sure cinched the Kid!" grinned Pecos Pete. "There'll be a howl in Frio when we get him there." "There sure will, fellers!" said the Kid. "But you ain't got me there yet, you galoots!"



CAPTURED AT LAST! As the Kid and the sheriff emerged from a winding path into an open glade, there was a shout, a tramp of footsteps, and a gleam of weapons. "The Kid!" "Hands up!" Five or six levelled revolvers stared the Rio Kid in the face! (See Chapter 5.)

"Buzzards' meat!" said the sheriff grimly.

"You've said it."

"I reckon we're through now, Kid."

"Yep! We hit the trail for the cow country to-morrow," yawned the Kid. "We'll part company then, sheriff, and you can get back to Frio and start trailing me again. I ain't exactly scared stiff to think of it!"

The sheriff shut his teeth hard.

"You've saved my life, Kid, and stood by me like a white man! I reckon I was hating you for the trouble you've given me. That don't go any more now. But duty's duty, and you're my meat if I can get you. I've sure told you so, fair and square, all along; you ain't got no kick coming?"

"Nary a kick!" yawned the Kid.

"Kid, get out of the country while you've got the chance!" said the Frio sheriff earnestly. "Light out of Texas, and give me a chance to let up on you."

The Kid shook his head.

"I guess not, sheriff! I hit the trail out of Texas once, and sure moseyed over a wide bit of the West; but I had to come trailing back. It's my own country, and I ain't a quitter."

The sheriff said no more. He lay down, and under the desert stars the two foes slept peacefully side by side.

desert was left behind at last, and they came into the green shadowy chapparal.

By devious winding paths the Kid pushed on, followed by the mustang bearing the sheriff of Frio. The sun was sinking over the plains, and the chapparal was deeply dusky. But the Rio Kid seemed never at a loss. And suddenly, as they emerged from a winding path into an open glade, where the red sunset fell more brightly, there was a shout, a tramp of footsteps, and a gleam of weapons.

"The Kid!"

"Hands up!"

Five or six levelled revolvers stared the Rio Kid in the face. The Kid halted in his tracks.

His hand did not drop to a gun. The Kid knew when he had no chance to draw, swift as he was on the draw; and he knew that he had no chance now. For once the wary Kid had been caught napping, and had walked fairly into the hands of his enemies.

Abe Harrigan, Pecos Pete, and half a dozen others of the sheriff's men of Frio had him covered, ready to riddle him with bullets if he touched a gun.

A mocking and rather bitter smile crossed the Kid's handsome face. He lifted his hands above his head.

"It's your say-so, gents," he said

"Keep 'em up!" said Abe, his eyes gleaming over his levelled gun. "We've got you dead to rights, Kid! I'd sure be sorry to spill your juice; but if you wink so much as an eyelash you get yours!"

The Kid shrugged his shoulders.

"You've got the cards stacked against me," he said. "I ain't got no kick coming. It's your say-so!"

"Get hold of his hardware, Long Jim!"

"You bet!"

The walnut-butted guns were lifted from the Kid's holsters. Though there were eight of them, every man with a Colt bearing on the Kid, the Frio men breathed more freely when the boy outlaw was disarmed.

The Kid glanced curiously at Jake Watson.

The Frio sheriff sat on the halted mustang, staring in grim silence at the scene. He had not spoken a word yet. Neither did the Kid address a word to him. Fortune had turned against him, and the Kid was not the man to ask favours. In helping his enemy, he had taken this risk; and now that it had materialised, the Kid had no complaint to make.

Neither, for the moment, did

Harrigan and his men take heed of the sheriff. They were too anxious to make sure of the Kid.

"Fix up his paws, Jim!" said Harrigan.

A length of trail-ropo was drawn round the Kid's arms, and they were bound behind his back.

The Kid made no resistance. It was sudden death to resist; and the Kid was no fool. While there was life there was hope; it was not the first time the Kid had been roped in, and he was living yet to tell of it.

"We've sure got him safe!" grinned Long Jim. "By thunder, Frio will sit up on its hind legs and howl, when we ride him in."

Harrigan turned to the sheriff at last. "I'm sure glad to see you alive, sheriff," he said. "All Frio reckoned that the Kid had got you, when you never came back. How you come to be riding with that fire-bug, and on his cayuse, too?"

Now that the Kid was a bound prisoner, and the Frio men could give their attention to the sheriff, all of them were staring at him in amazement.

"We sure reckoned you was gone up the flume, sheriff, arter you left Frio with that Injun cuss, and never came back," said Pecos Pete. "We've been hunting for you ever since, but I reckon we never allowed we'd find you alive. And now you walk into our hands—with the Kid! It sure gets my goat!"

Jake Watson breathed hard. "The Injun turned on me," he said. "He got me a lick from behind, and fixed me up. The Kid saved my life!"

"Oh, shucks!" said Abe, in astonishment.

"He stood by me like a white man in the desert," said the sheriff slowly. "He was bringing me back, on his own hoss, to the Frio country, when he horned into you 'uns here in the chapparral."

"Great gophers!" said Harrigan blankly. "But that don't make no difference, sheriff; he's an outlaw, with a thousand dollars on his head, and I reckon he's our meat!"

"He sure is!" said Pecos Pete.

Sheriff Watson nodded.

"He sure is!" he assented. "He saved my life, and stood by me in the desert; but I sure warned him fair and square that he was my meat if I could get him. And, by thunder, I've got him now!"

"Now you're talking!" said Abe Harrigan.

The sheriff fixed his eyes on the Kid. "Kid," he said huskily, "you allow I warned you fair and square. You allow I told you to put a bullet through me, if you durned well liked; I told you to leave me to take my chance in the desert. I warned you I'd trail you down if you saved my life. You got to own that, Kid."

"Aw, forget it, sheriff!" said the Kid carelessly. "I ain't got no kick coming. I reckon I was some mosshead to horn in; but I've got no grouch."

"You always was game, Kid!" said Pecos Pete.

"We was camping here, when you horned in with the Kid, sheriff," said Abe. "But I reckon we ain't camping none now. We're hitting the trail for Frio, pronto. That fire-bug ain't safe till we get him inside the calaboose."

"Sure!" said the sheriff.

He did not meet the Kid's eyes.

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THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Ride!

BOUND in the saddle of the black-muzzled mustang, his arms roped behind his back, the Rio Kid rode out of the chapparral into the Frio grasslands. Under the glinting stars he rode, in the midst of armed men, watchful and wary. His face was cool and calm; and if his heart was heavy, his looks gave no sign of it. Fortune had played the Rio Kid many strange tricks; but surely none stranger than placing him, a doomed prisoner, in the hands of the man whose life he had saved!

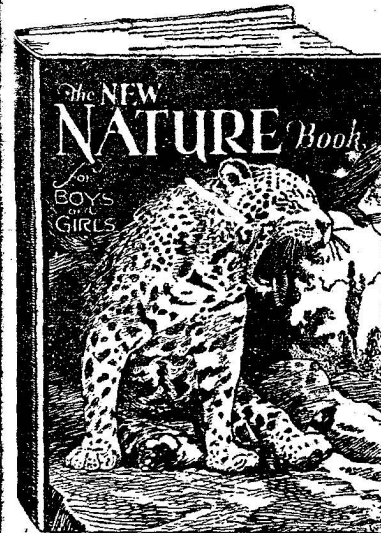
By his side rode the sheriff of Frio on a horse belonging to one of his men. The sheriff's face was grim and sombre. The Rio Kid was in his hands at last, bound, surrounded by armed men; the long trail was at an end. Triumph had come at long last; and the mockery of Frio and all the cow country would be silenced, when the elusive Kid was placed behind the bars of the calaboose. But the triumph of the Frio sheriff was bitter in his mouth.

He was not thinking, as he rode beside the Kid, of triumph. He was thinking of the days and nights when he lay feeble and helpless in the arroyo in the Staked Plain, watched over and cared for by the Kid. The heart of the Frio sheriff was heavier than the Kid's.

He had belted on the holsters with the walnut-butted guns in them. The Kid's rifle was strapped to his saddle. It was the Frio sheriff who rode armed and free now; the Kid was at his mercy, as he had been at the Kid's mercy. Under the glistering stars the cavalcade rode on, at a gallop, eating up the miles of grassy plain that lay between them and Frio.

Blacker and blacker grew the sheriff's visage as he rode. Suddenly he slacked rein.

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"Halt!"

The riders drew in their horses. They peered at the sheriff of Frio in the dimness of the stars.

For a second Jake Watson was silent. When he spoke his voice was husky and harsh.

"You 'uns ride on to Frio; I guess I'll foller!"

"Sheriff!"

"Cut it out!" rapped the sheriff. "I guess I'm heeled, with the fellow's own guns, and I can sure take care of a bound man. Ride on, I'm telling you!"

"But—" muttered Pecos Pete.

The sheriff broke out savagely:

"Are you giving orders in this nyer outfit? Ride on, I'm telling you, or, by the great horned toad, I'll give you hot lead to chew on, dog-gone your hides!"

The Frio men exchanged glances. But they rode on, muttering to one another. The sheriff was left alone with the prisoner.

In silence he watched the horsemen till the last of them sank out of sight in a distant fold of the prairie.

Then he turned to the Kid, who sat silent, bound on the mustang. With the Kid's own knife Jake Watson cut through the ropes.

The Rio Kid smiled and stretched his limbs.

"That your game, Jake?" he yawned.

"Yep!" The sheriff spat out a curse. "I've hunted you, Kid, and I'll hunt you again. I'll never let up till I've got you cinched. But you saved me in the desert, and I'm not standing for this. You were totting me to safety when my men got you, and—it ain't good enough. Duty or no duty, you're a free man!"

"I sure reckoned you was no such dog-goned, hard-baked cuss as you made out, sheriff!" smiled the Kid. "You'd sure have been more pizen than an Injun or a rattlesnake if you'd toted me into Frio this-a-way!"

"Aw, quit chewing the rag!" broke in the sheriff roughly. "Hyer's your guns, dog-gone your hide! You're a free man, Kid, with horse and guns—ride, durn you, ride!"

The Kid grinned as he buckled on his belt and holsters.

"I guess I'll ride!" he said. "You're a white man, Jake, though you don't let on to be."

The Rio Kid wheeled the mustang. But he paused before he rode.

"Sheriff," he said, "you owed me this—"

"Don't I know it?" snarled the sheriff. "Ride, I keep on telling you!"

"But you've got me beat," said the Kid soberly. "You've got me beat at the end of the trail, Jake. If I ride a free man to-night I quit the Frio country so long as you're sheriff of Frio."

The sheriff breathed hard.

"Keep to that, Kid—and good luck go with you wherever you ride!"

The Kid, with a whimsical grin, held out his hand. Sheriff Watson gripped it for a moment.

"Ride!" he muttered.

"Adios!"

The darkness swallowed the Rio Kid; the beat of the black-muzzled mustang's hoofs died away in the night. The sheriff gave a deep, long sigh, wheeled his horse, and rode after his men.

(The Rio Kid keeps his word and seeks adventure far from Texas. Don't miss next week's roaring Western tale, entitled: "THE RIO KID'S CHRISTMAS!")