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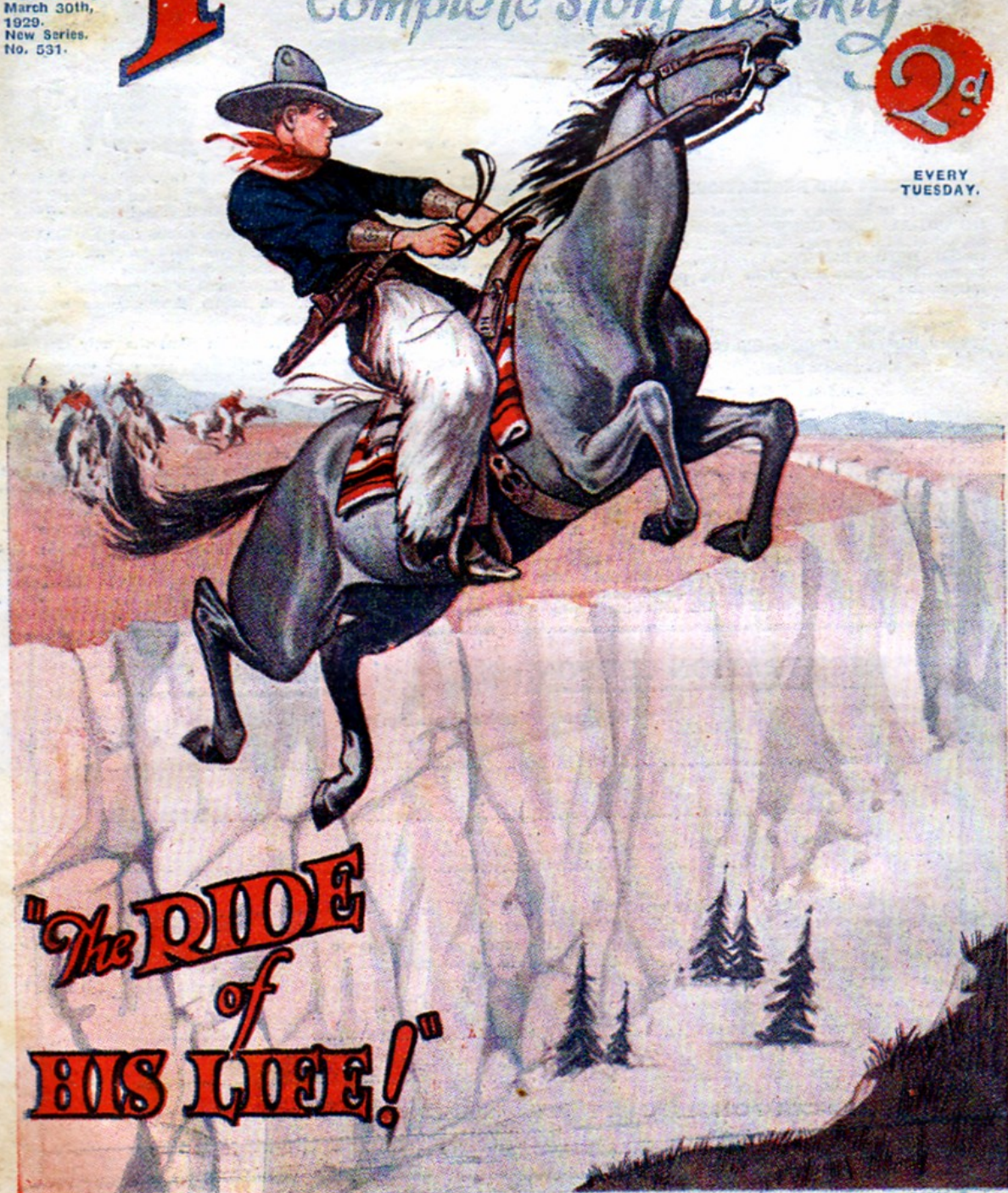
The POPULAR

Complete Story Weekly

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EVERY
TUESDAY.



"The RIDE
of
HIS LIFE!"

ROARING WESTERN YARN COMPLETE INSIDE!

THRILLS GALORE BELOW!

Jud Blake, marshal of Gunsight, thought he had a simple task in tracking down the Rio Kid. But that was before he had met this dare-devil young outlaw!

The RIDE of his LIFE! *By* RALPH REDWAY



OUR ROARING TALE OF WESTERN ADVENTURE, FEATURING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

**THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Kid Talks Turkey!**

"PUT 'em up, feller!"
Jud Blake, marshal of Gunsight, jumped.

There was no man to be seen on the trail that ran through the dusky chaparral when the order rapped out sharply.

Jud was a wise man. He put his hands up over his head obediently. When he received that order from a man who could not be seen he figured that the muzzle of a Colt was looking at him somewhere from among the pecans and mesquite.

He halted and held up his hands, staring about him. There was a rustle in the mesquite and a lithe figure, in a Stetson hat and goatskin chaps, stepped out. The cool, handsome face looked at Jud over the levelled barrel of a .45.

"That's a good little man!" said the Rio Kid approvingly. "You sure have hoss sense, Jud."

The marshal of Gunsight eyed him grimly.

He had never seen the handsome, sunburnt cow-puncher before, but he could guess who was holding him up. The whole Gunsight country, on both banks of the Claro, was ringing with the name of the Rio Kid.

"You win, Kid!" said the marshal laconically.

"You sorter seem to know me," the Kid remarked.

"I guess so. If you ain't that pesky fire-bug from Frio, the Rio Kid, I reckon you're his ghost!"

"You've said it, feller!" agreed the Kid. "Keep them paws over your hat, hombre, or this hyer gun may go off mighty sudden. You don't want to reach for a gun—you'd never know what hit you, marshal."

The Kid had read the thoughts of the man who sat his broncho with his hands up. Jud was calculating chances.

But he gave up the idea. All Texas knew that the Rio Kid never missed, and it was not good enough for the marshal of Gunsight.

"You win!" he repeated, shrugging his shoulders. "What's your game, you pesky fire-bug? You shot up the last marshal of Gunsight—"

"Forget it," interrupted the Kid. "Keep your paws up while I talk turkey to you, marshal. What you doing in this chaparral?"

"Hunting for you," answered Jud coolly, "and now I guess I found you—at the wrong end of a gun."

"This hyer gun won't hurt you any, if you behave," said the Kid cheerily. "I guess I been watching for a chance to talk to you, marshal. I heard that the Gunsight galoots had elected you marshal in the place of the pilgrim who was shot up, and so you're the feller I want to meet up with." The Kid grinned. "You been hunting me, and I reckon I've been watching you do it and waiting for you to put yourself where I wanted you—and that's here, under my gun."

Jud scowled.

For a week Jud Blake had been marshal of Gunsight, and that week he had spent hunting the boy outlaw. Somewhere in the belt of chaparral that lay between Gunsight and Frio he was sure that the Kid had his hiding-place, and Jud aimed to root him out and take him into the cow-town to a necktie party. At this very moment, while the Kid held him up on the dusky trail, a dozen of his men were beating the chaparral for the Kid, some of them within sound of his voice if he shouted. But he did not feel disposed to shout, with the Colt looking him in the eye

and the Kid's cool, resolute face behind it. He had a hunch that if he shouted it would be the last sound that any ear would hear from him.

"You don't want to get mad," admonished the Kid. "I guess all I want is to put you wise. You're honing to rope in the galoot who's been raising Cain in this section and calling himself the Rio Kid."

"You," said the marshal.

The Kid shook his head. "Not by long chalks," he said. "You know Poker Poindexter, of the Poindexter ranch?"

"Sure!" said Jud with a stare.

"That's the galoot."

"Forget it," said the marshal.

"I'm giving you the straight goods, marshal," said the Kid earnestly. "That rancher raises the dollars on the trail that he loses at poker and faro at the Four Aces in Gunsight. I sure roped him in once with the goods on him, but a bunch of moss-headed punchers horned in and spilled the beans. That rancher's the man you want, and I'm putting you wise that he's borrowed my name to ride under."

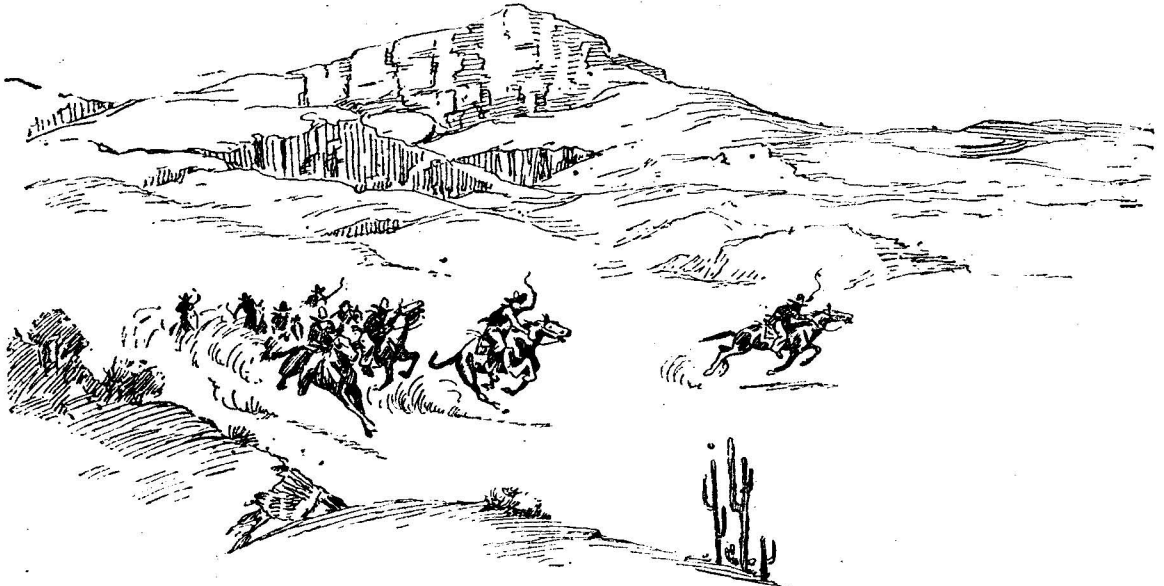
"Sho!" said Jud.

He stared blankly at the Kid. Poker Poindexter, of the Poindexter ranch, was one of the party riding with the marshal that day in search of the Kid. The boy outlaw's statement was a startling one.

"You allow that it was me shot up the last marshal?" went on the Kid. "I never heard of the galoot till after he was shot up. I came into this section and found there was a bulldozer riding under my name, and I've sure got the goods on that galoot, Poindexter. That's what I'm telling you, marshal."

"Sho!" repeated Jud.

"Why, you gink," exclaimed the Kid



indignantly, "if I shot up the last marshal, like you reckon, why ain't I spilling your juice now, instead of talking turkey to you, Jud Blake?"

That question was puzzling the Gunsight marshal himself. He was out to rope in the Kid and see him strung up to the nearest tree. Yet the Kid held him at his mercy, and did not pull trigger.

And with more than a dozen men beating the chaparral for him, the Kid was taking great risk in showing himself out of cover. Unless he shot the marshal he would leave him close on his trail when he left him. And he was not aiming to shoot.

"I guess I want a fair show," said the Kid. "That pesky fire-bug has been using my name, and I don't stand for it. I guess you don't believe it, marshal, but I've put you wise, and I want you to chew on it."

There was a rustle in the thickets near at hand.

It indicated the approach of someone of the marshal's followers.

The Kid made a backward spring and disappeared into the mesquite, from which he had come.

Jud Blake stared after him.

"Shucks!" he muttered.

From the chaparral a horseman pushed into the trail at a little distance behind the marshal. He turned his head and saw Poker Poindexter.

With the Kid's words fresh in his mind, the marshal stared curiously at the rancher. Poindexter was well known throughout the section, chiefly as a reckless gambler. Jud Blake was one of the many men in Gunsight who had wondered how Poindexter raised the money to pay his losses at poker. His ranch was well known to be mortgaged to the last acre, and it was known to be carelessly neglected. If it earned enough money to pay the interest on its mortgages that was all it did. Yet Poker Poindexter had been seen to lose thousands of dollars at the Four Aces.

The Kid had told the marshal to "chew" on what he had told him. Jud Blake was "chewing" on it, that was certain.

But the hunt for the Kid was the matter in hand.

"This way, hombre!" called out the marshal. "We're sure close on him."

"You've seen him?" exclaimed Poindexter.

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"Sure! This way."

And the marshal drove his broncho into the thickets into which the Rio Kid had disappeared, followed fast by Poker Poindexter on his grey mustang. A shout from the marshal brought other horsemen plunging through the chaparral towards him. The hunt was hot on the trail of the Rio Kid now.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Neck or Nothing!

"OLD hoss, we've sure got to beat it, and we've got to beat it pronto!" said the Kid.

The boy outlaw of the Rio Grande leaped into the saddle.

His face was set and grim.

More than a dozen Gunsight men were hunting him in the dense chaparral, and the Kid knew the danger he had incurred by stopping the marshal to talk turkey to him.

They knew that he was there now, and knew that he was near at hand; and at any moment a revolver might ring from the pecans and post-oaks, aimed to take his life.

Danger and the Kid were old acquaintances.

The Kid rode through the chaparral, a gun in his hand, and his eyes keenly about him.

He did not want to burn powder if he could help it. But at any moment the need might come.

The men who were hunting him believed that he was the masked outlaw who had robbed and slain recklessly in the Gunsight country; and if they roped him in he had short shrift to expect.

Yet he was glad that he had seized that opportunity of talking to the new marshal of Gunsight and putting him wise. For, once the finger of suspicion was pointed at Poker Poindexter, there were plenty of circumstances to strengthen that suspicion. And the Kid was keenly anxious that the desperado who had borrowed and blackened his name should be brought to justice.

In the Gunsight country they believed the Kid to be a trail robber and a reckless shedder of blood; and it got the Kid's goat. Whether the marshal believed him or not, the seed was planted in his mind; and he could not fail to

observe the undoubted fact that Poker Poindexter—who lost a fortune at gaming—always had plenty of money, which assuredly did not come out of his neglected ranch.

Crack!

A bullet whizzed by the Kid's head.

A Stetson hat showed in the pecans, and the Kid fired at it—though not at the head under it. The hat spun under the shot, and there was a yell and the sound of a man scrambling hurriedly into cover.

The Kid gave his mustang a touch of the spur.

There was no chance now of getting to the hidden dug-out in the heart of the wood, where he had many times lain doggo while the hunt was hot for him. The chaparral was alive with enemies, and he had drawn them upon him by showing himself to the marshal.

He dashed through the thickets as fast as the powerful mustang could stride through the tangle.

Crack, crack!

Shots rang out, and chipped leaves and branches about him. The crash of the fleeing mustang in the thickets was heard far and wide.

The chaparral, in which the Kid had many times lain hidden, was no refuge for him now. The boy outlaw was heading for the open plains. Once in the open, the speed of his mustang would

save him, as it had saved him many times before.

The Kid burst out of the chaparral with a rush and spurred his horse across the rolling prairie to the west.

The mustang's flying hoofs seemed scarcely to touch the grass.

The Kid looked back.

They knew he had broken cover. From half a dozen different points in the long dark line of the chaparral horsemen spurred out.

There was a jubilant roar as they sighted the Rio Kid on the open prairie. A dozen revolvers rang sharply, though the Kid was too far ahead for the firing to be anything but wild.

The Kid's face set hard.

He was hunted like a wolf for the crimes of another—the crimes of a man who was even now among his hunters, more bitter indeed than the rest, because he knew that the Kid knew his secret, and was anxious to stop the boy outlaw's tongue.

The Kid was tempted to loose off the walnut-butted guns at his pursuers—and even at the distance his aim would hardly have failed him.

But he left the guns in their holsters. Not unless he was driven to it in self-defence would he draw a bead on the cowpunchers who were hunting him in the belief that he had murdered the last marshal of Gunsight.

"Beat it, old hoss!" said the Kid, shaking his reins.

The grassy plain flew under the galloping hoofs.

Behind him came the marshal and his men, drawing together in a bunch as they rode in hot chase.

But there was no horse in the party that equalled in speed the grey mustang. They urged on their steeds with whip and spur; but the Kid, looking back

over his shoulder, could see that not a man in the bunch was gaining, and most of them were dropping behind.

With a clear run before him, the Rio Kid would have dropped his pursuers. But between the chaparral from which the Kid had been hunted and the banks of the Rio Claro stretched the cow-country, dotted with herds of grazing cattle; and here and there among the herds a Stetson hat was to be seen. There were foes before the Kid, as well as behind; for every man in the Gunsight country was his enemy.

"Dog-gone it!" muttered the Kid, as he swerved from his course to avoid a bunch of three or four cowpunchers ahead of him.

The punchers, quitting the cattle at the sight of the fleeing outlaw, galloped to intercept him.

The Kid struck to the southward, where, far away in the distance towards the Rio Grande, the sage desert lay. But that change in his direction brought the marshal and his men closer to him, and bullets whizzed dangerously close to the boy outlaw as he rode. The black-muzzled mustang was stretching to full gallop now, putting every ounce of speed into that wild ride for life or death.

Poker Poindexter rode close to the marshal's side as they spurred on over the rolling prairie. The rancher's eyes were blazing.

"We've got him now, Jud!" he shouted.

"I guess he's on a good critter!" said the marshal.

Poindexter laughed grimly.

"We've cinched him, I tell you! He's riding straight for the barrauca, and no cayuse in Texas could jump it. We've got him dead to rights."

"Thunder!" said Jud.

The Kid looked back again.

He had lost ground by his change of course, but again he was gaining.

mile after mile flew under the galloping hoofs; and as the sage desert drew nearer the herds of cattle disappeared, and there was no danger now—or little—of fresh foes appearing ahead.

Already in view in the far distance was the dreary stretch of desert, where nothing lived but sage and stunted cactus and yucca, and the lizards that crawled in the blazing sun. On that vast open plain, with his good horse under him, the Kid reckoned that he would ride clear of the Gunsight crowd.

But the Kid was now to the Gunsight country. Round the cow-town itself for many miles he had learned the lay of the land. But he was twenty miles from Gunsight now, in a region where he had never ridden. And as yet the deep, wide barranca that split the plain was not to be seen. But it was known to Poindexter and to most of the Gunsight men, and they grinned with glee at the sight of the boy outlaw riding hard towards an impassable barrier.

They had ceased to fire now. There was no need to waste lead when their quarry was riding into a trap from which there was no escape.

"By gum!" said the marshal. "We've sure cinched the galoot! I'll tell the world!"

Poindexter's eyes glittered with triumph. A few more miles and the only man in Texas who knew his dark secret would be rounded up, to be shot out of hand. With the Rio Kid would die what he knew.

When the outlaw reached the barranca he must turn at right angles—to right or to left.

The marshal shouted to his men, and they separated, spreading out wide to



THE GULF ACROSS THE PLAIN! Closer and closer the Kid drew to the dark line that marked the desert ahead—and it grew wider and wider to the view; no longer a line, but a gulf that split the plain. "By the great horned toad!" muttered the Kid. But he did not slacken rein! (See Chapter 2).

hem in the outlaw when the time came. Either he had to put up his hands and surrender or go down under a hurricane of bullets when the time came.

The Kid, looking back, was puzzled. He knew what that manoeuvre of his pursuers meant; and he rose in his stirrups to scan the plain before him, seeking to find out what obstacle might lie in his path. But he could see none, and he rode on at full gallop.

Suddenly on the arid stretch of the plain ahead he discerned a dark line that ran east and west like a bar across his path. For many miles on either side it extended.

"Sho!" murmured the Kid. A few more strides of his horse, and he knew what it was.

That dark line on the desert marked a barranca—a rift in the plain. In the rainy season a torrent poured along the rift, rolling its waters down to the distant Rio Grande. But it was dry now—a deep gulf in the earth, of unknown depth to the Kid, but known to the pursuers to be sixty feet down. And the width the Kid could not see yet; but the Gunsight men knew the width, and knew that no horse in the country would have essayed the leap.

The Kid rode on. Closer and closer he drew to the dark line that marked the desert, and it grew wider and wider to the view. No longer a line, but a gulf that split the plain.

Wider and wider it yawned as the galloping hoofs of the mustang covered the intervening distance.

"By the great horned toad!" muttered the Kid.

He did not slacken rein. On the wind was borne to his ears a shout from the Gunsight crowd—a shout that told of triumph. They had him now.

East and west lay the barranca, against which the long-stretched line of riders behind were hemming him in.

To wheel his horse and ride back at the enemy and fight his way through was one resource. The other was to leap the barranca and take his chance. And the terrible leap, as it drew nearer and nearer, might well have appalled the most reckless rider in a land of reckless riders.

The Kid's teeth were set. "Old hoss!" he muttered. "You've sure got to stand for it, old hoss—you sure have! It's neck or nothing now, old hoss!"

With flying hoofs the mustang rushed down to the brink of the barranca.

There was a yell from the pursuers. "Thunder, he's taking the leap!" gasped the marshal.

Poindexter grinned savagely. "I guess it's his last jump this side of Jordan!" he said.

And all eyes were fixed on the Rio Kid as the black-muzzled mustang seemed to soar into the air, and for a thrilling second horse and rider hung poised over the vast gulf below.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Across the Barranca!

THE Rio Kid's teeth were shut hard as he rose to the leap.

It was neck or nothing now. Death lay below—death by a crashing fall of sixty feet. Death lay behind in the guns of the men who were hemming him in. Confident as the Kid was in the powers of his horse, there was doubt in his heart. But he did not falter. With set teeth, and a firm hand on the rein, he rose to the leap—for life or death.

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For an instant the vast gulf was below him, and the mustang seemed to soar.

Crash! The forefeet crashed on the opposite bank.

A shrill squeal broke from the straining mustang. Behind the Kid the horse's hind hoofs were in the gulf, the sun-baked earth of the barranca's edge breaking away under them.

One second more and horse and rider would have slid backwards into the abyss.

But one second was enough for the Kid.

While the crash of the hoofs still echoed, the boy outlaw flung himself over the horse's head to firm ground beyond, and without a pause he dragged at the mustang.

That pull saved the gallant horse. The Rio Kid dragged with all his strength, and the hoofs beat a frantic tattoo on the crumbling earth. A moment more, and the mustang was dragged to safety.

Trembling in every limb, the mustang stood beside his master.

The Kid panted. Even his nerve of iron had been shaken for the moment. He stood panting for breath, his hand on the horse's neck.

It was the narrowest escape of the Kid's wild life. But he had escaped, and now the deep barranca lay between him and his foes.

There was a roar from the Gunsight men as they came sweeping on, loosing off their guns.

But the marshal did not fire. For the moment Jud forgot that it was an outlaw, wanted by half the sheriffs in Texas, who had escaped him in his admiration for the desperate leap.

"Thunder!" ejaculated Jud. "I guess that's some hoss, and some rider, too! Thunder!"

Poindexter, livid with rage, blazed away with his revolver as he galloped on to the barranca.

Good as his own steed was, the rancher did not dream of essaying the leap the Rio Kid had made. Not a man in the Gunsight crowd dreamed of it.

The Kid was out of their hands, unless they could shoot him down before he could hunt cover.

But the Kid did not give them the chance. A few moments were enough for him.

"Beat it, old hoss!" panted the Kid. He dragged the mustang back from the verge of the barranca into the shelter of a sandy knoll. There the horse stood safe from fire, still trembling and exhausted.

Leaving the mustang in cover the Kid dropped flat on the earth, with a sage-bush in front of him. A walnut-butted gun was in his hand now.

Crack! The Stetson hat spun on the head of Poker Poindexter.

The rancher drew rein hurriedly. Across the barranca the whole party were now under fire of the man they had hunted.

Poindexter did not give the Kid time for a second shot. He dragged in his horse, and threw himself to the ground. The rest of the riders promptly followed his example.

A score of yards from the barranca, horses and riders lay, in cover of the irregularities of the plain and the sage and cactus.

The voice of the Rio Kid rang mockingly across the abyss.

"Say, you galoots, ain't you wanting me yet? I'm sure hyer, honing to see you jump!"

Poindexter spat out a curse.

"Beaten to it!" he muttered.

"You galoots sure was in a hurry jest now!" called out the Kid. "Say, there's a thousand dollars reward for the hombre that ropes me in! Ain't any of you ginks got any use for a thousand dollars? Say!"

A spattering of shots answered him.

Poindexter, keeping in cover, crawled to the side of the marshal of Gunsight, who lay behind a sage-bush.

Jud looked at him.

"He's sure beaten us to it, Poindexter," he said.

The rancher gritted his teeth.

"He sure has," he muttered. "I guess there ain't any cayuse in this crowd that could make that leap."

"I guess I ain't trying it on," grinned the marshal. "No, sir! No sugar in mine!"

"Say, you, Tex!" called out the Rio Kid. "You looking for sudden death? I can sure see you behind that yucca!"

Tex Clew, foreman of the Poindexter ranch, gave a gasp. He had fancied himself out of sight of the keen eyes across the barranca.

He leaped up and rushed for safer cover.

For the moment his life was at the mercy of the outlaw. But no shot came from across the barranca.

The Kid laughed.

"Say, Tex, you don't want to hurry!" he called out. "I ain't shooting, you durned gink! Take it easy!"

"Oh, great gophers!" gasped the Poindexter foreman, as he sank behind the shelter of a little hillock where Mohave and Sandy Jones, who belonged to his outfit, were ready sheltered.

"Marshal!" shouted the Kid.

"Say!" called back Jud.

"I guess you'll want new spurs when you get home to Gunsight!"

Crack!

The marshal gave a yell.

For a second he believed that he was shot in the leg. But the shock came from the bullet that ripped a spur from his heel.

"Oh shucks!" gasped Jud, as he dragged his limb into closer cover. "I guess that Kid has got eyes like a turkey-buzzard! I sure never knowed my laig was showing."

Poindexter crouched closer. He could guess that he would not be spared if the Kid drew a bead on him; though the boy outlaw had no hunch to shoot up any others of the Gunsight cowmen.

The Kid's voice rang out again.

"Say, you galoots, if you don't want me I reckon I'll be hitting the trail! Say!"

"He's sure a cool cuss!" muttered the marshal.

"I guess we'll wing him when he gets on his cayuse!" muttered Poindexter. "There's no cover for a mounted man." Jud made no answer. He would have been lying there with a shattered leg had the Kid chosen, and he knew it. Outlaw as the Kid was, Jud had no hunch to fire on him just then.

"You, Tex!" called out Poindexter.

"Hallo, boss!" came back from Tex, a few yards away.

"Keep your rifle ready! That fire-bug will be breaking cover."

Tex granted.

"I guess I'd have got mine when I broke cover, if that gink had wanted!" he said. "I ain't drawing a bead on him, nohow!"

"I guess this gets my goat, some!" said the marshal. "That guy don't seem to have any grouch agin this crowd, excepting you, Poindexter."

He eyed the man beside him curiously. Back into his mind came the words the Rio Kid had spoken in the chaparral.

"It sure gets my goat," he repeated slowly. "That fire-bug who's been riding the trails calling himself the Rio Kid shoots to kill. He's shot up six men in this country. I reckon I'm beginning to believe that it ain't the same hombre. If this Kid is the same feller, why ain't he burning powder?"

Poindexter breathed hard. "I sure reckon that's a cinch, marshal!" said Tex. "I'll tell the world some pizen galoot has been riding the trails, and calling himself by the Kid's name. 'Tain't the same hombre, 'Oh, quit fooling!" snarled Poindexter savagely.

"Say, you galoots!" came the Kid's voice, ringing across the wide barranca. "You want the feller that shot up the last marshal of Gunsight? I'm telling you that you've got him right handy—and his name's Jim Poindexter!"

The rancher's face was livid. "You hear me, you Poindexter!" came the Kid's ringing voice. "You've got all this section fooled; but I'm sure wise to your game, and I'll get the goods on you, feller, afore I'm through! You ain't done with the Rio Kid yet!"

Poindexter, gun in hand, peered from cover. He jerked back his head as a bullet grazed his hat. The Kid had the eyes of a hawk.

Keeping in cover, the rancher watched, with burning eyes, for a mounted figure to appear on the skyline across the barranca.

But the Kid was too cute for that. He crawled back to where his horse stood in cover, and, taking the bridle, led the animal away.

The ground along the barranca was rough and broken, and the Kid had unerring eye for cover. Taking advantage of every gully and ridge, of every fold of the plain, the Kid, crouching low, led the mustang farther and farther, till he was at a secure distance from the enemy.

Then he mounted and galloped away across the plain to the south.

The beat of his horse's hoofs came echoing back, and the Gunsight men leaped from cover.

They had a glimpse of the mounted outlaw in the distance, far out of effective range.

Five or six shots rang out; but they flew wide of the boy outlaw as he rode away at a gallop. The Rio Kid glanced back, waved his Stetson in mocking salute, put spurs to his horse, and disappeared into the desert.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Trailing Back!

THE marshal of Gunsight stood staring across the barranca after the vanished figure of the Rio Kid. Some of the Gunsight men were cursing; most of them stared after the Kid in silence. More than one of them, they knew, would never have lived to ride back to the cow-town had the Kid chosen to kill. And in every mind was growing the conviction that the Kid's tale was true—that some desperado had been riding the trails, with a mask on his face and blood on his hands, in the Kid's name.

Poindexter could read the thoughts in the bronzed faces round him, and there was fear mingled with the rage in his breast.

More than one curious glance was

thrown on him, though if there was suspicion in the minds of the Gunsight men they did not voice it.

"I guess that Kid was handing out the solid truth," said Jud Blake slowly. "There's some fire-bug in this country we ain't cottoned to yet, that's sure been fooling us by using the Kid's name!"

"I'll say that's a cinch, marshal!" said Tex.

And several of the punchers nodded assent.

Poindexter gritted his teeth. "Are we standing here chewing the rag and letting that outlaw hit the horizon?" he snapped.

"I guess he's made his getaway," answered the marshal, "and I sure reckon we've got to look nearer to home for the galoot that shot up the last marshal of Gunsight!"

"Sure!" said Tex. "Meaning—" hissed Poindexter, his hand slipping towards a gun.

The marshal looked at him steadily.

"Cut that out, Poindexter!" he said coldly. "I guess the Kid was talking wild when he named you; leastways, there's nothing to go on; but I sure reckon it was some other guy shot up the marshal, and robbed the Claro hack, and raised Cain round here generally. I guess it ain't that Kid we want; and I'm hitting the trail for Gunsight pronto!"

"There's a way across the barranca a few miles farther down," said Poindexter. "We can pick up that fire-bug's trail on the other side. I sure know the print of his mustang!"

The marshal shook his head. "He ain't the man we want," he answered. "We got to look nearer home for the man we want, I'll tell the world!"

And the marshal and his men mounted for the ride back to Gunsight. The rancher breathed hard.

"You can let up on him if you want," he snarled. "I ain't letting up, anyhow. You, Tex, Mohave, Sandy, you mount and ride with me; we're trailing that outlaw down!"

The three punchers looked at one another. It was easy to read in their faces the doubt in their minds.

But they obeyed the rancher's order. The marshal and his men rode away to the north, heading for the distant cow-town. The three punchers followed Poindexter along the bank of the barranca.

The rancher rode ahead of his men, and they followed him in silence. What the Kid had said had made a deep impression on all who had heard him. There was doubt—and doubt might turn to suspicion, and suspicion to certainty; and once the truth was known Poindexter was well aware that his own men would have noosed the rope to string him up to the branch of a cottonwood. His heart was bitter with rage and hatred as he rode, followed by the silent cowboys.

Five miles from the scene of the Kid's perilous leap the barranca narrowed and shallowed. There it was possible for a skillful rider to descend and cross, and mount the other side.

To cross the barranca, to pick up the Kid's trail, to track him down and kill him like a wolf, was the rancher's only thought. If the Kid lived, sooner or later there was a rope noosed for the secret bandit who had ridden in his name.

"Shucks!" exclaimed Tex, suddenly

drawing rein as the rancher was about to lead the way down the sloping side into the barranca.

Poindexter glanced back at him. "I guess we don't need to cross, boss," said the foreman.

"What do you mean?" snarled Poindexter. "If you're afraid to follow me, I'll ride alone after that fire-bug!" "You don't want to blow off your mouth so much, boss!" answered Tex coolly. "Look at them tracks."

He pointed to a set of horse's tracks that climbed the side of the barranca and emerged upon the plain where the horsemen halted.

Poindexter stared at them. It was a fresh set of tracks, left by some rider who had crossed the barranca from the south side not long since. In his savage haste the rancher had not noticed the trail.

He sprang from his horse, bent down, and examined the hoof-prints.

"I guess them's the Kid's tracks!" said Tex.

"They sure are!" said Poindexter.

He rose to his feet, staring across the plain to the north. The tracks told their own tale. The Kid, who had last been seen galloping to the south, had evidently turned, when he was out of sight of his pursuers, and struck for the barranca again. He had found the place where it could be crossed, and had crossed it, and ridden north—towards Gunsight.

Poindexter scanned the plains. But the Kid, though he must have passed quite recently, was not in sight.

"That Kid is sure some hombre!" said Mohave. "Shucks! He ain't hoping to quit the Gunsight country, he ain't!"

"I reckon he's got a cinch on some galoot in this country!" said Tex drily. "Ride!" snarled Poindexter.

He turned from the barranca and followed the Kid's trail northward, back to the cow country of Gunsight.

For long miles the trail led them; the Rio Kid seemed to have taken no trouble to blanket it. But it was lost at last. The trail ran into a wide creek that flowed down from the hills to join the Rio Claro. The Kid had evidently taken to the water, and whether he had ridden up or down the stream there was no sign.

"I guess this is where we lose that hombre!" said Tex.

The foreman was right.

Poindexter searched up and down the stream for long hours with bitter determination; but he found no sign where the Kid had left the water. At that point the outlaw had blanketed his trail—and not a sign remained to tell the way he had gone.

It was the end of the trail; though Poindexter refused to acknowledge it till the sun was sinking deep in the west and the shadows lengthening over the dusky prairie.

Then at last, with bitter rage and disappointment, he gave the word to ride. His brow was black as he rode. The Rio Kid was still in the Gunsight country; and he had come to stay—until, as Poindexter knew only too well, he had unmasked the desperado who had ridden in his name. He had still to reckon with the Rio Kid!

THE END.

(Another roaring Western yarn featuring the Rio Kid appears in next week's issue. Don't miss it, boys!)

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