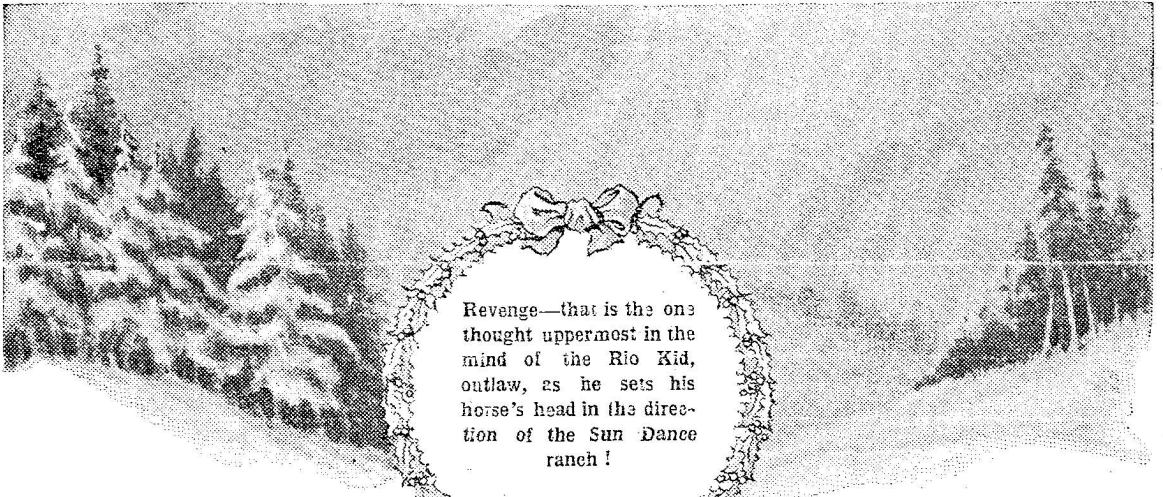


# The Rio Kid's Christmas Gift!



DRAMA, SENSATIONS, AND  
SURPRISES IN THIS POWER-  
FUL TALE OF THE WEST!

By Ralph Redway.

## THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Word of the Kid!

"THE Kid?"  
"Sure!"  
"Aw! Forget it, sheriff!"  
Lester Leigh, boss of the Sun Dance ranch, smiled as he spoke—a smile of amusement, tintured with contempt.

Sheriff Heenan did not smile. The burly sheriff of Sun Dance was standing at a window, looking out over the frost-bound ranges. Far in the distance, glimmering in the last rays of the setting sun, the Huacas barred the horizon. The sierra was piled with ice and snow, and snow lay on the ranges of the Sun Dance ranch. Coulees and barrancas were choked with it. It was a hard and bitter winter, and the hardest Christmas Day that any man on the Sun Dance ranch remembered.

Even in the ranch-house, well warmed by central heating, the cold seemed to penetrate. The wind that came from the sierra was laden with whirling flakes.

But through the biting cold and the whirling flakes vehicle after vehicle drove up the muddy trail to the ranch-house. The gate stood open wide. All kinds of vehicles—buggies, and rigs, and even chuck-wagons, rolled up, loaded with cheery-faced guests. For thirty miles round ranchers and their families were gathering at the Sun Dance, and everything that went on wheels in Sun Dance county was requisitioned; and every few minutes horsemen rode in, thickly cloaked against the wind.

Lester Leigh, the fat and prosperous rancher of Sun Dance, expensively dressed in store clothes, with a big diamond blazing in his shirt-front, looked self-satisfied and quite at his ease. Obviously, he did not share the uneasiness of the Sun Dance sheriff.

Jeff Heenan, clad in broadcloth, had a suspicious-looking bulge under his coat. The gun that Jeff generally wore swinging on his hip was out of sight. But it was there. Even in Sun Dance county it was not usual to pack a gun for a Christmas party. But no earthly

consideration would have induced Jeff Heenan to part with his six-gun that day. There was a pucker of anxiety in his brow as he looked out in the fading light.

"Forget it, sheriff!" Lester Leigh repeated. "I guess you've got the Rio Kid on your nerves."

The sheriff turned from the window, and his eyes rested gravely on the fat, self-satisfied face of the rancher.

"The Rio Kid will be at the ranch to-night," he said tersely.

"You reckon so?"

"He said so!" answered the sheriff. "I guess he was blowing off his mouth a few," said the rancher with a laugh. "You're here, sheriff, with half a dozen of your men—and half the county have come to the dance. If the Kid's bonehead enough to put his head into such a trap he won't pull it out again in a hurry."

"I don't say he'll get away again, Leigh," said Heenan slowly. "Leastways, he won't get away alive if I draw a bead on him. But all Texas knows that the Rio Kid never breaks his word, and he said that he would come here Christmas and shoot you up in your own ranch. And I guess he won't let up on it—and wouldn't, if all the Texas Rangers was camped in the shebang, and all the sheriffs in Texas along with them."

"Let him come, then," said the rancher, with a shrug of the shoulders. "Texas will be rid of the most dangerous outlaw that ever rode the trails if he shows up here to-day."

Heenan did not answer. His glance sought the window again, and he scanned the snow-bound ranges in the fading light, as if he almost expected to see the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande riding his grey mustang openly up to the ranch. His gravity seemed to impress the rancher a little at last, and the smile died off his face.

"You sure reckon he'll come, Heenan?" he asked, and there was a trace of anxiety in his tone.

"Sure!"

"But he would be mad! The whole outfit has been warned to watch out

for him; and with a hundred guests here, or more—"

"I guess a big crowd don't make it harder for the Kid—it makes it easier," said the sheriff.

"He would be throwing his life away."

"The Kid's got a grouch agin you, rancher, and I guess he don't give a continental red cent for his life agin keeping his word," said Heenan.

"I reckon he's ridden out of this country days ago," muttered Leigh. "He hasn't been seen since the day you nearly got him here. Not a sign of the fire-bug—and he's been well looked for, too."

The sheriff nodded. "I'm wise to that. He ain't been seen—and he won't be seen till he horns in byer to shoot you up, boss."

Lester Leigh laughed. But there was a false ring to his laugh. "The sheriff's words had their effect on him, in spite of his disbelief.

"You reckon he aims to shoot me up?" he said.

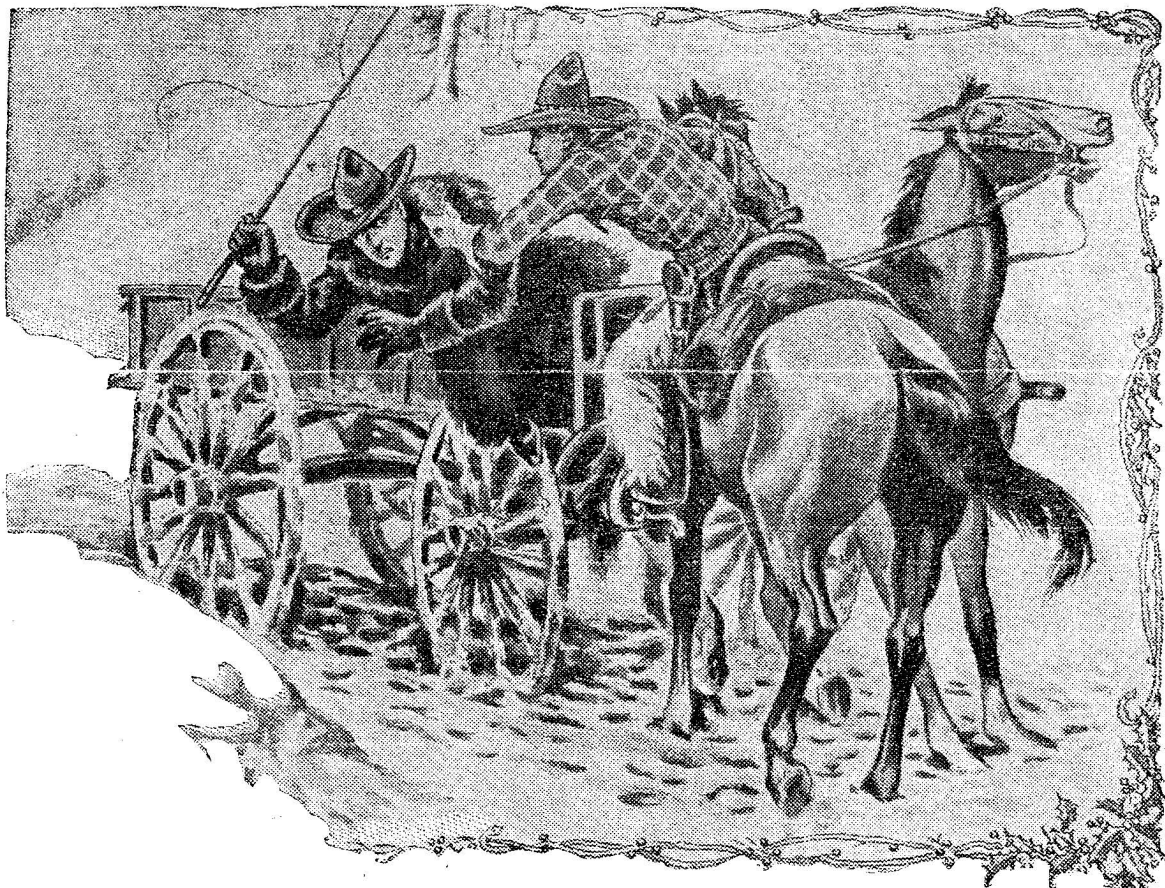
"He allowed that was his game when he sent you his message, by me," said Heenan. "He figures that you double-crossed him, Leigh. And the Kid ain't the galoot to forget it."

The rancher frowned.

"The Kid ain't a malicious cuss," went on Heenan slowly. "I've heered that he saved Mule-Kick Hall's life in a flood in the Mal Pais when Hall was hot on his trail to cinch him. He let me off the other day, when I was riding him down and doing my durndest to shoot him up. He had the drop on me and let me beat it. But what you did at him, Leigh, fairly got his goat, and he gave me that message for you, and meant every word of it. Between ourselves, rancher, it was—"

The sheriff paused.

"He horned in here, and I kept him while I sent word to you," said Lester Leigh coldly. "That was justifiable, in dealing with an outlaw with a price on his head. He came in here, not knowing that I'd bought the ranch from his old pard, Stenson; and it was too good a chance to be lost."



"Mebbe!" said Heenan. "Mebbe! If you'd pulled a gun on him or told your outfit to rope him in— But asking him that a-way—making out to be friendly while you was sending a Greaser to fetch my men from Sun Dance—"

The sheriff paused again. The colour flushed into the rancher's face. He knew what his own outfit thought of the trick he had played on the Rio Kid, of his treachery in assuming a face of friendship and hospitality while he was planning the boy outlaw's capture or death. In point of fact, his own conscience, hard as it was, was a little troubled. But he was surprised to find that the Sun Dance sheriff, who would have given two years of his life to rope in the Rio Kid, shared the general opinion. Anger gathered in the rancher's fat, hard face.

"I reckon a galoot can't put his cards on the table in dealing with an outlaw," he snapped.

"Nope!" agreed the sheriff. "But—the Kid's got a big grouch agin you, Leigh, and it ain't no use denying that he's got a reason. Double-crossing the guy like that—"

"You dare—" began the rancher, his eyes flashing.

"Daddy!"

The blaze died out of his eyes and the black frown from his brow. Heenan, looking at him morosely, marvelled to see the softening of the hard, selfish face as he turned to the child. Lester Leigh was a hard man—hard as iron in business dealings, hard and unfeeling to his outfit, hard and cold to all—save

his little daughter. In that hard and ruthless heart there was one soft spot.

"Yes, Pet!"

Even his voice was soft as he answered the child. The cold, metallic ring had gone out of it.

"Mummy wants you, daddy," said Pet.

The rancher swung the child to his shoulder and walked out of the room without another word to the sheriff of Sun Dance.

Jeff Heenan looked after him with a strange expression on his face. Then, chewing on an unlighted cigar, he stared from the window again at the darkening landscape.

"He sure gets my goat!" murmured the sheriff. "He's sure the hardest cuss in Texas—I guess there's guys in his own outfit that'd be glad to shoot him up. And he sure did play it low down on the Rio Kid, he sure did play a dirty greaser's game, and, outlaw as he is, I guess the Kid is worth a whole team of ornery, double-crossing guys like Lester Leigh. But"—the sheriff's bronzed face set grimly, and his hand stole under his broadcloth coat for a moment to make sure that the gun was ready when wanted—"but I guess if the Kid keeps his word—and he sure will—I'll be on hand. I don't give a continental red cent for Lester Leigh. But the Kid ain't going to shoot up that little gal's daddy—not if this here galoot knows it—and he reckons he do! No, sir!"

And the sheriff, heedless of the gathering company at the ranch, of merry voices and pealing laughter, stared grimly and glumly from the window—assured in his own mind that the Rio Kid would be as good as his word, and

that the Christmas festivities at the Sun Dance Ranch would be interrupted by a tragedy.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER. A Borrowed Outfit!

"HALT!"  
"Sho!" ejaculated Young Tom Harrigan.

Young Tom was taken quite by surprise.

Hold-ups in Sun Dance county were rare; hold-ups at Christmas-tide were unknown. With snow on the frozen ranges, snowflakes whirling in the bitter wind, the hardiest hold-up man in Texas was not likely to be riding the trails.

But it was a hold-up all the same, and the young rancher realised it quickly. He was driving his buckboard at a rattling pace, by a trail that ran through a frosty pinewood, when the horseman on the grey mustang pushed out of the pines and called on him to halt. And a levelled six-gun glimmering in the faint remnant of daylight backed up the order, and Young Tom Harrigan prudently pulled in his horse, and the buckboard stopped.

The horseman rode closer.

"Put 'em up!" he remarked casually. Harrigan stared at the cool, steady, sunburnt face, the glimmering revolver, the steady eyes that glistened behind it, and put up his hands.

"That's wise," commented the horseman. "I should sure be sorry to spill your juice, hombre, on Christmas Day. I sure should hate to do it. Keep 'em up while I talk turkey, feller."

Harrigan grinned.

"You've sure roped in the wrong cayuse," he remarked. "If you're after

dollars—and I guess you are—you've slipped, feller. Any guy in the county could tell you that Tom Harrigan don't carry a fat roll."

"Forget it," said the rider of the grey mustang. "I ain't after your roll, hombre, fat or thin."

"You've got me guessing, then," said Young Tom. "You ain't halted me on the trail jest to chew the rag, I guess."

"Nope!"

"Spill it!" said Harrigan. "I guess it's freezing too much for a long chin, and I'm due at the Sun Dance."

"Jest what I figured. You're going to the Sun Dance ranch for the fancy-dress hop."

"You've said it."

"And I reckon you've got your glad rags in that buckboard?"

"I sure ain't travelling in them," said Harrigan, with another grin. "The guys would sure stare a few if I drove up to the ranch dressed as Santa Claus, feller."

"Sure!" assented the trail rider. "And I'm telling the world that it's some outfit you've got in that grip beside you, and will look handsome at the dance in the big barn at Sun Dance."

"How do you know?" demanded the young rancher, in surprise. "You ain't seen my Santa Claus outfit that I know of."

The trail rider laughed.

"You didn't notice a guy about my size standing at your elbow in Kelly's store at Sun Dance, when you was buying it?" he said.

"I sure did not," said Harrigan. "I remember there was a Mexican standing there—"

"Feller, that Mexican has washed off his complexion since, and took off his black beard," said the rider, "and here he is talking to you jest this minute."

"Sho!" ejaculated Harrigan.

"I ain't after your roll, feller. Keep it to buy an outfit for your next Christmas party. I'm after that grip with your glad rags in it."

"Shucks!"

"I guess I'm going to borrow that costume, feller," said the rider of the grey mustang pleasantly. "You see, I've a hunch for horning in at the jamboree this evening—seeing as Lester Leigh has asked half the county, and forgotten this intaat. You get me?"

"Carry me home to die!" ejaculated Harrigan. "You figure on horning in where you ain't wanted, in my outfit?"

"You get me."

"Then you can forget it," said Young Tom, with emphasis. "You ain't borrowing my glad rags worth a cent."

"Search me!" said the rider.

He pushed his grey mustang a little nearer. The six-gun that covered Young Tom was steady as a rock in his hand, and his eyes glinted over it, though his handsome face wore a smile. Harrigan, staring at him, gave a sudden start.

"The Kid!" he breathed. "The Rio Kid!"

"That's what they call me along the Rio Grande," assented the rider.

Young Tom Harrigan clicked his teeth. He cursed himself for not having packed a gun before he left his ranch. Yet he knew in his heart that a gun would not have helped him when the Rio Kid's Colt was looking at him, with the Kid's finger on the trigger.

"You don't want to give any trouble, feller," said the Rio Kid, in the same pleasant tone. "I guess I'm only going to borrow your glad rags. I guess I'll let you have them back when I'm through—and they sure won't be much the worse for wear. I'm going to borrow your boss and buckboard, and

your fur coat and hat—jest so that the guys won't notice the Rio Kid horning in. You don't want to feel sore over making a guy a loan like that."

"What's your game at the Sun Dance ranch?" muttered Harrigan.

The Rio Kid did not answer that question. But the smile died off his face, and his eyes glittered.

Harrigan caught his breath.

"I've heard that you've threatened to shoot up Rancher Leigh in his own ranch," he said.

"Sure," said the Kid icily. "That's my game, feller. The guy double-crossed me, and I guess it was a close call for me. I guess I told him I'd shoot him up in his own ranch, and all Texas can tell you that I keep my word. That all-fired skunk talked to me fair and friendly—and sent for the sheriff and his men to rope me in—and me his guest, trusting to his word."

The Kid's eyes blazed. "I guess a guy like that ain't fit to live, feller. But that ain't your business."

"Ain't it?" said Harrigan between his teeth. "If I'd a gun on me, durn you, I'd try my luck agin your Colt!"

"I guess you'd hit Jordan so sudden you'd be s'prised to find yourself there," said the Kid amiably. "Forget it! Oh thunder!"

Young Tom Harrigan suddenly dropped his raised hands, grasped his whip, and made a desperate blow at the horseman beside the buckboard. He expected the six-gun to roar; he knew that he was taking a desperate chance.

But the Rio Kid did not pull trigger; he hated, as he said, to spill any guy's juice, especially at Christmas-tide. Swift as the blow was, the Kid shifted and eluded it, and the next moment he grasped the young rancher and dragged him from the buckboard.

Young Tom Harrigan went with a crash into the snow that powdered the trail. He sprawled there with spinning brain, and the next moment the Rio Kid was out of the saddle and bending over him, the six-gun jammed to his ear.

"Let up!" said the Kid quietly.

"Dog-gone you!" panted Harrigan. "Shoot if you like, but you ain't using me to horn in at the Sun Dance, you dog-goned firebug."

He strove to struggle up, reckless of the six-gun. Still, the Kid, with a patience strange in a hunted outlaw, did not pull trigger. The long barrel of the Colt rapped on the fallen man's head, and for several minutes Young Tom Harrigan's senses left him.

When he came to himself again his arms were bound behind his back, and

he was a helpless prisoner. He lay on the trail, and he saw that his horse had been tied up to a pine. He would have spoken—words of rage and defiance—but he could not speak. A gag was in his mouth, tied safely by a cord that was wound round and round his head. He lay and stared at the boy outlaw in helpless fury.

The Kid smiled down on him.

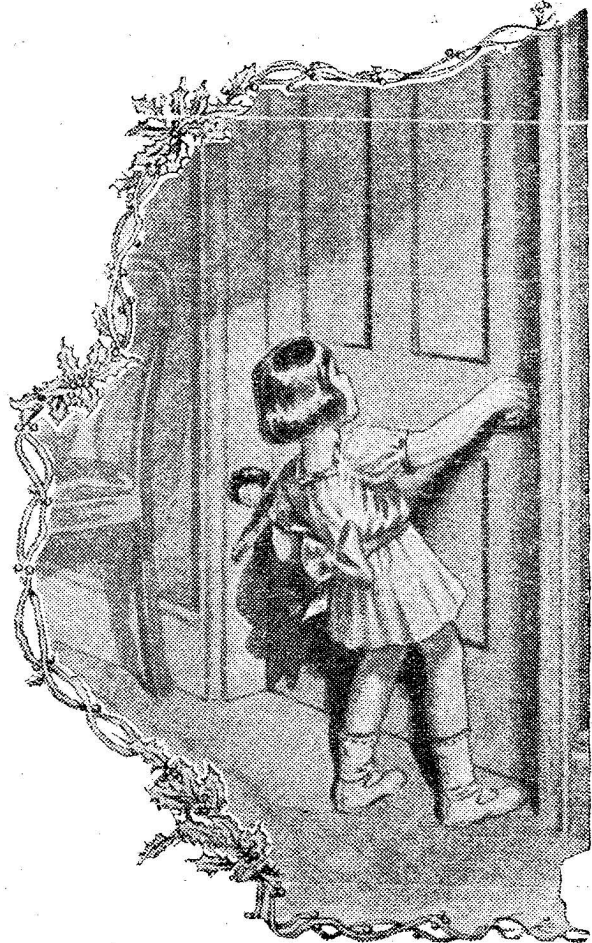
"You don't want to get your mad

up," he remarked, "I ain't going to hurt you none—I guess I'd hate to hurt a good little man like you. I'm jest going to leave you safe while I pay a visit to Lester Leigh at the Sun Dance ranch, and when I'm through you can have your outfit back agin, feller, and no harm done—cept to Lester Leigh!"

Harrigan writhed in his bonds. But he was helpless, and the Rio Kid lifted him to his feet and walked him off the trail into the frosty pines. Side-Kicker, the grey mustang, followed, and Harrigan's horse and buckboard remained tied up on the trail.

Deep in the depths of the pine-wood the Kid stopped at a little hut, or jacal, built of branches, and covered with snow. Within, a fire burned, smouldering on the earth, filling the jacal with warmth. Tom Harrigan stared about him. His rage was intensified if possible by this discovery that the Kid had prepared for him, taking it for granted that the young rancher would fall a prisoner into his hands. The Kid gave him a smile in return for his savage glare.

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The Rio Kid swung round at the sound of a timid tap on the door and the voice of a little girl saying: "Are you in there, daddy?"

explained, "but I ain't leaving a guy to freeze, nohow. Say, you don't want to get your back up that-a-way; I guess some guys would have tied you to a tree and left you to it. I sure taken a lot of trouble to fix you comfortable while I'm borrowing your outfit. I always was a soft-hearted gink, I allow."

When the Rio Kid left the jacal in the pine wood he took with him young Tom Harrigan's hat and sheepskin coat. But he left the prisoner warm in a thick bearskin rug by the banked fire, though very carefully he left him with his hands bound, a gag in his mouth, and his feet lashed to a peg in the ground, making escape impossible. Harrigan's escape would have meant death to the boy outlaw who was about to horn in at the crowded ranch. In the jacal, the grey mustang remained with the prisoner, and while young Tom Harrigan writhed in his bonds and cursed the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande sat in the buckboard and drove to the Sun Dance ranch.

**THE THIRD CHAPTER.**  
**Santa Claus!**

SHERIFF HEENAN, heedless of drifting snowflakes, walked round the wire fence as the last glimmer of daylight died away. Armed men were posted at intervals, and to every one the sheriff spoke a word or two, warning him to be on the watch now that night was coming on, and to shoot at sight if the Rio Kid showed up. He stopped at last at the gate, where Texas Bill and five or six cow-

men were on guard, armed with rifles. Lester Leigh, though he doubted whether the Kid would be as good as his word, was not wholly easy in his mind, and he had willingly left the matter in the sheriff's reliable hands, and Jeff Heenan neglected no precaution. Every man on the Sun Dance knew of the Rio Kid's menace to horn in on Christmas day and shoot up the boss of the ranch, and in point of fact, they had little sympathy with the boss whose treacherous dealing with the Kid was, as Texas Bill described it, a low-down greaser's game. But that cut no ice, they were keenly on the watch for the boy outlaw if he came, and ready to carry out the sheriff's orders. If the Kid came, there were few who doubted that he would come to his death.

For it seemed impossible that the Kid could beat the odds that he was up against. With a group of armed and watchful men at the gate, and armed men guarding the fence throughout its circuit, how was even the resourceful Kid to enter the enclosure without instantly drawing fire? And if he succeeded in entering he would find himself among swarming foes.

"Keep your eyes peeled, you guys," said the sheriff to the men at the gate. "Shoot on sight if you see the Kid! Don't talk to the galoot—jest pull trigger when you see him."

"You bet!" said one of the cowmen. "I reckon you can bar the gate," said Heenan, "I guess all the folks have arrove by this time."

"Here comes a buckboard," said Texas Bill, as there was a rattle of wheels and harness on the trail, and a vehicle loomed up through the misty gloom.

The sheriff glanced up at the newcomer as he dashed up.

"That's young Tom Harrigan!" he remarked.

"Sure!" said Texas Bill.

The buckboard and the rawboned chestnut horse that drew it were well known. The driver, hunched up in a heavy sheepskin coat against the wind, with a hat pulled down over his face, drove up at a rattling speed. Sheriff Heenan stood aside for the buckboard to drive in, and the man in the sheepskin coat waved a hand to him as he passed. The buckboard rattled on towards the corral, and Texas Bill slammed the wide gate shut.

"I guess that'll be the last," said Sheriff Heenan. "Keep your eyes peeled, fellers—and remember that there's a thousand dollars on the Rio Kid, for the guy that gets him."

"You bet!"

Heenan went back to the house. In the wide hallway of the ranch-house, bright with coloured lanterns, Lester Leigh met him. The sheriff shook the snowflakes from his shoulders.

"The Kid ain't horned in yet?" asked the rancher, with a rather sarcastic smile.

"Nope."

"Well, I hope he'll come," said the rancher. "If you're right, and he keeps his word, we'll rid Texas of him to-night."

"I reckon!" assented the sheriff. "Leastways, if he gets away alive I'll allow that Kid's more'n human. But—I reckon I won't feel easy in my mind till sun-up, all the same."

"Forget it," said Leigh.

But there was a shadow on his brow as he moved away. The "hardest cuss" in Sun Dance county had plenty of nerve, but the Rio Kid's menace weighed more and more upon his mind as the darkness drew on. He deserved, and knew that he deserved, the vengeance of the outlaw. he had "double-crossed" the Kid, and he did not expect to be forgiven, if the Kid had a chance of getting back on him.

But what chance, after all, had the Kid, with the ranch crowded with guests and guarded by more than a score of armed men? It was the sheriff's uneasiness that was making him uneasy. Lester Leigh dismissed the matter from his mind, as he busied himself with his numerous guests.

The band, specially imported from town for the great occasion, were tuning up in the great barn. A covered way lighted by Chinese lanterns and adorned with Mexican palms in tubs, led from the ranch-house to the barn. The strains of merry music floated through the frosty air, and already some couples were dancing. All was gaiety and merriment; social entertainments were few in Sun Dance county, and only Lester Leigh gave them on such a scale, and the ranchers and their wives and daughters had gathered to enjoy themselves. A fancy dress dance was rather unique in the section, and all Sun Dance had risen to the occasion.

Lester Leigh, standing in the big doorway of the barn, looked on a merry and motley crowd. The walls were hung with coloured draperies, decorated with holly, and the barn was lighted with innumerable Chinese lanterns swinging from the roof. On a platform at the upper end the Sun Dance band discoursed sweet music; at

a bar at the lower end there were refreshments liquid and solid—chiefly liquid. There was a great space for the dancers, and it was crowded with figures in strange costumes—Indian chiefs, Mexican vaqueros, Spanish cavaliers, pirates, and brigands, though most of the dancers were in simple mask and domino. Prominent among them was a figure in the garb of Santa Claus that attracted many glances; a bright scarlet cloak and hood trimmed with white fur, gave the brightest dash of colour to the scene. Lester Leigh's eyes rested several times on that scarlet figure, and he wondered who was the man inside that striking costume. But that it was impossible to guess, as the scarlet hood completely concealed the face, and unmasking was not to take place till supper-time.

Sheriff Heenan joined the rancher in the doorway, and his eyes, also, fell on the scarlet figure, now whirling in the maze of the dance with a Dresden shepherdess.

"That's young Tom!" said Heenan, with a nod towards the graceful dancer. "He got in late, but he ain't losing time."

"Young Harrigan?" said the rancher. "Yep! I was in Kelly's store at Sun Dance when he roped in that costume," said the sheriff. "That's how I know. I guess it run him into more dollars than he could afford; but he sure is cutting a dash."

"He's picked up dancing since I last saw him hopping," said Lester Leigh, with a smile, "I ain't seen him treading on his partner's feet yet."

The sheriff grinned. "You've said it," he assented. "If I didn't know that was young Tom I'd sure allow he couldn't dance that a-way. But it's Harrigan for sure."

"You're dancing, sheriff?" Heenan shook his head. "I guess I'm going to hustle round agin, and keep an eye peeled for the Kid," he answered.

Lester Leigh laughed. In the midst of merry company, and with the strains of music in his ears, the rancher was feeling quite at ease, and all his doubts and uneasiness had left him.

"You've got the Kid on your nerves, Heenan," he said banteringly. "Mebbe!" said the sheriff briefly.

And after another long look at the crowd in the barn the sheriff turned away, to make another round of the gate and the fence, and warn his men once more to be on the look-out for the firebug of the Rio Grande.

#### THE FOURTH CHAPTER. Saved From Vengeance!

LESTER LEIGH looked at his watch, detached himself from a group of friends, and went along the covered way that led from the dance barn to the ranch-house. It was half-past eight, and the dance, which had started early, was going strong. The rancher, as he left the merry crowd behind him, was not thinking of the Rio Kid—the boy, outlaw and his menace had passed entirely from his mind. It was Pet's bed-time, and Lester Leigh never missed saying good-night to Pet. It was of his little daughter that he was thinking as he returned to the ranch-house. And he did not even observe that the guest in the scarlet cloak and hood had left the crowd, and was following him. But as he came into the house he noticed that Santa Claus was at his heels, and he looked round with a smile on his face.

"You're not tired of dancing, Harrigan?" he asked.

"Say, you know me in this outfit?"

asked a voice, under the scarlet hood that concealed the face of Santa Claus. "I reckon so," said the rancher.

"I guess I've got something to tell you, Mister Leigh—if you can spare a few minutes."

"Not very many," said the rancher. "What is it?"

Santa Claus glanced round him, his eyes flashing strangely through the eye-holes in the scarlet hood.

"I sure won't keep you long," he said. "But let's get out of hearing. Walls have ears, when the Rio Kid's around."

Leigh started violently. "The Rio Kid?" he breathed.

"Yep!"

"He threatened to be here at the dance," said the rancher. "But I guess he won't make the grade, Harrigan. You haven't seen or heard anything of that durned firebug?"

"I sure have, rancher, and I guess I'm going to put you wise. Let's get out of hearing."

"Come with me," said Lester Leigh abruptly.

He led the way into the living-room of the ranch-house; quite deserted now. In the light of the swinging lamp he looked curiously at Santa Claus. The man in the scarlet cloak and hood shut the door by which they had entered.

"You figure that the Rio Kid won't make the grade, Mister Leigh?" he asked, his eyes gleaming at the rancher.

"Sure!"

"That's where you miss your guess, feller."

From under the scarlet cloak a hand emerged with a six-gun in its grasp. The long barrel of the Colt was aimed direct at Lester Leigh's startled face.

"Don't give a yaup," said the voice from under the hood. "Jest one yaup, Lester Leigh, and you get yours, sudden."

The rancher staggered back. His eyes, distended with terror, were fixed on the scarlet figure. He sank heavily into a chair.

"I guess you know me, Lester Leigh?" said the Rio Kid grimly.

"The Kid!" breathed the rancher hoarsely.

"I reckon I allowed I'd be here," said the Kid coolly. "I guess I borrowed this outfit from Harrigan. I'm a man of my word, Mister Leigh. I sure allowed I'd horn in at your Christmas dance, and shoot you up on your own ranch. And I'm here to do it. You got five minutes to get ready, and then you get yours. Make the most of it."

The Kid's eyes gleamed at the rancher over the levelled Colt.

With a face white as death Lester Leigh gazed at him. Within call were a score of armed men—a hundred guests. But he dared not utter a cry. The levelled Colt was ready to spit fire and death at the first call for help. When the rancher spoke at last it was in a husky whisper.

"You—you here—"

"I allowed I'd be on hand," said the Kid.

"You—you're here to—to—" The rancher's voice broke.

"You've said it! You double-crossed me, you pizen skunk—you ain't fit to live!" said the Kid, with bitter scorn.

"You—you can't—"

"Forget it!"

There was a deathly silence; faintly through it came the strains of music from the barn, the echo of merry voices and laughter. The sounds came like a ghastly mockery to the ears of the doomed rancher.

"You got one more minute!" The Kid's steady voice broke the silence suddenly.

The rancher gave a groan, and cowered back in the chair. The deep silence fell again. The revolver in the Kid's hand never wavered; the eyes that looked over the levelled barrel glistened mercilessly.

There was a sound at the door. The handle moved, but did not turn, as if touched by a hand that hardly reached it. Through the silence came a plaintive voice that made the Kid start convulsively:

"Daddy!" A shudder ran through Lester Leigh.

"Are you there, daddy? Let me in, daddy!"

"Shucks!" breathed the Kid hoarsely.

He bent towards the rancher. "Say, who's that—what—"

"Pet—my little girl!" groaned Lester Leigh. "For mercy's sake let her see nothing—wait—she doesn't know I am here—she will go—wait—wait till she is gone!" The sweat was thick on his brow. "Wait! I am at your mercy—your gun covers me—wait—wait till she is gone!"

The Kid stood motionless. The grim hardness had died out of his face, the burning fire from his eyes.

There was a soft step in the passage without. Pet was going! A shiver ran through the rancher.

"Wait!" he breathed. "A minute—a few minutes—for mercy's sake! If she should hear—"

The Rio Kid's hand was no longer firm as he thrust the revolver out of sight under the scarlet cloak.

"Stick where you are, rancher!" he said in a low voice; and in a moment more the door had opened, and the Kid was gone.

In the lighted passage a child turned to look at the figure of Santa Claus, with a smiling face and bright eyes. The Kid paused.

"Little one!" The voice under the scarlet hood was soft. "Little one, I guess you know I'm Santa Claus, that brings gifts for little ones at Christmas-time—"

"You're not really Santa Claus?" asked the child.

"I guess I sure am that very guy," said the Kid gently. "And I'm sure handing you a Christmas gift that you'll like a whole heap. You'll sure find it in that room, little one; you go and look—see!"

He pointed to the open doorway.

The child gave him another wondering look, and went into the room.

The Rio Kid hurried away.

Young Tom Harrigan, sore and savage, drove his buckboard back to his ranch at a late hour that night. Sheriff Heenan cursed with a choice assortment of swear-words, at the knowledge that the Rio Kid, in spite of his watchfulness, had come—and gone! Under the waning stars the Rio Kid rode the grey mustang by snowy trails, with no thought of vengeance in his mind now—glad, from the bottom of his wild heart, that a child's voice had stayed the hand of vengeance, and that he had left his enemy his life as the Rio Kid's Christmas Gift.

THE END.

(It is a strange characteristic of the Rio Kid's to "horn" into trouble of other people's concern, and bring upon his own shoulders a whole heap of thrilling adventures. This is the theme of next week's story, which is the first of a series in which the Rio Kid finds himself well in the limelight. Don't miss: "BLACK GEORGE!")