

BOYS! HERE'S A NEW CHUM FOR YOU!

The RIO KID!

by RALPH REDWAY

THE FIRST of a Wonderful NEW Series of Roaring Western Tales, Starring an amazing character—THE RIO KID! He's a New Chum—one Who'll keep you Entertained for Hours with His Breathless Escapades and Thrilling Adventures. Make His Acquaintance Right Now!

THE FIRST CHAPTER. Trailed Down!

THE Rio Kid lifted his head and listened.

His hand slid to his gun-holster silently.

A minute before he had been sleeping as peacefully as if he lay in his berth in the old bunkhouse at the Double Bar. The chaparral baked under the sun of Southern Texas. Even the cactuses were still. But a sound had come from the llano that warned the Kid of danger.

Still distant, faintly from afar, came the beat of a horse's hoofs on the sun-baked prairie.

The Kid's bronzed face grew grimmer.

His gun was in his hand now as he rose on his knees and peered through the scrubby mesquite to the plain beyond. On the edge of the chaparral the Kid had camped in the welcome shade. His horse, worn down by the long trail, lay sleeping, undisturbed by the sounds that had awakened the alert Kid. With his left hand the Kid drew aside a mass of pendant Spaniard's-beard and cleared his view. Before his eyes—steely-blue, clear, and keen as those of an eagle—lay the burnt llano, stretching endlessly towards the Rio Pecos. In the far distance swam the heat-mists, dimming the view. Close at hand a sweating horseman drove on his panting broncho with quirt and spur.

The Rio Kid's lip curled back from his white, even teeth. He smiled—a

smile that was not good to see, had anyone been there in the baking chaparral to see it.

Quietly, still smiling, he rose to his feet.

The chaparral still hid him as he stood and watched the oncoming horseman. But, as if the sweating rider could see the young lithe form standing there, he came spurring on directly towards the spot.

The reason was plain enough. Across the dusty plain lay the trail of the Kid's mustang. Plain enough for the rawest greenhorn to follow, it led to the spot where the Rio Kid had plunged into the shade and stopped to rest.

Louder and sharper rang the tattoo of the galloping hoofs. Closer the rider drew to the dark line of the chaparral that barred the llano.

Under the big Stetson hat the Kid could now make out his face—a hard, grim, bearded face—a face he knew. It was the face of a man who would not have stopped, even had he known—what he probably surmised—that the outcast of the Double Bar Ranch was standing ready waiting for him in the thick mesquite, gun in hand.

"I guess it's you for the long trail, sheriff!" murmured the Kid, and he raised his gun.

The revolver bore full upon the horseman, now only a hundred yards away—and coming closer and closer with every stride of his powerful broncho.

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But the Kid held his fire. Dark and desperate were the tales told of the Rio Kid, through all the cattle country along the Rio Grande and the Pecos. Boy in years, hard-bitten man in all else, cool and daring and desperate, quicker on the draw than any puncher of the ranches, or any gunman of the river camps, the Kid's life had been a tale of danger and desperate hazard ever since the day when he had pulled out from the Double Bar and become an outcast. Yet he hesitated to fire on a man without warning, though that man was Sheriff Watson, of Frio, and a rope and a branch awaited the Kid if he were taken back to Frio in the sheriff's keeping.

His gun bore on the sheriff, and the man's life hung by a thread. But the Kid did not burn powder. He stepped out of the mesquite into the blaze of the sun and held up his hand.

"Halt!"

His voice rang sharply. The rider was almost upon him—almost upon the levelled gun that glistened in the blaze.

"The Kid!"

Sheriff Watson pulled in his broncho almost upon its haunches.

Many a time the sheriff of Frio had looked death in the face, but never closer than now.

He knew the Kid's aim—it was known from the Rio Grande to the Stake Plain. The pressure of a finger, and the men of Frio would have been put to the trouble of appointing a new sheriff.

"Don't reach for a gun, sheriff," said the Kid, with a smile. "It would sure be foolish."

Watson did not reach for a gun. He knew better than that. His eyes glistened and his face hardened.

"Light down, sheriff."

Watson slid from his horse.

"And now, hombre, tell me what you want here in the desert," said the Kid, still smiling.

"I want you, Kid."

"I kinda guessed you did, sheriff," grinned the Kid. "What do you want me for?"

"I guess the list is too long to go through," said Sheriff Watson. "Half the hold-ups and shootings that have been going on in Frio county for the last twelve months, I got news of you down to Hueco, Kid, and I came after you to get you. And I'm not going back without you."

"I knew I was seen at Hueco, and I figured it out they'd pass it on to you," said the Kid, with a nod. "And you came after me to get me?"

"Sure."

"Well, here I am!" smiled the Kid.

The sheriff breathed hard and deep. Six or seven paces from the Kid he stood, towering six-feet-three, gigantic in contrast with the little, slim Kid.

"You're not goin' back without me!" mocked the Kid. "You haven't figured whether you're goin' back at all, sheriff. It's my say-so!"

"You're my game, Kid!" said Watson tersely. "If you drill me it will be one more notch agin' you, and you'll pay for all when you're roped in."

"I ain't roped in yet even, Watson. You're goin' back—and you're goin' back without me."

The sheriff's knuckly hands clenched.

"You're goin' to sit on that hoss, with a trail-rope to keep you from fallin' off, sheriff; and you're goin' to ride back to Frio with your hands tied," bantered the Kid. "It will give the boys a laugh. I guess your bronc will know the way home."

A quiver ran through the burly frame of the Frio sheriff, and his jaw squared.

"Put down that gun!" he commanded. The Kid laughed.

"I'm coming for you, Kid!" said Watson grimly. "I've got my duty to do; and I guess I've looked at a .45 afore. I ain't follered you fifteen miles across the desert for nothing! Put that gun down!"

"Come and take it from me!" jeered the Kid! "You can't bluff me, sheriff!" No more was said.

The burly figure bounded forward, reaching for a gun at the same moment. Crack!

A flash of fire leaped from the revolver, and the sheriff of Frio, almost with his hands on the Kid, lurched and crashed down into the burnt grass of the plain.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Kid's Way!

THIERE was a rustling in the chaparral. The Kid's mustang, startled by the shot, thrust a shaggy head from the mesquite.

"All O.K., old hoss!" said the Kid, laughing.

He thrust the revolver back into its



SHERIFF WATSON—a he-man of Frio Township, Texas, who has sworn to capture the Kid—you'll see how he keeps his vow.

holster and stepped towards the still figure that lay at his feet.

The sheriff of Frio did not move.

His hat had fallen off, and under the thick grizzly hair a streak of crimson ran down over his bronzed face.

The Kid looked at him, as he bent over him with a whimsical smile. He knew exactly what the damage was; to a hair's-breadth he had known where the bullet would touch. He had "creased" the sheriff of Frio, as a cow-puncher will "crease" a refractory steer that defies the lariat. The bullet had stripped a patch of skin and a tuft of hair from the sheriff's head, and stunned him. In five minutes or less Sheriff Watson would be himself again, little the worse. But those five minutes were the Kid's.

Even as he bandaged the man's head with his own bandanna, the Kid wondered why he had not put the bullet through Watson's brain. He hardly knew why he had spared an enemy who would never rest from his pursuit while the Rio Kid rode the trails of Texas. But he had spared him, and now he was bandaging his head. But he lost no time. He drew the revolvers from the sheriff's gun-holsters and tossed them into the chaparral. He uncoiled the trail-rope that was looped on the saddle

of the bronco, cut a length from it, and bound Watson's hands behind his back.

By that time the sheriff's eyes were open again.

He sat up dizzily, staring at the Kid with uncertain eyes. He dragged at his arms, and realised that he was bound.

The Kid's smiling glance met his wild stare.

"You ain't dead yet, sheriff, by long chalks," laughed the Kid. "You ought to be, by rights. But you ain't."

"You ornery little scallywag!" groaned Watson.

"That ain't grateful, sheriff," said the Kid mockingly. "If I'd downed you for keeps, only the coyotes and the buzzards would have known anything about it. You're getting off cheap, sheriff."

Watson gritted his teeth.

"You creased me," he muttered. "You didn't shoot to kill, darn your hide!"

"If I was to shoot to kill, sheriff, you'd be talking to the angels instead of to me. I said you out like I used to the steers on the Double Bar."

Watson struggled with his bonds.

"Forget it," grinned the Kid. "It's a good trail-rope, and I guess I can tie knots."

"What have you fixed me up like this for?" demanded the Frio sheriff hoarsely.

"To save wasting lead on you, pard. I'm sendin' you back to Frio. Tell the boys that if they want me they'll have to send a better man than Eben Watson to rope me in."

The sheriff's eyes blazed with rage. He struggled with the rope that bound his arms till the sweat started out on his face, and he panted for breath.

The Rio Kid stood and watched him with smiling amusement.

Watson desisted at last, choking with rage. Almost he would have preferred a bullet through the heart, to the bitter humiliation that the Rio Kid proposed to put on him. But the Frio sheriff had no choice.

"If you're done wriggling like a tarantula, sheriff, I'll fix you up for the home trail," jeered the Kid.

"You ornery little cuss—"

"Can it, sheriff, and save your breath for the ride home. You've got fifteen miles afore you."

"I guess I won't—"

"I guess you will," said the Kid, with a cold, steely gleam in his eyes. "You'll put a leg across that bronc instanter, sheriff."

He grasped the burly man by the shoulder, and with a swing of his arm jerked him to his feet.

The sheriff stood unsteadily, his eyes burning with rage, at the outlaw. The Kid's hand was on his gun.

"Gettin' on that hoss, sheriff?" he inquired.

"Yep!"

The answer was hissed through the sheriff's set teeth.

"I guess you're wise."

With a helping hand from the Kid, the sheriff of Frio mounted the waiting bronco.

The Rio Kid took the trail rope again and ran it round the horseman, roping him to the saddle, and knotting the rope.

Then he took the bridle, and turned the bronco with his head to the north—where, far beyond the heat-mists, the town of Frio lay in the valley of the Pecos.

"I guess the hoss will hit the trail for home, sheriff. You're going back without me." The Rio Kid laughed. "Pray that you don't meet any rustlers

on the trail, sheriff. Sayin' good-bye before you get?"

The sheriff looked down at him from the saddle. The crimson had died out of his rugged face; it was set and hard and bitter.

"You hold the winnin' hand this time, Kid. I'm goin' back to Frio to be laughed at. But, by gum, you'll repent it! From this day on I'll never quit till I get you, dead or alive!"

There was a bitter intensity in the sheriff's voice, a glint of ruthless determination in his eyes.

The Kid looked at him, and for a moment his hand played with the butt of his gun.

But the temptation passed, and he laughed.

"It's you for chewing the rag, sheriff," he drawled. "But you don't scare me worth a red cent. Keep it for the Greasers and the maverick men—you can scare them. Good-bye, sheriff!"

The Rio Kid struck the flank of the bronco with his open hand, with a crack like a pistol-shot.

The bronco started at a trot.

With a smiling face, his hands on his hips, the Rio Kid stood looking after the bound horseman as he went. Smaller and smaller the figure grew in the hazy distance, till it was blurred from sight by a belt of sasafraz. Then the Kid turned back to the chaparral, with a light laugh.

"It's us for the trail, old hoss," he said, patting the neck of his mustang. "I reckon that the sooner we're across the Rio Grande into Mexico, the better it will be for my health, old cayuse, if not for yours. There'll be hard ridin' on this trail when the sheriff gets loose."

The Kid, whistling cheerily, saddled up.

But suddenly he stopped, and the cheery whistle died on his lips. His face grew hard and tense.

Softly, silently, he drew the horse out of sight into the cover of a thick clump of trees. The well-trained animal gave no sound. Deep in cover, the Kid peered through leafy branches at the trail which ran through the chaparral, from the dusty plains towards the Rio Grande. There was a jingling of horsemen, a murmur of voices that came nearer, from the south, the direction of the Mexican border. Friends or foes? Not friends—for the Rio Kid followed a lone trail; no rustler had ever called him comrade, and no honest man, since the trouble that had driven him from the Double Bar. To the Rio Kid all comers were foes, or possible foes.

A bunch of horsemen came under his eyes, riding by the tangled path through the chaparral, heading for the open plain. Rough men with ragged chaps and battered Stetson hats, unwashed, unshaven, grim and ugly and desperate to the eye. Every one of them "heeled"—with guns handy in the loose-swinging holsters. From deep cover the Rio Kid watched them, and his lips curled. Outcast and rustler the Kid might be, but he had nothing in common with such as these. Five of them, and the man riding at their head he knew—Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith, so-called from the reward placed on his head by the authorities of the Lone Star State.

The Kid lay very low.

The rustlers were riding to a raid on the Pecos ranches—to run off some outlying bunch of cattle into Mexico. But the Kid, outlawed and hunted even as they were, would have been fair game for them; they would have shot him down for his horse and his guns. Not that the Rio Kid would have shrunk

from the conflict, even against such desperate odds. But he would not seek it—Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith and his gang were nothing to him.

With a jingle of bridle and spur, and a murmur of husky voices, the gang of rustlers rode out of the chaparral into the sunny plains. He heard them cursing the sun-blaze as it disappeared.

They were gone, and the Kid led out his mustang into the trail and mounted, to ride the way the rustlers had come.

But he paused, a whimsical grin breaking out on his handsome, mocking face.

The rustlers were riding for the Pecos, and riding at a good speed. What if they came on the sheriff of Frio? He was scarcely a mile ahead of them—and a steed with a bound rider would not travel fast.

"Gee!" murmured the Kid.

He visualized the hard, brutal face of Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith, with a scar running across the cheek—a scar left by a bullet from Sheriff Watson's gun in a struggle long ago.

He paused long.

The mustang twisted round his nimble head, looking up at his rider, as if asking why he did not ride.

The Kid knitted his brows.

"Not our funeral, old hoss," he murmured. "He came after me to get me, and I let him off cheap. Our trail's to the south."

He shook out his reins, and the mustang started. But the Rio Kid's face grew darker with troubled thought, and he drew rein again. At long last he wheeled round and rode to the edge of the chaparral, and sat in the saddle there, his steely eyes scanning the distance in the dusty plain. The way of safety lay to the south, over the Mexican border. But it was to the north that the Rio Kid was looking, and continued to look.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Kid Chips In!

"SHERIFF WATSON, by thunder!"

"You, sheriff!"

There was a roar of laughter as the rough, savage-faced horsemen closed round the sheriff of Frio.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith grinned with glee, the deep scar on his stubbly cheek wrinkling up hideously.



This is the Kid, chaps! The Daredevil of the Texas prairies—the Terror of All.

"You, sheriff!" he chuckled.

Sheriff Watson sat his horse like a statue. He was bound to his broncho, his hands were tied behind his back. He was helpless at the mercy of the border rustlers, and he knew it. The Rio Kid had spared his life, condemning him only to the mockery of Frio when he rode home trussed up on his horse. But Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith was not so merciful. The rustlers laughed and chuckled hoarsely as they closed round the helpless rider, but there was ruthless determination in their faces. The sheriff of Frio, who had hunted them like wolves on the plains and in the sierra, was given helpless into their hands. The whole gang would have hesitated to face him had he been free and armed. But he was powerless now, and there was no mercy for him.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith gripped the bridle of his horse. The sheriff's eyes glinted at him, but he did not speak.

"I guess you've hit up agin trouble this time, sheriff," grinned the rustler.

No answer.

"Who fixed you up like this, sheriff?"

The sheriff spoke at last.

"Five hundred dollars to let me loose!"

There was a roar of laughter.

"Sheriff Watson's speaking civil for once," chuckled Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith. "Jest the amount that's offered for me, sheriff, and that you've done your darndest to earn, by gum! Make it five thousand and I guess we wouldn't stand for it. This time we've got you where your hair is short, sheriff!"

The rustler tapped the scar on his bristly cheek.

"Remember that, sheriff?"

"I remember," said the sheriff coldly. "I guess I wish it had gone through your cabeza, you skunk!"

"I guess you'll never have another chance, sheriff. Tell me who fixed you up like this, all ready for us to find?"

"The Rio Kid."

"Oh, gum! Is the Kid in these parts?" exclaimed Smith, with a startled glance round on the dusty plain.

"Far enough away by now!" said the sheriff bitterly. "In Mexico by this time, I guess."

"Fool to leave you kickin', if he had the pull on you," sneered Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith. "I reckon we're not makin' a mistake like that!"

"We just ain't!" grinned another of the rustlers. "You're for it, sheriff."

And the ruffian drew a gun from his holster.

"Nix on that!" snapped Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith.

"Look hyer—"

"Put up that gun, Feto Finn!"

The rustler scowled and cursed, but he slid the gun back into its holster. Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith had his ruffianly gang well in hand.

"I guess that isn't good enough," went on the leader of the rustlers. "What's the good of wasting good lead when there's a rope handy?"

Pete Finn's scowling face cleared, and he chuckled. There was a roar of hoarse merriment from the rustlers.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith waved his hand towards the dark line of the chaparral, a mile or less to the south.

"There's timber," he said. "Hyer's the sheriff and a rope. I guess we hit the back trail to a tree."

"That goes!" grinned Pete Finn.

Smith dragged round the sheriff's horse.

"You get me, Eben Watson?" he bantered. "What became of two of my

pardners who were roped in a month ago?"

"Strung up at Frio," answered the sheriff briefly.

"I knew that. And I guess you are going to be strung up in your turn, sheriff."

"You ornery dog!" muttered the sheriff of Frio hoarsely. "Put a bullet through me, and let it go at that!"

The ruffian laughed savagely.

"Not on your life, sheriff. It's you for the rope and a branch. Ride for the chaparral, boys."

Back the way they had come the rustlers rode, in a grinning, gleeful bunch. In the midst of them, his bridle held by Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith, rode the bound sheriff of Frio.

they rode at last into the shadowy aisles of the chaparral.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith called a halt in a clear patch, where a big ceiba grew amid the trailing mesquite.

"Hyer's the place!"

The rustlers dismounted, and hitched their horses in the chaparral.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith threw his lariat over a level branch of the ceiba a dozen feet from the ground.

The noose was placed about the neck of the sheriff of Frio, and drawn taut. The other end of the lasso was secured to a stump.

The rustlers looked on, grinning, while Smith drew his knife across the rope that bound the sheriff to his bronco.

rustlers started and stared round them in surprise and alarm.

But it was not at any of the gang that the bullet was aimed by the unseen marksman.

The rope twanged and parted, cut in two by the bullet from a gun that never missed its aim.

Even as he was swung off the back of the parting horse, the sheriff felt the cut rope slipper down on his face, and he fell into the herbage, half stunned by the fall, the loose rope round his neck.

"Geel! What—who—?"

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith spat out an oath.

Every one of the gang had a gun in hand now, and every gun spat fire to



SAVED BY THE KID! Crack! A bullet snapped the rope, and the sheriff fell from the horse into the grass, the noose slipping from his neck. With yells of rage the rustlers swung their guns in the direction of the trees. Crack! Crack! Crack! Then from the shadows came a light laugh—the laugh of the Rio Kid! (See Chapter 8.)

His face was hard and set in grim despair.

Through that burning day he had trailed the Rio Kid, and this was the end of the trail. The Kid's gun had spared him—for this! The rope and a branch! Even as he had meted out to many a desperate rustler, so it was to be meted out to him. He did not speak, but in his heart there were curses—curses on the Kid who had doomed him to this. Free and armed, he would have been glad to fall in with Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith and his gang, careless of the odds. If he had fallen, he would have fallen to the bullet or the steel! But now—

Trot, trot, went the hoofs on the sun-baked plain. Mocking jeers and laughter fell unceasingly on the ears of the Frio sheriff as he rode in the midst of the gang.

From the blaze of the sun on the plain

With his hands still bound behind him, the sheriff sat in the saddle, pale, but calm as a statue. Only a touch was needed now to send the horse from beneath him, and leave him swinging.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith drew back and took his quirt in hand. The bronco stood motionless. The sheriff, his chin dragged up by the taut rope, gave no sound.

"Ready, sheriff?" grinned the rustler.

No word.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith raised his quirt, and struck the bronco a sharp blow across the haunches.

The animal started, squealed, and plunged forward. The sheriff swung off its back.

Crack!

From the shadows of the chaparral came the sudden ring of a gun. The

direction from which the ring of the shot had come.

Crack, crack, crack!

From the shadowy mesquite came a light laugh—the laugh of the Rio Kid. And following his laugh came his fire, and the nearest rustler pitched over, and groaned and lay still.

The sheriff lay dazed, half stunned, while the guns blazed and cracked round him.

"It's the Kid!" yelled Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith, as he caught the light, mocking laugh. "The Rio Kid! Kill him."

And the desperate ruffian led a rush into the thickets where the Kid lay in cover. Three desperate rascals rushed at his heels. But the man who had fallen to the Kid's first fire did not stir.

A lithe form moved in the mesquite, and the crack of the Kid's gun laid

another of the gang on his back, groaning.

Then three were upon him, firing as they came.

The Kid's handsome face wore a smile—a smile more deadly than the blackest frown. Blood trickled down his cheek where a bullet had gone close. But he leaped forward to meet the rushing rustlers, and the spitting bullets flew wild as he crashed at them. And at close quarters the Kid's gun claimed another victim, and Pete Finn lay stretched in the mesquite. And then the heart of Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith failed him, and he dodged back and sprang away, and ran—and the last of his gang ran with him.

The Rio Kid's light laugh rang after them as they fled. But Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith's gun rang out as he vanished into the chaparral, passing the bound sheriff on the ground, and a bullet ploughed into Eben Watson's shoulder. Then the rustler was gone.

"You dog!" panted the Kid, and he stood in the clearing and pumped bullets after the fleeing rustlers.

But Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith was gone.

The Rio Kid shrugged his shoulders. He reloaded his gun—the Kid never took chances. Then he stepped to the sheriff.

A twist of his knife, and the rope fell away from Sheriff Watson's arms.

"I guess you're hit, sheriff."

Watson strove to rise, and sank back again into the grass. His bronzed face was white as chalk.

"You've saved me from the rope, Kid," he said faintly. "I reckoned you was across the river by this time. Why did you chip in, Kid?"

The Kid gave another shrug. "Quien sabe?" he said, laughing.

He glanced at the fallen rustlers. One of them did not stir; two wounded men were crawling away into the mesquite. They did not trouble the Kid. He dabbed at the blood on his cheek.

"You're wounded, Kid."

"I guess they barked the skin," said the Kid carelessly. "You've got it, sheriff. Let me see."

He knelt by the wounded sheriff's side and examined the hurt. The bullet had gone clean through, and was buried in the earth. The Kid bandaged the wound with deft fingers and stopped the flow of blood. The sheriff, with no sound of pain from his iron lips, watched him in silence.

"I guess you'll pull out O.K., sheriff, if you get to a doctor. That pesky coyote meant to make it keeps for you, but I guess he was in too much of a hurry. You want to travel quick to Frio, sheriff."

Watson smiled grimly.

"I reckon it's the long trail for me, Kid. I couldn't sit a horse, even if you tied me on as you did before, you ornery young cuss!"

The Kid nodded thoughtfully.

"You've said it," he agreed.

"I guess I was swearing death and thunder to you, Kid," said Watson faintly, "but I take it all back. You've saved me from the rope, and I can stand the rest. Give me my canteen before you vamoose the ranch—and take my thanks, Kid."

The Kid eyed him queerly.

"I reckon you couldn't sit that brone, even if you was tied on," he said musingly. "But I figure it out, sheriff, THE POPULAR.—No. 469.

that you could sit in the saddle with a galoot riding along and holding you up."

The sheriff looked at him.

"You, Kid?"

"Well, what about it?" grinned the Kid.

"There's no doctor nearer than Frio."

"Sure."

"Wash it out, Kid. They'll shoot at sight if the Rio Kid is seen in the streets of Frio."

"They sure will," said the Kid.

He laughed again his light, musical laugh, and bent over the sheriff. With a strength that was amazing in his slim, lithe form, he lifted the heavy man from the ground.

"Boot and saddle, sheriff! You can't afford to waste time—you sure can't!"

Sheriff Watson, like a man in a dream, sat heavily, weakly, in the deep cowboy saddle. He held on with both hands. The big, powerful man was as weak as a child. The Rio Kid glanced round him again, with his whimsical smile. The two wounded rustlers had long disappeared—Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith and his fleeing comrade were far away. The Kid cast loose the tethered horses

got the wrong man, and I was the wrong man."

"Kid!" muttered the sheriff.

"Nuff said!"

And Sheriff Watson, still like a man in a dream, found himself riding northward across the plain, upheld in the saddle by the strong, untiring arm of the Rio Kid.

The sun was down, a glimmering crescent of moon showed over the black rim of the Pecos hills. They were beginning to light up in Frio. Lamp or lantern glinted here and there in the straggling street of the border town. Only the Red Dog saloon was ablaze with naphtha lamps. Up the dusky street from the dusky plains came two riders, one a burly man, hanging limply in his saddle, the other a boy, supporting the weight of the limp form on the bronco. Outside the Red Dog a dozen cowpunchers stood in a bunch, chewing the rag. One and all fixed their eyes on the two riders that came into the radius of light from the naphtha lamps of the Red Dog.

"Gosh, the sheriff!" roared Hank Hanson, deputy sheriff of Frio, and he rushed into the trail.

White and limp, the sheriff slid into Hank's arms as he was released. For he was insensible now. For the last five or six miles the Kid, with aching arm, had held the unconscious man upright in the saddle. Glad enough was the Rio Kid to be relieved of that burden. Watson lay heavily in the arms of the deputy sheriff, and at the same moment there came a roar of amazement from the bunch before the Red Dog.

"The Kid!"

"The Rio Kid!"

Every hand reached for a gun as he was recognized.

With a whirl and a clatter the mustang spun round, and ere the readiest revolver could be aimed the Kid was riding up the street. Men rushed into the street, loosing off hurried shots as they ran, yelling to one another.

"The Kid!"

"That darned young fire-bug, the Rio Kid! Don't let him get clear!"

Crack, crack, crack!

Thud, thud! rang the hoofs on the hard earth of the unpaved street of Frio. There was a shout

as the half-seen figure in the dusk seemed to sway in the saddle. But it was only for a second. The sharp Mexican spurs galled the flanks of the mustang, and the steed leaped to lightning speed. Deep into the shadows beyond the glimmering lights dashed the Rio Kid, and from the darkness of the prairie his mocking laugh floated back to the enraged men of Frio.

Still they pursued him, pumping lead into the darkness, till the faint and fainter hoof-beats died away into the silence of the great llano, and they returned into the camp swearing their disappointment. Though when, later, the men of Frio heard what Sheriff Watson had to tell, some of them were glad that their lead had flown wide.

But little cared the Kid what they thought or felt.

Under the rising moon, a smile on his face, he rode with a loose rein, and carolled lightly as he rode, care-free.

THE END.

(Chaps, you'll meet the Rio Kid again in next week's issue! He's in another thriller, entitled: "The Brand Blotters!" Tell all your pals about this fine series of stories.)

NOW YOU'VE MET THE RIO KID! DON'T YOU WANT TO KEEP HIS FRIENDSHIP? DON'T YOU WANT TO HEAR MORE ABOUT THIS AMAZING YOUNG OUTLAW? THEN READ—

THE BRAND BLOTTERS!



—NEXT WEEK! THIS IS THE SECOND OF OUR BRILLIANT NEW SERIES OF WESTERN YARNS!

The Kid comes up against a bit of a mystery when riding through the trackless desert of Texas. Being always ready for any daredevil adventure, he just must walk in and see what it's all about, and that starts the trouble for him, and for others!

of the rustlers, and whistled to his own steed. The black-muzzled mustang came pushing through the mesquite.

The Kid mounted.

"We hit the trail now, sheriff."

"Kid," said the sheriff hoarsely, "you're a white man—white all through. But I tell you they'll shoot at sight at Frio, even if you bring me in. You won't have nary chance to chew the rag, Kid. It's death that you're asking for."

"Quien sabe?" said the Kid again. "Lean a bit on me, sheriff. You'll ride O.K.—so. That's right!" He showed his white teeth in a grin at the sheriff as they rode together out of the chaparral, under the westerling sun. "Sheriff, I'm taking you to Frio, and if they get me—"

"They sure will, Kid!" muttered the sheriff.

"They say on the Rio Grande, sheriff, that the Kid has as many lives as a cat. But if they get me, and you pull out, sheriff, I want you to remember one thing. I never did what they had up against me at the Double-Bar. Not on your life, sheriff. They

THE KID DOESN'T CARE!

hits upon a mystery in the heart of the foothills—a big mystery—and regardless of the dangers, he investigates!

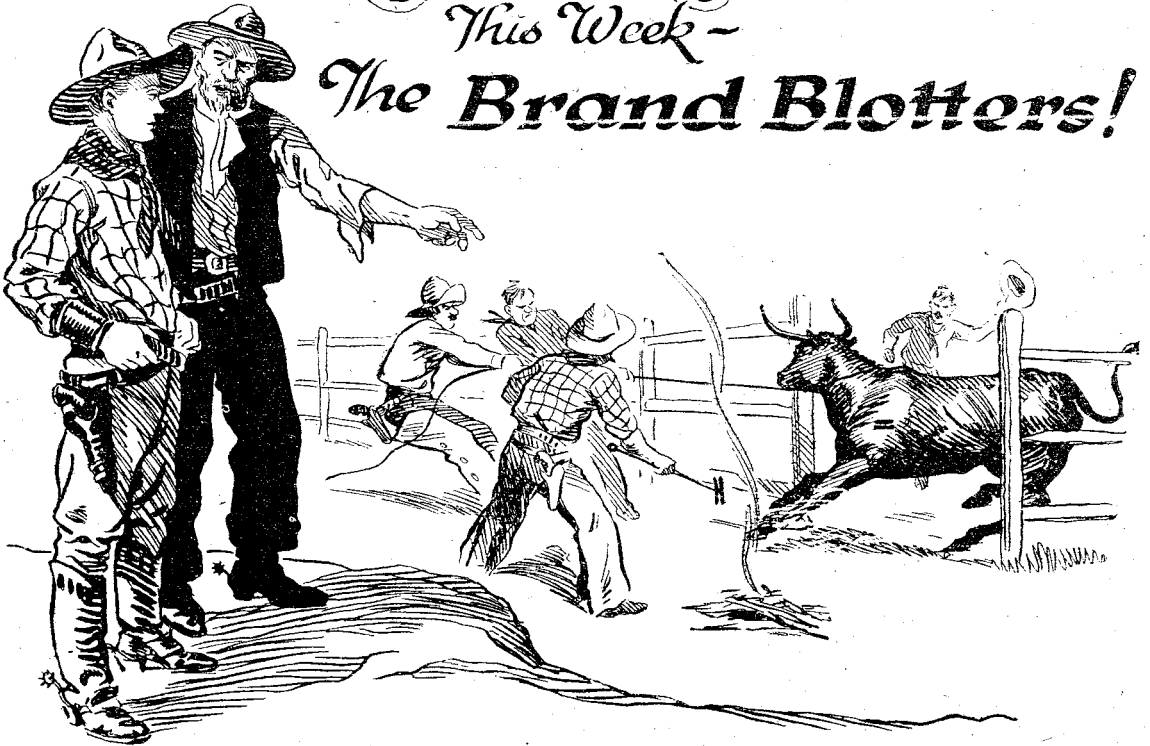
The Kid's in hot water again this week, chaps! This young dare-devil outlaw

THE RIO KID!

By *Ralph Redway*

This Week -

The Brand Blotters!



THE FIRST CHAPTER. In the Staked Plain!

ANOTHER shot rang from the rocks high up the canyon, but the Rio Kid was already in cover. The first bullet had spun the Stetson from his handsome head, and the second followed it fast. But it was not the first time that the Kid had owed his life to his rapid perception of danger.

The bullet hummed by. The Kid, crouching behind a rugged boulder, heard it spatter on the stones a dozen yards away. The mustang was in cover with his master. Out in the sunshine lay the Kid's hat, with a hole through the wide brim of it.

The Kid laughed softly.

But he was puzzled.

On every trail in the cow country between the Pecos and the Rio Grande, there was danger for the Kid. But he had thought to leave danger behind when he headed for the Staked Plain. In that grim desert of arid thirst and solitude the outcast of the Double Bar Ranch had looked for no foe, for no company save that of the wheeling, screeching buzzards.

From the grassy plains the great table-land of the Llano Estacado rose steeply like a rampart. The narrow canyon split the steep side, and gave dangerous access from the plains to the upper country. The Kid's mustang had been picking a sure-footed way up

THE POPULAR.—No. 470.

**THE SECOND OF OUR NEW
SERIES OF WESTERN TALES,
STARRING AN AMAZING
CHARACTER—THE RIO KID.
MAKE HIS ACQUAINTANCE
RIGHT NOW!**

among the strewn boulders, when the shooting started from above.

The Kid's leap into cover had occupied the fraction of a second. But he had seen a curl of smoke from a clump of pecans fifty yards up the steep canyon. There was his enemy, the unseen marksman who had pulled trigger at sight of him.

The Kid thought it out.

Some outcast of the desert, some greedy half-breed, might have shot him down for his horse and his guns. But it was not that. The man hidden in the pecans was watching the canyon; he was on guard there. Which implied that there was something beyond, that there was something afoot in the lonely desert where the Kid had expected to meet no human soul.

It would have been easy for the Kid to worm his way down among the rocks and escape again to the lower plains. But the thought of doing so did not cross his mind. He was interested to know what was going on in that desolate section of the Staked Plain;

what it was that was being guarded so carefully and so ruthlessly. And he was keen to come to closer quarters with the man who had burnt powder. The Rio Kid was not to be turned into a target for gun-practice with impunity.

The Kid lay low and thought it out, smiling. But he moved at last. Not a sound or a movement came from the clump of pecans up the canyon. The unseen man there was watching and waiting. His rifle was ready for another shot if the Kid showed himself. But the Kid did not show himself. He moved among the rocks on his stomach like one of the green lizards that crawled near him. It was an old game to the Kid. From one rock to another, by shallow gully and narrow crevice, he crawled, slow, cautious, and patient as a cougar creeping on its prey. His mustang lay motionless where he had left him. Slowly and surely, unseen and silent, the Kid wormed his way up the rock-strewn canyon, past the clump of half a dozen scrubby pecans where the rifleman lay concealed.

He was above the man now, and he came out of cover.

He knew that he had not been seen or heard. The rifleman was still watching the canyon below, and his back was to the Kid.

There was a gun in the Kid's hand as he crept into the pecans from the upper side—the side where the sentinel looked for no danger.

A big Stetson hat half hid the man who was kneeling in the scrub, rifle in

hand, watching the lower canyon, muttering curses in his impatience.

Soft-footed, the Kid stepped behind him.

The cold metal rim of a .45 pressed against the back of a brawny neck, and the kneeling man gave a sudden convulsive start.

"Drop that iron!"

The Kid's voice was soft—soft as a cooing dove; but the revolver rim grinding into the brawny neck was not soft.

The rifle was dropped.

"Gee-whiz!"

A startled stubby face was swung round at the Kid.

"Stand up!"

The man stood up. Without waiting to be bidden, he raised his hands above his head.

The Kid looked at him, smiling at the astonished fury in the stubby face. With his left hand he jerked a Colt from the ruffian's holster, and tossed it carelessly away through the pecans.

"Now what's the game, feller?" asked the Kid pleasantly.

"You've got me."

"Looks like it, sure," assented the Kid. "You've spoiled my best hat, feller. Any reason why I shouldn't spoil you—for keeps?" He made a motion with his gun-hand.

The man was staring at him hard. Recognition was dawning in the stubby face.

"By hokey! It's the Rio Kid!" he ejaculated.

"Right in once," assented the Kid.

"I've never seen you before that I know of."

"I guess I've seen you, Kid," chuckled the rustler. "I've seen you shooting up Frio."

The Kid's face clouded for a moment. "After you was boosted off the Double Bar." The man dropped his hands. "Put up your gun, Kid. If I'd savvied it was you, I'd never have pulled trigger. Dog don't eat dog."

The Rio Kid winced.

Every sheriff and town-marshal on both sides of the Rio Pecos would have given much to lay hands on the Kid. Yet it was the Kid's pride that he had nothing in common with rustler and cow thief. The Kid would have been a welcome recruit in any gang that ran stolen steers across the border into Mexico. But he played a long hand.

The colour mounted into the handsome sunburnt face, and his hand gripped harder on his gun. But the rustler, confident now, went on, with a grin.

"Dave Finn, that's me. I was at the Circle Cross when you was at the Double Bar, Kid. You was boosted out for—"

"Let up on that!" snapped the Kid.

The man grinned again.

"What's the game here?" asked the Kid quietly. "You're not alone on this stunt, whatever it is?"

"Six of us," said Dave Finn, "and a better game than rouncing up steers for Old Man Peters at the Circle Cross. It's the game for you, Kid, and I reckon every hombre in the gang will welcome you with open arms. It's up against the Double Bar."

"How?"

"Ever heard of brand blotting?"

The Kid nodded impatiently.

"That's the stunt."

"Steer stealing and blotting out the brands on the cattle?" asked the Kid slowly.

"Co-rect."

"Here, in the Staked Plain? There's no feed for cattle in the Staked Plain," said the Kid.

"Only in spots," said Finn. "There's a spot of feed at the top of this canyon. I guess we drive the steers here, and put the new brands on them. Then they're driven to the Cross Bar Ranch. Sabe? Two bars brands across the double bar turns a Double Bar steer into a Cross Bar. We've driven them right under the eyes of the Double Bar outfit, and they never savvied worth a cent. Old Man Dawney at the Double Bar is missing cattle, and putting it down to rustlers across the river. But his steers don't go into Mexico. They go to the rail-head and into the cars for San Antone and Austin. Savvy?"

The Kid whistled. "And who runs the Cross Bar Ranch?" he asked.

"Dandy Smith. There's a fortune in it, Kid, till the game's up." Finn jerked his hand towards the bend of the upper canyon. "The camp's there. You sashay along with me, Kid, and the boys will give you a welcome. They'll be plumb glad to have you. You was boosted off the Double Bar. I've heered that Old Man Dawney showed you off the ranch with a gun in his fist. Now's your chance to get back on him. You was the best hand with a rope on the Double Bar, and I guess you ain't forgotten how."

The Kid's brow contracted in thought.

Finn watched him anxiously.

"You'll take a hand, Kid? I tell you there's a fortune in it. You mosey along with me to the camp. It's your chance to get back on Old Man Dawney and the Double Bar outfit. We want a good man with the lariat, and you're all that. Is it a cinch?"

The Kid burst into a laugh.

"I guess I'll think it over," he said. "I'll mosey along to the camp, anyhow, and see the boys."

Finn nodded, and his eyes glittered. If the Kid joined up, well and good; if he turned the offer down, he was not likely to get out of the cow-thieves' camp alive to tell what he knew. The Kid read his thoughts like an open book, but his smile did not change. He was taking his life in his hand, but the Kid was used to that.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Brand Blotters!

THE smell of burnt hair and flesh was sickening. But the Rio Kid had been used to that in the old days at the round-ups, and he hardly noticed it, if at all. Four men were at work in the camp in the upper canyon. Another had gone to take Dave Finn's place on guard below. Finn lounged with the Kid, pointing out things to him with an air of pride. And the Kid, whatever his thoughts were, admired.

Hot as the sun was, a camp-fire blazed, to heat the branding irons. Four sweating ruffians laboured, stretching steer after steer, jamming the hot iron on the squealing brute's hide, blotting out the old brand with a new one. It was hard and weary work, but there was, as Finn had said, a fortune in it. For they were not branding for an employer, like the punchers at the round-ups on the ranches. They were branding stolen cattle, to be sold for their own profit.

The Kid, as he watched and noted, could not help admiring. It was a stunt worthy of Dandy Smith, a man he had heard of but never met. The Dandy, sometimes a gambler at the river camps, sometimes a rustler on the llano, had given up wild ways and

bought a little hacienda, with a few hundred acres, from a greaser who had failed to make it pay, and who had sold it for an old song. He had named it the Cross Bar Ranch, and started to raise cattle. And he made it pay, as its previous owner had never done, for he drew on the almost countless herds of the neighbouring Double Bar.

Old Man Dawney's brand was a double bar.

Dandy Smith's brand was a double cross bar:



The punchers on the Cross Bar Ranch were rustlers when the sun was down. Stray steers from the Double Bar, on the boundless plains, stray bunches of steers, were roped in, and driven rapidly off to the canyon in the Staked Plain.

There the double bar became a cross bar, and the steers were recognisable anywhere as belonging to the Cross Bar Ranch.

Every day almost stolen steers came and went at the camp in the canyon, many a long mile from the rounds that the cowboys rode.

Old Man Dawney was a rich man, and he hardly knew the numbers of his herds. But he knew that many steers had vanished, and set down his losses to dusky cow-thieves across the Rio Grande. Brand blotting was an old game in Texas, an old and dangerous game; but Old Man Dawney never suspected that it was going on under his nose. The Cross Bar Ranch was open to inspection. There was no sign of brand blotting there—no trail of lost steers ever led in the direction of Dandy Smith's ranch. Not till they were branded with his own brand did Dandy Smith see them at the Cross Bar, whence they were driven to the railroad.

Hundreds of steers, once the property of Old Man Dawney, had gone through the brand blotter's hands, and had been shipped off by rail by Dandy Smith, to be turned into beef for the cattle-thieves' profit. And, so far, there was no suspicion.

"Nary a suspicion!" chuckled Dave Finn. "Ask the sheriff of Frio, and he'll allow that brand blotting has been stamped out in this section. Ask any town marshal along the Pecos. It was sure a big idea of the Dandy's."

"I allow it was," agreed the Kid.

His keen eyes roved round.

At the level of the Stake Plain, the canyon, narrow below, widened out almost into a valley. A spring bubbled up among the rocks. Where there was no water there was vegetation. It was a little patch of fertility in the midst of the barren desert. Few riders of the lower prairies would ever have had the curiosity to ride up the rocky canyon. That fertile patch was probably not known to one in a hundred of the punchers in the section. There was feed for some hundreds of cattle there; but, as Dave Finn explained, there were seldom more than thirty to fifty steers at the camp. They came and went. It was safer to move them in small bunches.

The Kid watched the brand blotters at work.

There was a corral by the spring, and a steer was roped and led out of the corral, heeled over by a couple of the men, while another wielded the branding-iron, hot from the fire.

A pressure of the hot iron, a squeal from the steer, a raucous scent of burnt hide, and the double bar was changed into the cross bar, the registered brand of the Cross Bar Ranch.

The steer was roped back into the corral, and another took his place.

So it went on.

There were forty or fifty steers to be dealt with, and each, after it had been branded, was indubitably the legal property of the owner of the Cross Bar Ranch. For only by the branded sign could one steer be told from another. Old Man Dawney would never have known his own beasts, had they been driven under his ranch windows, after the brand blotters had done their work.

"Great!" said the Kid.

He laughed.

"You're in it, Kid!" said Finn eagerly. "You get back on Old Man Dawney, sabe? And we want a man who can handle a rope as you do."

The Kid's lip curled.

He understood that.

The rustlers were not good punchers. The Dandy's gang was the raff of the cow country. An expert with the lasso like the Rio Kid would have been invaluable to the gang. More than that. In a tight corner, with a sheriff's posse on the trail, the Kid's gun would have been more valuable still to the cattle-lifters. To run off cattle under cover of night, to shoot down any unsuspecting wanderer who happened near the camp, was one thing. To face the sheriff of Frio, or a crowd of angry punchers, was quite another. The Kid was the man for that.

"How long's it been going on?" asked the Kid.

"Three months."

"And nobody spotted this lay-out?"

Finn grinned.

"You was the third hombre that came moseying up the canyon, Kid?"

"And the first two?"

"I guess they never knew what hit them."

The Kid nodded. He could guess that the desperate gang did not run any risk of chance discovery. Only by way of the steep path up the canyon from the lower plains could discovery come; and there, in the clump of pecans, a man was kept on the watch. To shoot at sight. Dandy Smith did not believe in half-measures. Only the buzzards, wheeling high over the Staked Plain, knew what became of the hapless wanderers whose ill-luck led them near the headquarters of the brand blotters.

The Kid's lips set in a hard line.

There were half a dozen of the gang there, and they had welcomed him. Evidently they

looked on the outcast of the Double Bar as one of themselves, a coyote of the same colour. Perhaps it was because they had welcomed him, rascals as they were, that the Kid's gun stayed in its holster. Perhaps he was tempted to fall to Finn's proposition. It was true that he had been driven off the Double Bar at the muzzle of Old Man Dawney's revolver. It was true that a false suspicion had turned him from a care-free cowpuncher into the outcast of the Rio Grande. There was a bag of dollars in the proposition, and revenge on the ranch that had cast him adrift—revenge on the hot-headed rancher who had treated him like a Digger Indian. Perhaps the Kid was tempted. His face expressed nothing.

"You're in it, Kid?" persisted Finn.

"I guess I'm thinking it over."

An ugly look came over Finn's stubbly face.

"You gotta think one way," he said.

"You're here now, Kid. Every man in his outfit packs a gun."

The Kid laughed lightly.

"If you want gun-play what's stopping you?" he asked.

The rustler shrank from the clear glance of his eyes.

"It's a cinch, Kid. The Dandy will be here to-day, and you'll see him. Talk to him soft. The Dandy isn't a good man to rile."

"I've never talked soft to a cow thief."

Finn's eyes glittered.

"What does that mean, Kid? You don't bank on bein' allowed to go free and tell what you've seen here?"

"I bank on doing just as I darned well choose," said the Rio Kid coolly. "I guess I'll wait and see the Dandy and talk to him. If that isn't good enough there's six of you 'uns here and one of me, and my gun's ready to speak up."

"It's good enough, Kid," said Dave Finn hurriedly.

"Then I'll wait."

And the Kid idled and waited, while the burning sun sank lower and lower beyond the Staked Plain towards the sierras of New Mexico.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Gun Play!

NIGHT on the Staked Plain. A strange name for a strange land.

In the old days, when the Spaniards held all the wide South-West, a trail had run across the high table-land from Texas to Santa Fe, in New Mexico, but sand and dust blotted out the track, and whitened bones in the desert told where travellers had lost their way. And then great wooden stakes had been set up at regular intervals to mark the trail. Long since had the stakes rotted away—vanished, like the Spanish conquerors who had set them up. But the name remained. The Staked Plain, or Llano Estacado, in the musical tongue of the old conquerors.

Against the black velvet of the night the camp fire in the canyon danced and gleamed. The branding was over; the rustlers were gathered round the fire, eating flap-jacks, talking or smoking. Glances were cast at the Rio Kid, lounging against a big rock at a short distance from the fire. Welcome—more than welcome—as a member of the out-cast gang, but doomed to grim death otherwise. The Kid knew it, if the dark glances of the rustlers had not told him so; he had known the chance he was taking when he came into the camp with the sentry he had outwitted. But he leaned on the big rock and hummed a tune. His mustang was tethered to the corral fence, relieved of saddle and bridle. Five men at the camp fire, and the guard half-way down the canyon, if the Kid had thought of making a rush for it. But he was not thinking of that. Yet the position he had taken up, careless as his aspect was, looked as if he knew his danger. With the big rock behind him, he had his enemies all in front, if it came to gun-play.

From the shadows of the deep canyon came a sound.

"I guess that's the Dandy!"

There was a clatter of roofs on the rock.

It was one of the gang, for had it been a stranger the sentinel's rifle would have been heard.

The Kid glanced at the horseman who rode into the light of the camp fire. The rustlers all rose to their feet. The Kid not move.

Dandy Smith alighted.

The Dandy was a well-dressed man. He looked like a prosperous rancher, oddly enough, in contrast with the ruffians gathering round him. He was about to speak, but even as his lips opened he saw the stranger in the camp. His hand was on his gun instantly. The Kid smiled, and did not stir.

"Who's that?" rapped out the Dandy.

"The Rio Kid."

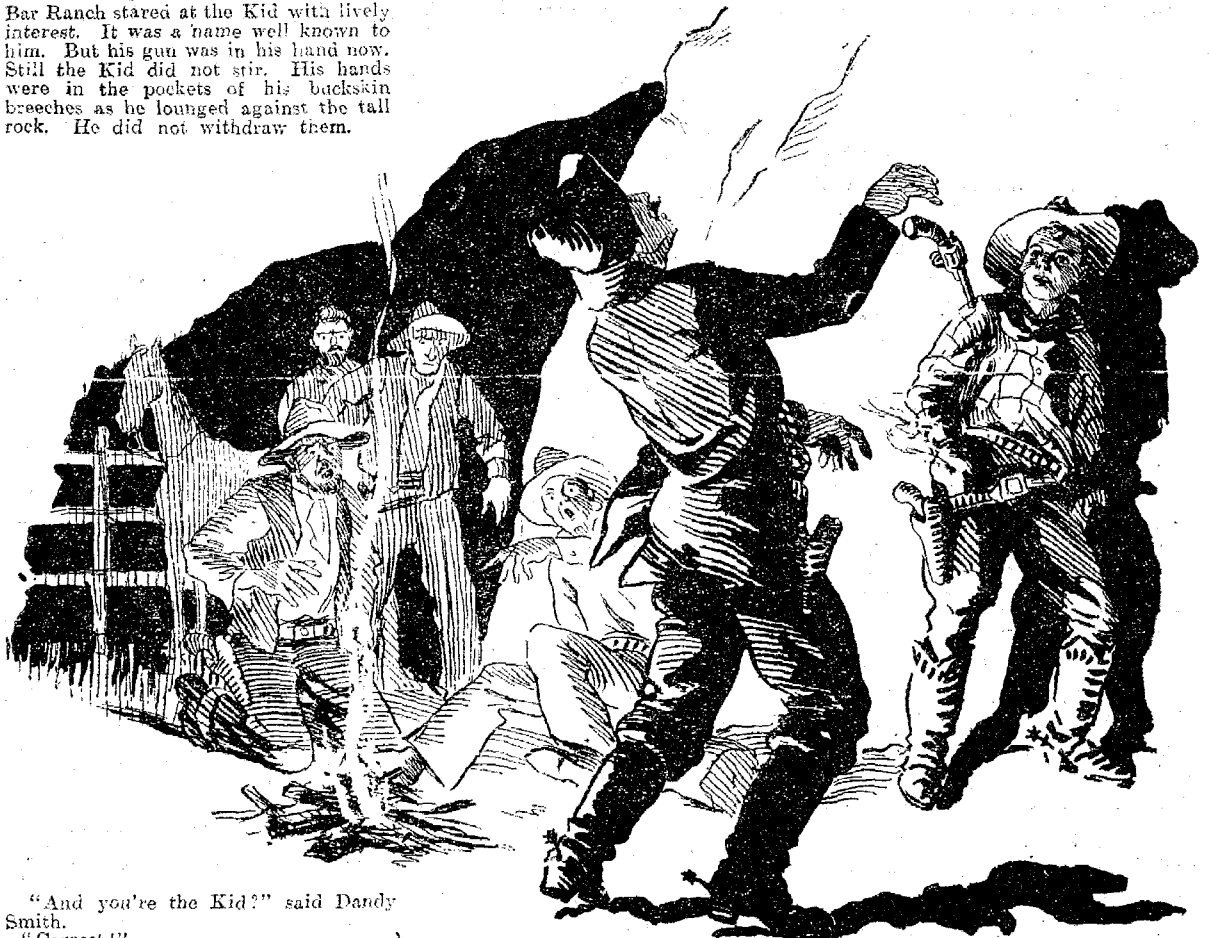
"By gum!"

The owner of the Cross



CAUGHT NAPPING! Soft-footed, the Kid stepped behind the gunman in the shrubs. The coldrim of a .45 pressed against the back of a brawny neck, and the kneeling man gave a convulsive start. "Drop that iron!" (See Chapter 1.)

Bar Ranch stared at the Kid with lively interest. It was a name well known to him. But his gun was in his hand now. Still the Kid did not stir. His hands were in the pockets of his buckskin breeches as he lounged against the tall rock. He did not withdraw them.



"And you're the Kid?" said Dandy Smith.

"Correct!"
 "How did you get here?" The Dandy's eyes gleamed round at the rustlers. "Who let a stranger pass up the canyon?"

"Don't blame your gang, Dandy," drawled the Kid. "I guess your man Finn knocked a hole through my best hat. It would have been through my head if I'd wasted time. He did his best. After that I didn't give him a chance."

"The Kid's a good man, boss," said Dave Finn. "I figured it out he would go in with us. He's sure got it up agin the Double Bar outfit."

Dandy Smith nodded.
 "And if he doesn't?"
 "Want, he's here," said Finn. "He had me dead to rights down in the canyon, after I'd missed him. I guess we've got the Kid dead to rights hyer, if he don't do the sensible thing."

"That's a cinch," agreed the Dandy. But his eyes watched the Kid suspiciously. The Kid met his glance with a bland smile.

"Well, what about it, Kid?" asked the rancher. "You know the game here—"

"Cattle stealing and brand blotting," assented the Kid. "Some game?"

"We're working the Double Bar Ranch," said Dandy Smith, "where you were boosted out of the outfit, Kid. There's room for a good man, and I guess it would be pie to you to make Old Man Dawney pay for firing you."

"It would be pie," said the Kid. "Then you're on?"

The Rio Kid shook his head slowly. "Forget it," he said, in a drawl. "I'm not on. I guess I told Finn I'd think it over."

SOME SHOT! "You're the only galoot that's got into this camp alive, Kid; but you're not getting out of it alive!" And Dandy Smith swung up his gun. Crack! It was not Smith's gun that barked; it was the Kid's. He had fired point-blank at the rustler through his pocket. (See Chapter 3.)

"Well?"
 The Dandy's eyes gleamed dangerously.

"I've thought it over," said the Kid calmly. "It's not good enough. I draw the line at riding the ranges with cow-thieves."

"You're wanted for a score of hold-ups all over the State."

"I'm wanted for more little matters than you've ever heard of, Dandy Smith," said the Kid, unmoved. "But not one of them is cattle stealing. No man ever missed a steer from his herd because the Rio Kid was around. Old Man Dawney will see me again some day. But not lifting his cattle."

"Put it plain," snarled the rancher. "Are you joining this outfit and taking orders from me?"

The Kid laughed.
 "If you knew me, Mr. Smith, you'd know that I take no orders from any galoot that ever walked on two legs."

"You'll take orders from me."

"I guess not," said the Kid lazily. Dandy Smith watched him like a cat. His gun was in his hand and the Kid's hands were idly in his pockets. Long before the Kid could have withdrawn a hand and reached for a gun the Dandy could have filled him with lead. But the Kid still smiled.

"It's not good enough, sabe?" drawled the Kid. "I guess I'm going to get back on Old Man Dawney and the Double Bar outfit—in my own way. Not in your way, Dandy Smith. But go ahead with your brand-blotting game. I'm not chipping in."

"That don't go, Kid. Do you figure on getting out of this?"

"Sure."
 "To tell what you've seen here?"
 "Nix! No funeral of mine," said the Kid. "When I ride out of the canyon down below I'll forget it."

"Do you figure that that's good enough for us?"

"I guess that it's got to be."
 Dandy Smith laughed, with a laugh that was like a snarl. There was a murmur from the brand blotters.

"I'm a slave of my word," drawled the Kid. "I'll forget it. I keep on telling you that it's not my funeral."

"That cuts no ice here, Kid," said the rancher. "You've been given your chance and I guess we don't trust to your keeping your mouth shut. I've sunk a bag of dollars in the Cross Bar Ranch and it's beginning to pay me back. No hombre is goin' out of this camp alive to tell a story about brand-blotting goin' on in the Staked Plain. You get me, feller?"

"I get you," nodded the Kid. "You don't figure on taking my word?"

"Not on your life."
 "Then I take it back," said the Kid lazily. "I'd feel pretty sick at letting this dirty game go on, anyhow. When I get out of here, I'm bumping it for the Double Bar, to put them wise about your branding game. It's up to me now."

Dandy Smith laughed again.
 "And that's the Rio Kid—the hardest case on the border, the galoot that a

dozen sheriffs are plumb anxious to get hold of!" he jeered. "Talking like a fool while he's looking at a gun. You're the only galoot that's got through into this camp alive, Kid; but you're not getting out of it alive. It's you for the long trail."

And Dandy Smith swung up his gun. Crack!

It was not the Dandy's gun that barked.

The Dandy's gun flew from his hand, still undischarged, as he staggered back with a yell, and crashed down beside the camp-fire. There was a hole in the pocket of the Kid's buckskin breeches now, and from it a tiny curl of smoke. His hidden hand, in the pocket, had held a tiny derringer, and he had fired through the buckskin before the Dandy could pull trigger.

But his hands were out of his pockets the next second and grasping the guns in his holsters.

"Put 'em up!"

The Kid's voice was not soft now. It grated hard, and his steely blue eyes glittered over two levelled barrels.

"Hold on!" yelled Dave Finn. "I guess I pass, partner." And Finn's hands flew up, and the other rustlers, cursing, followed suit.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Winning Hand!

THE Rio Kid laughed.

But the levelled guns never wavered, and the eyes behind them were cool and steady. Five men stood before him, eyeing him like wolves. But not one of them ventured to touch a gun. The Rio Kid's aim was too well known for that risk to be taken.

"I'm waiting for you 'uns," said the Kid politely. "I'd get three or four of you before you could burn powder. But the rest of the outfit would sure get me. What about it?"

There was no answer save in savage looks. Five pairs of hands were held over five heads, motionless. If looks could have killed, the Rio Kid's wild life would have come to a sudden end by the camp-fire in the lonely canyon. But looks could not kill; and there was death in the guns that stared at the dismayed outcasts of the Staked Plain.

The Kid laughed again.

"You're sure peaceable galoots," he said banteringly. "Your game's up here—you've blotted your last brand, to-morrow or the next day the Double Bar outfit will ride this way, and I guess the sheriff of Frio will drop in for a friendly call at the Cross Bar Ranch. Didn't you tell me, Dave Finn, that every hombre in this gang packed a gun?"

And the Kid's mocking laugh rang again against the silence of the starry night.

But not a hand was lowered, though teeth showed in savage snarls.

Dandy Smith stirred and groaned. He made a movement to rise, and sank back again with another groan. His face was white as chalk. His eyes

blurred at the Rio Kid like the eyes of a rattlesnake.

"I guess you've got yours, Dandy Smith," drawled the Kid. "I had you covered all the time you were chewing the rag. Lie still, feller, and you'd live to be hanged yet. I guess I'm no scavenger to clean up such trash."

His eyes glinted at Dave Finn.

"You Finn, take these hombre's guns, and pitch them into the cleft yonder. And say your prayers first if you try on any gum-game."

"I guess I know when I've had enough, Kid," mumbled Finn. "I ain't backing agin the Rio Kid."

"You're wasting time."

Under the watchful eyes of the Kid, looking across levelled guns, Finn drew the revolvers from the holsters of the rustlers, and threw them into the cleft. His own followed. For a second, as his hand closed on a butt, he was tempted to take his chance. But it was death, and he knew it; the Rio Kid never missed his man. Finn's revolvers followed the others into the cleft.

"That's sure better. I guess you hombre's can sit down now," drawled the Kid. "You can tend Dandy Smith, Dave Finn. He sure needs it."

Still with eyes on the rustlers, disarmed now, and gritting their teeth with helpless rage, the Kid stepped to his horse.

In the saddle, he smiled at the savage gang.

"Any message for the Double Bar?" And as he received no reply, the Kid rode away laughing down the canyon into the darkness.

Dandy Smith raised himself on one elbow, his eyes burning.

"Pecos Pete's on guard below," he muttered thickly. "Maybe he'll get that young fiend!"

The rustlers listened tensely.

The hoof-clatter had died away into silence. But the Kid had to pass the man who watched in the clump of pecans half-way down the canyon. With straining ears they listened, and every man gave a start and a shudder of nerves as a gun rang in the night.

"Pete's got him!" muttered the Dandy, with a livid face.

Through the deep silence came faintly from afar, the echo of a horse's hoofs on the rocks. It died away. Was it the riderless mustang, plunging to the lower plains, or was it the Kid riding away care-free? They soon know. From the shadowy canyon below a man came staggering, his right arm hanging useless at his side, broken by a bullet. It was the man who had watched in the pecans. The Kid was gone.

Bud Wash, foreman of the Double Bar Ranch, reached for a gun as a horseman rode out of a clump of cottonwoods within sight of the ranch buildings, in the morning sun.

But he did not touch the Colt. The Rio Kid's hand rested lightly on his hip, but there was a gun in it, and the Double Bar foreman knew better.

"You back here, Kid?" he said. The Kid smiled.

"Ain't you glad to see me, Bud?"

"I guess every hombre in the outfit would be glad to see you, Kid, and to fix up a necktie party for your benefit," answered the foreman of the Double Bar.

The Kid's glance passed the busy foreman, and rested for a second on the distant buildings that had once been his home.

"I guess I haven't come here to shoot up the ranch, Bud," he said, laughing. "I'm here to tell you a story. You've been missing steers?"

"And I reckon I know why, now that I see you around, Kid," said the ranch foreman gruffly.

"You've been missing steers?" repeated the Kid, with ever so gentle a motion of the gun resting on his hip.

"Yep!" rapped out Bud.

"Guess where they're gone?"

"Across the Rio Grande, I reckon, and I figure it out that you could tell me just where."

"That's a cinch. Look for them on the Cross Bar Ranch, Bud."

The foreman eyed him.

"The Cross Bar Ranch?" he repeated.

"With the brands blotted out," said the Kid. "Look for them with the double bar crossed with a new brand at the Cross Bar Ranch, or on the cars going to Austin. You get me?"

"By gum!" said Bud Wash slowly. "Brand blottin'!"

"Just that!"

And the Rio Kid swept off his Stetson in a mocking salute, whirled round his mustang, and rode at a gallop to the south, leaving the foreman of the Double Bar staring after him dumbfounded.

THE END.

(Don't miss "The Black Sack Gang!"—next week's topping yarn of the Rio Kid.)

RED HOT WESTERN YARN

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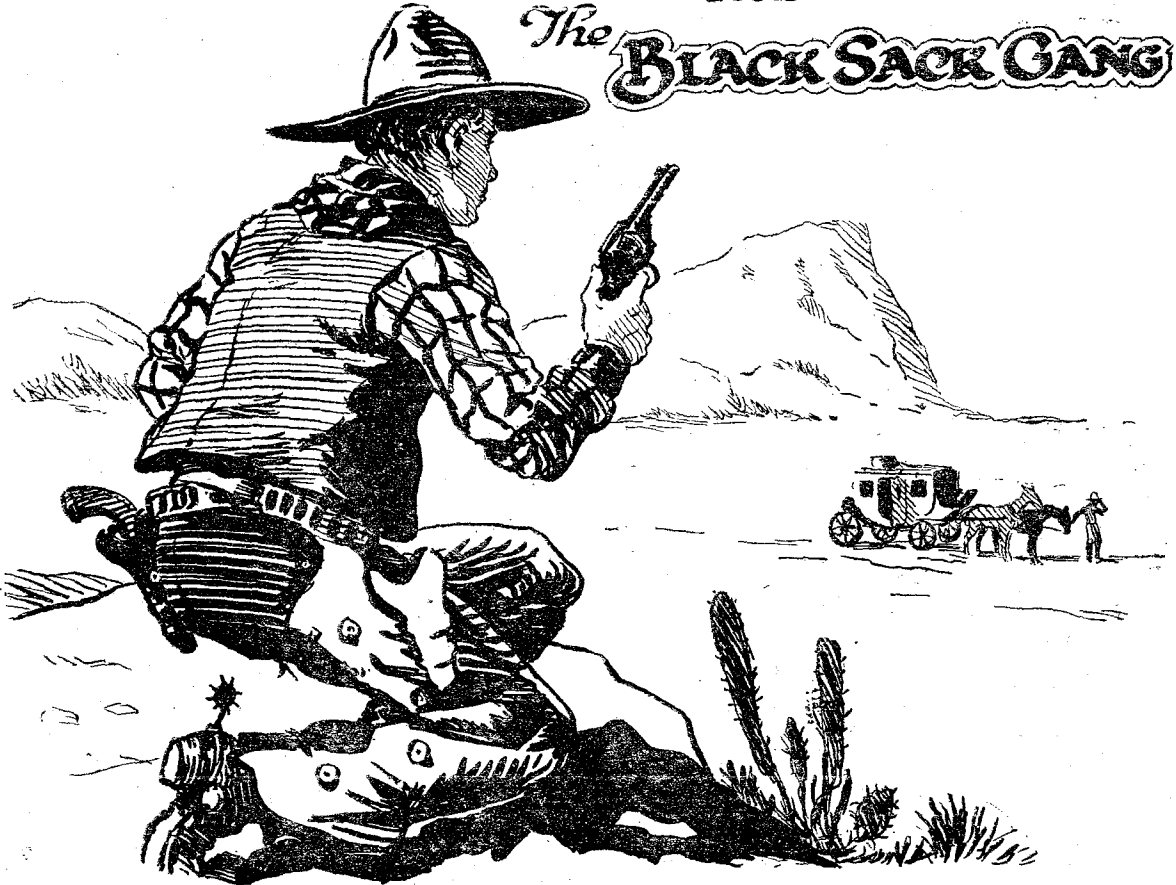
THE SENSATION OF THE WEEK!

The Rio Kid vowed vengeance on the man who turned him into an outlaw, but, when the chance to get quits comes along, what does the Kid do?

THE RIO KID!

by RALPH REDWAY
This week -

The BLACK SACK GANG



YOU MUST MEET THE MOST AMAZING CHARACTER EVER CREATED—THE RIO KID—IN THIS NEW SERIES OF WESTERN TALES.

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Hold Up!

THE little two-horse hack that followed the trail from Yaqui to Frio was already late. Dave Tutt cracked his long whip with a succession of reports like pistol-shots. Dave was anxious to draw up before the Red Dog at Frio before the sun dipped behind the sierra. But Dave quite forgot that he was in a hurry when a figure lounged out into the trail ahead from a thicket of mesquite and gestured to him to stop. Dave drew in his horses so promptly that they almost rolled back on their haunches.

It was an odd-looking figure that stepped into the trail. A black sack was inverted over his head, covering him to the belt. Little could be seen of him save the cowboy chaps and big spurred boots, and a pair of keen eyes that glistened through slits cut in the sack. There was a gun in his hand,

but he did not lift it. The sight of the black sack was enough for the stage-driver. Dave Tutt's view was that he was paid to drive the hack and nothing more, and he did not even pack a gun.

"Pass, pardner!" said Dave amiably, as the black-sacked figure lounged up to the halted vehicle.

"You've got one passenger?" The voice came muffled and blurred through a narrow slit in the thick sacking.

"Jest one."

"Old Man Dawney, of the Double Bar?"

"Right in once!" assented Dave.

"Tell him to light down."

But Old Man Dawney, of the Double Bar, had already thrust an angry face from the door of the hack. There was amazement as well as anger in the hard, old bronzed face. It was long since outlaws had been seen on the Frio trail.

"Road agents?" he ejaculated.

"You've said it!" assented the man in the black sack.

A .45 glimmered from the hack. Old Man Dawney packed a gun, if the driver did not.

"Forget it, feller," drawled the man in the sack. "Look round before you burn powder."

"You're covered, boss," said the driver.

The rancher glanced round.

Four men had stepped from the scrub beside the trail, two on either side of the hack. Each of them was disguised by a black sack drawn over his head, and each held a levelled gun.

For a moment the rancher hesitated. The boss of the Double Bar was accustomed to giving orders, not to taking them.

"Drop that Colt!" rapped out the leader.

"Drop it, boss," urged Dave Tutt.

THE POPULAR.—No. 471.



I am always pleased to hear from my chums—a letter or postcard is welcomed at all times. Let me know what you think of the old POP and of our stories. My address is: The Editor, The POPULAR, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

SOME BOY!

THERE'S no doubt about it, chaps, this new character, the Rio Kid, whom I've introduced into the old paper, is going to make a hit! You remember me telling you, just before Christmas last year, that I had several little surprises up my sleeve—well, this happens to be one of those "little" surprises.

Ralph Redway is a new author to this paper, but he is destined to attain fame in a very short time if his tales of the Golden West are anything to go by. And, what is more important, the Rio Kid's stay in our camp is going to be a prolonged one. Loud cheers! He's too good a man to lose, and his thrilling and dare-devil adventures, written with such sparkling style by Ralph Redway, will be an added attraction to an already attractive and popular weekly.

One thing you will be certain of when you read these Western tales, and that is the originality of the

adventures through which the hero, the Rio Kid, passes. Each story contains more thrills and breathless moments than any tale of twice its size. And the Kid, too—he's something new in characters. You don't meet his kind every day, do you?

You may have a pal who doesn't read the POPULAR. If so, you will be doing him a good turn—a very good turn—if you hand him this copy containing the third of our grand new series of Western tales. I'll bet, when he's read "The Black Sack Gang" on page three, he'll add his name to the already long list of supporters of THE RIO KID.

A NEW PAPER—"THE MODERN BOY."

The "Modern Boy" will be on sale everywhere on Monday, February 6th, and will have a special appeal to all readers of the POPULAR. My advice to them is to make sure of No. 1 and the wonderful model of the champion G.W.R. engine, the "King George V."

which is given away with the first issue of the new paper. There has never been anything to equal for design this capital model of the British locomotive which fairly amazed the railwaymen across the Atlantic. The "Modern Boy" has a grand fiction programme. It leads off with the opening chapters of the finest South Seas adventure serial ever written, the authors being the great aviator, Sir Alan Cobham, and Charles Hamilton. The second fiction winner is a grand yarn by Gunby Hadath, whose name is a password for vivid interest and excellence of humour.

But the "Modern Boy" does more than supply the best stories. It is a superbly illustrated paper, and its articles on subjects of importance in the world of to-day, such as wireless, and the latest things in racing motor-cars, will be just what an intelligent fellow wants.

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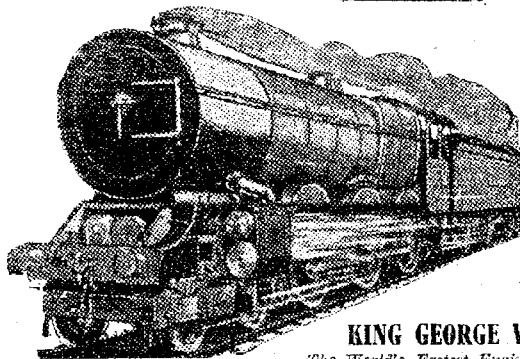
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"You can't buck agin the Black Sack crowd. It's a cinch."

The rancher appeared to realize that. He flung his revolver into the seat of the hack.

"Light down!"

Mr. Dawney stepped out of the hack. There was a cold, hard light in his eyes as he looked at the Black Sack crowd.

"You'll get ten years in the pen for this," he said quietly.

"Maybe, an' maybe not!" said the leader. "Stick 'em up!" His gun was raised now.

Slowly, reluctantly, the rancher raised his hands above his head. It was a bitter pill for Old Man Dawney to swallow. He was the lord of thousands of fertile acres; boss of the biggest ranching outfit in the county; the richest cattle-raiser between the Pecos and the Rio Grande. On his vast domain, stretching many a mile along the glimmering Frio, Old Man Dawney's word was law. His hard face was white with rage as he put up his hands at the order of a trail-thief.

"That's better! Go through him, you-uns!"

Two of the trail-thieves put up their guns and stepped to the rancher. They went through Old Man Dawney methodically. A roll of greenbacks was tossed to the leader, who slipped it under the sack.

"I know you!" muttered the rancher, his eyes glittering at the captain of the Black Sack crowd. "I know you! I figured it out who you were the first time I heard of the Black Sack crowd. They were never heard of before the Rio Kid was booted off the Double Bar. I know you!"

"The Rio Kid!" ejaculated Dave Tutt, staring down at the masked man.

He shook his head.

"I guess not, boss. This hombre's a foot taller than the Kid. You're sure mistaken."

The man in the black sack laughed, and pointed up the trail in the direction of Frio.

"It's you for Frio, Dave Tutt," he said.

"And my passenger?"

"I guess we want him."

"You won't drive on without me, Tutt!" said the rancher, gritting his teeth.

"I guess he will, some!" drawled the captain. "If he don't drive on instanter he'll sure never drive a cayuse agin!"

Dave Tutt shrugged his shoulders. "This ain't my funeral, boss," he said. "I'll tell them in Frio, and I guess the sheriff will soon be arter this crowd. So-long, Mr. Dawney!"

And Dave Tutt shook out his reins, cracked his whip, and the hack rolled on up the rugged trail.

Old Man Dawney made a stride after the hack; but the bluish muzzle of a Colt touching his breast stopped him.

He halted, quivering with rage.

"What does this mean?" he muttered thickly. "You've robbed me. What more do you want?"

"I guess we want you, feller. I sure reckon you're worth more than a roll of greenbacks to us. You're coming on a little paseo into the hills."

"Kidnapping?" muttered the rancher.

"Call it what you like. The Double Bar outfit won't see their boss agin till he's bin paid for. Put him up, you-uns!"

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One of the trail-thieves led horses from the mesquite. There were five in the gang, but there were six horses. The spare broncho was for the kidnapped rancher.

Old Man Dawney clenched his hands. He could see that this had been planned in advance; the spare horse was ready for him. Had his gun been still in his hand, he would have resisted, heavy as the odds were. But he was powerless now.

He was lifted roughly into the saddle, and a trail-rope bound him there. Then the Black Sack crowd mounted, and pushed off the trail into the rugged hillside. Old Man Dawney glanced round him as he went, his bridle held by one of the gang. Far in the distance he could see the smoke from the chimneys of Frio; he could see the two-horse hack rattling on the stony trail, and hear the croaking of Dave Tutt's

Man Dawney, bound on the broncho, then the rest of the gang spring out behind. Darkness lay like a velvet cloak on the hills, broken only by a gleam of stars. And still the mountain riders pushed on with their silent, sullen prisoner, and the rancher's last hope died away.

THE SECOND CHAPTER. The Rio Kid Takes a Hand!

THE Rio Kid had finished his lonely supper of frijoles, washed down by a can of clear water from the spring that bubbled up among the rocks. The black-muzzled mustang was already sleeping as the Kid unrolled his blanket. It was time to bed down, but the Rio Kid seemed in no hurry. He looked to his guns, the pair of long, blue Colts, with their notched walnut butts, that had more than once done desperate work in the hands of the Kid. Stars were coming out, glinting down on the Kid as he stood there, a moody look on his handsome sunburnt face. High up in the sierra the Rio Kid had camped for the night. His blanket was ready, but the Kid was sleepless. The stars that glinted on him in the rocky heart of the Hueca were shining down on the fertile grasslands of the Double Bar, once the home of the Kid. He was thinking of the Double Bar, of riding the fences, of the cheery talk of the bunkhouse, and for once his exile hung heavily on the usually care-free Kid.

The youngest puncher on the Double Bar, but the boldest rider and the best hand with the riata. His looks were bitter, and his thoughts were bitter, as he thought of the days on the grasslands. It was injustice that had driven him out, the hot-headed injustice of Old Man Dawney; and since then—the Rio Kid did not always like to think of what had happened since then. Many of the tales told of the Rio Kid were true and many were false. The legend of him had grown, as legends will grow. Half the desperate hold-ups of which he had never heard were put down to the Kid's account in the river camps and the bunkhouses along the Frio. When the Black Sack crowd appeared on the trails, the Double Bar outfit told one another that it was the Rio Kid again on a new lay-out. Old Man Dawney fully believed it, perhaps because he chose to believe it. On the wall of the Red Dog in Frio was a picture of the Kid, with an offer, signed by George Dawney, of a thousand dollars for the Rio Kid, dead or alive.

The Kid was thinking of it as he stood in the dim star glimmer, by his sleeping horse, his face clouded.

Clink!

The Kid gave a start.

The cloud of thought vanished from his brow at once as he heard the clink of a hoof on a stony trail.

High up in the lonely sierra, far from the haunts of men, he had believed himself solitary. But the clink of the hoof was followed by another and another.

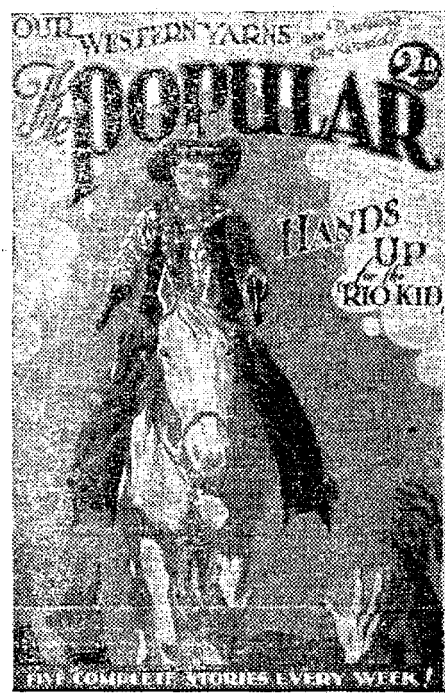
The Rio Kid dropped into the shadow of a rock, and watched and listened. His hands were on the guns in his loosely-swung holsters. If it was the sheriff's posse from Frio his guns would be wanted. The Kid's handsome lip curved in the smile that always came in the hour of danger.

Hidden in deep shadow, he waited and watched.

A horseman came into the starlight, a dozen yards from him, riding along the bottom of the steep arroyo on the rocky side of which the Kid had camped.

And the Kid started again.

LOOK OUT FOR THIS COVER NEXT TUESDAY!



whip. There would be excitement in Frio when Tutt carried the news there that Old Man Dawney had been roped in by the Black Sack crowd. More than one desperate hold-up had taken place since the Black Sacks had first appeared on the Texas trails. But the kidnapping of the richest rancher in the section was the most daring of all. Only two miles out of Frio, he had fallen into their hands. His teeth were set hard as the trail was left behind and he plunged into the rocky wilderness of the Hueca sierra.

The sun sank lower over the western sierra. The hoofs rang sharply on stony trails, mile after mile into the depths of the hills. Sheriff Watson and his posse would soon be in pursuit; but the stony trails gave no sign, and the hope of rescue and revenge died in the rancher's breast. Long miles of barren rock and scrub lay between him and the grasslands now, and an Apache hunter could never have picked up the trail of the Black Sacks. The horsemen rode in single file now—the leader first, then Old

The black sack that covered the rider was enough for him. The man who was riding by was an enigma like himself. It was the first time the Kid had seen any of the Black Sack crowd, though he had heard much of them. He released his guns. The Black Sacks were nothing to him.

Dimly from the shadows other horsemen came into view in the deep arroyo.

The second rider wore no disguise. The Kid saw his Stetson hat, and noted that he was bound to his broncho. A prisoner in the hands of the Black Sacks. And there was something familiar in the massive form of the rider—something that the Kid thought he knew. The Kid drew a deep, quivering breath. Even before the bound rider, glancing about him, showed his face in the starlight, the Kid knew him. It was Old Man Dawney of the Double Bar Ranch.

The Kid grinned from the rocks above the riders.

Old Man Dawney, a prisoner in the hands of the outlaws, led away into the heart of the pathless Huecas. No wonder the Kid had grinned.

That was the man who had fired him from the Double Bar, who had driven him off the ranch at the muzzle of a .45. That was the man whose hot and imperious temper had turned a careless cowpuncher into what the Rio Kid had since become.

The hard, bitter anger in the rancher's face amused the Kid as he watched unseen.

The imperious temper cut no ice with these outcasts of the sierra. Old Man Dawney, tied to his horse, was carried along like a sack of alfalfa. The Black Sacks did not heed his savage looks, or the deadly glitter in the deep-set eyes under the bushy brows.

But the grin died from the sunburnt face of the Kid.

He watched.

After the bound rancher came another rider, close. After a brief interval, another. Strung out a good distance behind came another horseman. Then another loomed in the shadows.

"The whole crowd, sure," murmured the Kid.

The leader had disappeared among the rocks and shadows ahead, Old Man Dawney had disappeared after him, and then the horseman who followed the rancher's broncho. Two Black Sacks rode still in view of the Kid above, and a clinking of hoofs on the stones told that still another was strung out behind on the rocky trail.

Five of them in all, as well as the prisoner. One of them turned his head and called back to the man who was straggling behind, not yet in sight of the Kid, the last of the single file.

"Look snippy, Jake! You'll sure get left."

A grunting voice came back.

"The darned cayuse's fell lame."

The first speaker rode on again, after the others. He vanished into the blackness of the shadows along the deep arroyo.

The Kid crouched motionless and watched.

Slowly the last of the crowd came clinking along the stony arroyo, a strange, eerie figure in the dim starlight, with the black sack hiding him down to the gun-belt.

The Kid stirred.

Perhaps the sight of Old Man Dawney, once his boss on the Double Bar, a helpless prisoner now in the hands of the outlaws, touched some forgotten chord. Perhaps it was the rumour that associated the Kid himself

with the Black Sacks, that stirred him to take a hand against them. Perhaps it was his sheer love of reckless adventure. Perhaps a mingling of all these things. He reached to his riata, coiled up on the saddle that lay beside his sleeping mustang.

Rope in hand, the Kid waited tensely.

The last of the Black Sacks, urging on his lame broncho with blows and curses, came abreast of the Kid, standing in black shadow a dozen yards up the steep side of the arroyo.

The Kid's arm swung.

A difficult cast, in the place, and in the uncertain light and shadow, but child's play to the Rio Kid. With rope or with revolver he had never been known to miss.

There was a whisper of whirling rope.

The Black Sack outlaw knew nothing

rough, bearded, stubbly face was revealed—the face of a border ruffian. But the Kid gave it scarcely a glance. The man was nothing to him; only a pawn in the reckless and desperate game the Kid banked upon playing.

He took the bridle of the lame horse and turned it in the arroyo. A lash of his quirt on the flank, and the horse broke into a gallop, and went clattering down the steep trail, the way it had come. Once free, the animal was not likely to stop before it reached the grasslands below in the valley of the Frio.

The Kid turned to Jake again. The man's eyes were open now, and he was groaning. He shivered as a cold rim was pressed to his cheek.

"Nary a word!" said the Kid pleasantly. "Nary a boot! It's you for the long trail if you yaup, partner!"



ROPED IN! The Black Sack outlaw knew nothing till the loop of the lasso dropped over his head. A sharp jerk at the rope, and the man was plucked from the saddle.

(See Chapter 2.)

till the loop of the lasso dropped over his head.

Then it was too late.

A sharp jerk at the rope, and the man was plucked from the saddle, falling with a crash on the rock.

Swift and active as a cougar, the Kid was bounding down the steep the next second. The lame horse stood pawing. The man who had fallen to the lasso lay senseless, stunned by the crash on the hard rock. The Kid bent over him, gun in hand. But the gun was not needed. The man in the black sack did not stir.

Tensely the Kid listened, gazing after the horsemen who had vanished. Afar, a faint clink came back to his ears.

They were riding on.

If they had heard the fall of their comrade, which was doubtful, they had not heeded it. In the lonely, pathless Huecas they were not likely to suspect the advent of a foe.

The Kid smiled.

Quickly he drew the black sack from the fallen man. In the starlight a

The man's dizzy eyes glared at him; but he did not call out.

"Who—?" he panted, in a whisper.

"I guess I'm called the Rio Kid."

"Gee! Your game, Kid!" said the ruffian laconically. "I ain't asking for nothing. You roped me?"

"Sure!"

The Kid cut a length of trail-rope and bound the man's arms behind him.

"You've got Old Man Dawney?" he said.

"Correct!"

"Where did you get him?"

"Picked him out of Dave Tut's back on the Frio trail."

"And what's the game?"

"Twenty thousand dollars."

"Ransom?" said the Kid.

"Yep."

"Old Man Dawney will never pay a cent. Don't I know the ornery old cuss?" grinned the Kid. "He will camp in the sierra for keeps rather than cough up a Continental red cent."

"I guess the captain will make him

hand it out, Kid. I've seen him afore at the game—injun tricks."

The Kid's brow contracted.

"Putting him to the torture till he signs the draft on the Frio bank," said the Kid. "That's the game, is it?"

The man nodded.

"Let me git on, Kid. This ain't no funeral of yourn. Old Man Dawney ain't got a glad hand for you."

"I guess I know it."

"He's put a thousand dollars on you, Kid. It's stuck up in the Red Dog at Frio, with your picture."

"I don't want you to tell me that. You're out of this game, pard." The Kid rose to his feet. "I'm borrowing your sack."

"What for, Kid?" muttered the ruffian uneasily.

"Fancy dress," chuckled the Kid. "Got any objections to make?"

The Colt touched the ruffian's face again.

"Nary a one. But you can't leave me tied up, Kid," beseeched the outlaw. "You can't do it! I guess you might as well let daylight through my cabeza at once."

"You'll sure work loose by morning," said the Kid coolly. "I know how I've tied you. By morning the Black Sack crowd will be over the range, or else they'll never hear any more in the camps of the Rio Kid. You pass out of the game here, and I reckon you're lucky. You'll follow your cayuse back to the plains, with your hands tied and your mouth shut. I'm going after your pard, and if you come after me, remember that I shall shoot on sight—and shoot to kill. You've got your chance."

"Kid—" began the ruffian.

"Nuff said!"

The Kid jerked off the man's dirty neck-scarf and gagged him with it. He secured the gag coolly and scientifically. "Now git!"

The man scrambled clumsily to his feet. The Kid's gun was looking at him and he did not hesitate. Silent, save for a panting mumble, he stumbled away down the arroyo in the direction that his horse had taken. Already, as he went, he was wroesting savagely with the rope that bound his arms. But the Kid knew that he was safe; his hands were secure till morning, and until his hands were free the gag held him silent. A crash from the butt-end of a Colt might have kept him safer, but the Kid was not the man for such deeds.

He dismissed the fellow from his mind as he stumbled out of sight, mumbling in the shadows.

A soft cail, and the Kid's mustang joined him. Already the Kid was donning the black sack he had taken from the outlaw. He belted the open end of the sack round his waist and adjusted the eye-holes and the mouth-slit to his satisfaction. Then he mounted the black-muzzled mustang and followed on the way the Black Sack crowd had gone with their prisoner.

Under the black sack the Kid was grinning.

He had taken the place of the last man in the file, and the outlaws, if they looked back and saw him, would indubitably take him for their own comrade. Only the cowboy chaps, the sparr'd boots, and the gun-belt showed below the sack. For the nonce the Kid had become, what all Frio believed him to be, a member of the Black Sack crowd.

On the rocky trail the Black Sacks were riding slowly; but the Kid put his mustang to speed. A quarter of an hour later he was in sight of a black-sacked figure riding ahead of him.

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The man looked back at the clink of his horse's hoofs.

"You Jake—" he called back.

"Git on!" grunted the Kid.

He slowed down, and kept his distance in the rear of the Black Sacks as they rode on under the stars.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Kid Gets Back!

"HALT!" The leader of the Black Sack crowd slipped from his horse. Old Man Dawney stared before him in the dim light of the stars. Behind the captured rancher four figures in black sacks gathered. They had stopped in a wide canyon, far up the Huecas, and the leader had dismounted at what looked like a solid wall of rock, patched here and there with scrub pines and straggling pecans. The rancher guessed that the destination of the outlaw gang had been reached, but he could see no signs of a camp.

Taking his rein over his arm, the Black Sack captain went forward on foot. Only the rancher remained mounted. Men and horses plunged into a thicket of scrub, and it seemed to the rancher that they were heading for the solid wall of the canyon. But beyond the tangled thicket a deep fissure opened in the rock, and the Black Sack captain led the way into it, with the sure step of one who knew the path well.

Singly the rest followed him, with barely room for a horse to pass in the rift between the sides of rugged rock. But a dozen yards further on the fissure widened, opening out into a gulch. It was a "locked" gulch, shut in on all sides by precipitous rocks, accessible only by the fissure hidden behind the scrub thicket. The rancher's heart sank as he emerged into the open gulch. No trailer from Frio would ever find him there. The last of the file of Black Sacks grinned under his disguise. Even the Rio Kid, keen as an Apache on the trail, with an unfailing eye for sign, would never have tracked down the Black Sack crowd to their secret lair by other means than those he had adopted. Long miles of rocky hillsides and arroyos; that bore no sign lay behind them, and the scrub thicket, growing apparently by a solid wall of rock, told no tale. The Black Sacks had chosen their refuge well.

The moon was rising now; a silver crescent showed over the pine-trees that capped the rocky walls of the locked gulch. In the faint light the black-sacked figures looked ghostly, eerie. At a little distance was a spring, with a belt of vegetation by it, and near the water stood several roughly-built jacas. This was the camp of the Black Sacks.

Old Man Dawney was unbound and jerked from the bronco. The horses were cast loose, and the rancher, with his hands and feet shackled by a trail-rope, left standing.

The Kid breathed hard under his disguise.

He had ridden into the outlaws' lair with the gang, as yet unsuspected. But at any moment suspicion might rise. It was four to one when trouble started. But the Rio Kid had faced odds before.

Old Man Dawney's eyes were gleaming at the outlaws. Perhaps he expected them to doff their disguises now that they were in camp, and he was prepared to memorise each face, to store in his memory the identity of each man, to be hunted down later without mercy. But the outlaws did not remove the black sacks.

They built a camp-fire by the group of

jacas; the night was cold high up the sierra. They gathered round the camp-fire to their meal of flapjacks and cold beef, washed down by fire-water that had doubtless come from the Red Dog in Frio. The rancher knew that, without their disguises, these outcasts trod the streets of Frio; it was likely enough that he knew some of them by sight.

He shook his head savagely when food was offered him.

"I guess you can please yourself, feller," chuckled the captain of the Black Sacks. "You'll be glad of it to-morrow." "You'll be glad of it to-morrow."

The rancher made no answer.

He was scanning the man, but he was unwillingly satisfied now that the outlaw leader was not, as he had believed, the Rio Kid. He little guessed how near the Rio Kid was to him, and for what purpose the Kid was there.

Their supper over, the outlaws banked up the fire with logs cut from the thickets in the gulch. The hour was growing late, but the Black Sack crowd evidently did not intend to bed down yet.

The leader made a sign, and the gang gathered round the bound rancher.

"I guess it's business now, Mr. Dawney."

"You can cut that out," said the rancher coldly, his eyes hard as steel. "You'll get nothing out of me."

"Forget it, feller," grinned the leader. "You're going to give me your draft on the Frio bank."

"Never!"

"Take your time, Mr. Dawney. I guess I don't want it till the morning," said the Black Sack captain. "Before morning I reckon you'll be howling out to sign it, if it was twice twenty thousand."

The rancher's lips curled contemptuously.

"Put him to the fire!"

Dawney started.

"You low-down scoundrels," he said, between his teeth.

"I guess you'll be in a more reasonable frame of mind by the time your boots have charred off."

"You villain!"

"Can it, feller! Put him to it!" The rancher was dragged along to the camp-fire. Bound and helpless, he was flung down there, with his feet only a few inches from the glowing logs.

There was sweat on his face now; but there was indomitable determination, too. Even "Injun tricks" could not overcome the arrogant obstinacy of the owner of the Double Bar.

The Kid breathed hard.

He had expected the outlaws to bed down, and in the hours of darkness to find an opportunity to release the rancher and guide him to safety. But the prompt action of the outlaw leader forced his hand.

Yet for the moment the Kid made no move.

He had the advantage that the Black Sacks did not even suspect that there was an enemy among them. But there were four desperate men at close quarters when the shooting began. And for what was the Kid taking such a desperate chance? For the man who had boosted him off the Double Bar and made his name a by-word in all the cow country along the Rio Grande and the Pecos. The Kid cursed himself for a fool as he stood looking moodily on. But his resolution did not falter. He was a fool to chip in, he guessed bitterly that he was going " loco," but he was chipping in, all the same.

The steam rose from the rancher's boots. Already he was feeling the heat of the fire, and the sweat thickened on his hard face. But from his lips there came no word.

IN MERCILESS HANDS! The leader made a sign, and the gang gathered round the bound rancher. "By the morning I guess you'll be howling to sign that draft of twenty thousand on the Frio bank!" grinned the leader. (See Chapter 3.)



The captain of the Black Sacks bent over him.

"Say the word, feller."

The rancher's eyes glistened at him, but he did not speak.

"You'll go back to Frio when the dollars are in our hands. You know that. Old Man Peters at the Circle Cross went home safe after we was through with him. You heard of that?"

No answer.

The Rio Kid moved farther away from the camp-fire.

He preferred to have the outlaws clear against the blaze, himself with the darkness behind him. When it came to gun-play there would be some desperate moments.

He stood looking on grimly, his hands resting lightly on the guns in his holsters. Still he did not chip in. Old Man Dawney had bags of dollars; twenty thousand would not hurt him. But the Kid shook himself, and pulled himself together.

Quietly his guns came out, glinting in the flickering light from the camp-fire. His eyes gleamed through the eye-holes in the black sack that hid his face.

"I guess that's enough," crawled the Rio Kid. "You'll let up on this game, sure."

The captain spun round towards him.

"What the thunder—"

The rancher twisted round a furious face to look. Well was that soft, drawing voice known to his ears.

"The Kid!" he choked. "The Rio Kid! I knew it—I knew you were in this, you young coyote."

The Kid laughed.

The rustlers were all on their feet now, grasping their guns. The name of the Rio Kid on the rancher's lips electrified them.

The Kid's levelled guns threatened them.

"It's not Jake!" yelled one of the outlaws. "It's Jake's sack, but they ain't Jake's chaps, nor yet his boots. It's—"

"It's the Rio Kid!" The Kid's voice rang like steel now. "Put them up, the lot of you, or—"

But the captain of the Black Sacks was already pulling trigger. And the roar of the Rio Kid's .45's woke every echo in the locked gulch.

The Black Sack captain, as he pulled trigger, went down to the first bullet. Heavily he sprawled across the bound rancher, pinning him to the ground.

Old Man Dawney's hard face was fixed in amazement. The Rio Kid—one of the Black Sack crowd, as he had suspected—but what did this mean? For the lithe figure in the black sack was engaged in savage conflict with the other Black Sacks.

The Black Sack captain did not stir. Inert, he lay across the helpless rancher.

But three men were shooting, though not so fast as the Rio Kid. Hoarse yells and cries awoke the echoes.

For a long minute it seemed that pandemonium had broken loose in the locked gulch high up the Hueca sierra.

Then it was over.

Two men, desperately wounded, lay groaning, and a third was fleeing wildly for the shelter of the rocks. The rancher saw the lithe figure stagger. But the Kid straightened up again, and his revolver barked once more, and the running man threw up his hands and dropped with a bullet in his leg.

The Kid had won through. But blood was trickling from under the black sack that covered his face.

He stood unsteadily.

"Kid" muttered the rancher.

The Rio Kid laughed, and threw off the black sack that had disguised him. His face was pale now, and there was a trickle of blood from under the thick hair.

"I knew it was you, Kid," said Old Man Dawney.

The Kid bent over him, dragged aside the inert form that pinned him down, and drew the rancher away from the fire. His bowie glided over Old Man Dawney's bonds, and the ropes fell apart. The rancher was free. He staggered to his feet.

"You're wounded, Kid."

The Kid's hand went to his brow.

"A scratch, I guess." The rancher's eyes were on a patch of crimson that was welling through the Kid's shirt. The Kid's lip curled. "Yep, it's in the shoulder. What do you care, feller?"

"You've saved my life, Kid," muttered Old Man Dawney.

The Kid grinned.

"I sure said I'd get back on you for boosting me off the Double Bar, feller. I've done it—this a way."

"I knew you were in the Black Sack crowd—"

"Oh, cut it out!" jeered the Kid. "The man that sack belonged to is aashaying along somewhere down the mountain, with his hands tied and a neckscarf in his mouth. I borrowed his sack to trail these coyotes home."

"And why?" asked the rancher very quietly.

"Because I was a plumb fool!" said the Kid, with a laugh. "And I've got what comes to a plumb fool when he asks for it." He gave the soft call that his mustang knew, and his horse trotted up.

"Kid, you're not—"

The Kid pointed to the grazing bronchos by the spring.

"Take a mount and light out," he said. "I guess you'll find your way down to Frio. The Black Sacks won't stop you now, I guess; especially their captain. He's got his. Light out while you've got the chance."

The rancher drew a deep breath.

"Kid! After this—"

"Nuff said. So-long, Old Man Dawney."

The Kid reeled for a moment, but he climbed into the saddle of the mustang. His teeth were set hard.

"Kid, you're hurt! Let me—"

But the Kid was already riding.

There was a buzz of interest in the Red Dog saloon at Frio the following evening, when Old Man Dawney lighted down from his claybank outside, and walked in. All Frio knew by that time of the kidnapping of the rancher, and the wiping out of the Black Sack by the Rio Kid. All eyes were fixed on Old Man Dawney as he strode up the saloon. He stopped at the wall where the placard hung, with the picture of the handsome Kid and the offer of a thousand dollars for him alive or dead. The crowd watched him breathlessly as he tore down the paper, tore it across and across again, and scattered the fragments.

THE END.

(Don't miss: "GAME TO THE LAST!" next week's story of the RIO KID!)

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THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Hitting the Trail!

OUTSIDE the sheriff's office in Frio five horsemen sat in their saddles and waited, and a sixth horse, saddled and bridled, was held by a swarthy peon. Old Man Dawney, riding into town from the Double-Bar ranch, glanced at them as he dismounted, and threw his reins over the hitching-post. He gave a brief nod in acknowledgment of the salutations of the sheriff's posse. The boss of the Double Bar was a man of few words; and those few, as a rule, not pleasant ones. With his heavy tread, he entered the little 'deny building.

Sheriff Watson, of Frio, was seated on the only chair in the office.

His spurred boots rested on the desk before him, and his teeth held a big Mexican cigar.

"Morning, sheriff!"

Watson's spurs shrieked along the desk-top, as he dragged his feet down, and rose from the chair at the rancher's entrance.

"Morning, Mr. Dawney! Waiting

by Ralph Redway

This week:

GAME TO THE LAST!

"As many as you like," said Watson puzzled. "I reckoned you was dead keen on roping in the Kid, rancher. It was you put up a reward of a thousand dollars for him."

"That's washed out!"

"You don't want the Kid taken?"

There was a brief hesitation before

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for you-uns!" said the sheriff. "I guess we're ready to start, pronto."

He pitched away the half-smoked cigar.

"You got my message at the Double Bar?"

"Sure!"

"I guess we're enough to handle the Rio Kid," remarked the sheriff, with a grin, as he made a gesture towards the horsemen, visible through the open doorway. "But dealin' with that pesky young cayuse, you can't make too sure. Five or six of your men—"

"I've ridden in alone."

The sheriff looked at him.

"Your outfit don't want to get too near the Kid?" he asked sarcastically.

"My outfit will ride where I order them," said the rancher coldly. "But—I want a word with you, Watson, before you hit the trail."

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the rancher answered. But the answer came at last.

"No."

"I've sure waited for nothing," said the sheriff, with a frown. "I'd have been glad to tote half a dozen of the Double Bar boys along. But I reckon we can handle the Kid." He made a stride towards the door.

"Hold on, Watson."

"Time's going," granted the sheriff of Frio, but he held on impatiently.

"You're going after the Kid now?"

"Yep!"

"I was dead keen, as you say, to see the Kid roped in, and sent to the pen or strung up on a tree," said Old Man Dawney slowly. "But since then—you know what's happened, sheriff? He chipped in and got me away from the Black Sack crowd—saved my life, I reckon. He was wounded—I believe he was hard hit. May have passed in his

checks already, wounded as he was, out there alone on the Huecas."

"The Kid's tough," said Watson drily. "The law wants him dead or alive. If he's cashed his chips, we'll bring him in dead. If he's still chirping, we'll bring him in alive, to stand his trial for half the hold-ups that have took place in this section since you boosted him off the Double Bar."

Old Man Dawney's hard lips tightened.

"I boosted him off the Double Bar," he assented. "I had good reason, though the Kid says he never had a fair show-down. The proof at the time was good enough for me, and he had to hit the trail. But—"

"But he sure got you out of a tight place, and you reckon you'd like to call it square."

"That's so."

"I don't say you're wrong," said the

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sheriff, "but I've got my duty to do. The Kid did me a good turn, too, and when I was near to getting him. But that cuts no ice when it's a matter of duty. Anything more?"

"Xce," said the rancher slowly.

not used to taking no for an answer. You won't find your job an easy one with the Double Bar outfit against you. I want you to let up on the Kid."

Sheriff Watson eyed him, smiling grimly. Old Man Dawney's word was

and set at naught, as it had never been since the day the Rio Kid had defied him and had been driven off the Double Bar. His brow was black and bitter as he remounted his horse to ride back to the ranch.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Cornered in the Sierra!

"THE end of the trail!"

The Rio Kid muttered the words.

High up in the lonely Huecas, the Kid, stretched on the rough rock of the mesa, watched the distant riders threading a way up the canyon.

The mesa stood, a great mass of rock, with steep sides a dozen feet high, ten yards across at the top. On the summit of the craggy mesa the Kid had made his camp. There was no foothold for a horse there; his mustang had been left at a distance, unbethered, by a mountain spring where there was a patch of grass and trees. The Kid knew that he would not wander—he would find the black-muzzled mustang waiting, if he returned for him. But he doubted whether he would return.

The Kid was hard hit.

There was a bandage across his brow where a bullet had grazed; another on his shoulder where a ball had struck deeper.

The Kid's face, of old care-free, was white and haggard.

He had made his lonely camp on the summit of the mesa, with little hope that he would leave it alive.

The Kid was hardy, fit in every muscular inch of him. But his wound had sapped his strength. A couple of weeks' rest and he would have hit the trail again, careless of his hurt. But he did not expect that respite to be granted him. It was known that he was in the Huecas, it was known that he was wounded; and those who had hunted him on every trail were not likely to lose the chance.

In one spot, on the summit of the mesa, a bunch of hardy mountain pines grew in a cleft. By the trees the Kid lay on his blanket in the shade. It was the highest point of the mesa. From it he could watch the wide canyon on all sides. His rifle lay beside him. His guns, in their holsters, were ready to his hand. The Kid, in his lonely camp, did not count upon remaining unsought and unassailed. But he was prepared to defend himself to the last when his enemies came, so long as his strength lasted and his eyes were clear enough to shoot.

And now they were coming.

It was thirty-six hours since he had rescued Old Man Dawney from the rustlers, and ridden away wounded after the desperate fight with the Black Sack crowd. He had expected pursuit in less time than that. But they were coming at last.

Far in the distance, in the sun blaze, the Kid, as he lay on the rugged top of the mesa, watched the horsemen winding into view. They were afar yet. In the clear mountain air they looked like toy figures in the distance. But he knew the burly man who rode at their head—Sheriff Watson. He knew the rough, red-headed horseman behind him—Hank Hanson, the deputy sheriff. And the others were grim-faced men, armed to the teeth, as they needed to be when they hunted the Rio Kid.

"The end of the trail!" murmured the Kid.

It had been a wild and lawless trail that the Rio Kid had followed since

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"Spill it," said Watson.

"I want you to let up on the Kid."

"Forget it," said the sheriff tersely.

Old Man Dawney's eyes gleamed under his bending brows. The same hot and passionate temper that had worked such trouble for the Rio Kid was rising. The richest rancher of the Pecos Valley was accustomed to having his own way.

"I want you to let up on the Kid!" he repeated.

"Can't be did."

"Can and must!" said Old Man Dawney. "The Kid's done a lot of things that you want him for. But he's wiped out the Black Sack crowd, and that's a set-off, I reckon."

"I guess it may help him at his trial."

"It's not coming to that."

"It's coming to that if I can get him," said the sheriff of Frio coolly. "You're wasting time, boss."

The rancher's eyes glittered.

"You'd never have been sheriff of Frio without my support, Watson. I'm

law for many a mile of fertile grassland along the Pecos. But he could not dictate to the sheriff of Frio in his own office.

"You've nothing personal against the Kid, sheriff?"

"Nothing!"

"Then let up."

"No can," said the sheriff tersely.

"I tell you—"

"I guess I'm ready to pass out, when the Town of Frio wants a new sheriff," said Watson. "Until then, I've got my duty to do. So long, rancher!"

"Stop!"

But the sheriff did not stop. He tramped out of the office, took the waiting horse from the peon, and swung himself into the saddle.

"Pronto!" he rapped out.

And the horsemen started, a dozen cow-punchers in the street waving hats after them as they went.

Old Man Dawney stepped out, and stood by his claybank, looking after the sheriff's posse with contracted brows. His imperious will had been disregarded

the day he left the Double Bar. And it looked to have reached its end at last.

Where he lay, in the summit of the rugged mesa, he could put up a desperate defence. That was why he had selected the spot for his camp. But he doubted whether his shooting would be sure. He was weak, and at times his senses spun. Once he had caught himself babbling in a fit of delirium. But the weakness seemed to pass as he watched the distant riders winding up the rocky canyon. The Kid pulled himself together hard.

Snailed by the mountain pines from the westerling sun, he lay and watched. In the silence of the hills the sound of hoofs came to his ears at last as the horsemen drew nearer.

Their path lay up the canyon, and they would pass within a dozen yards of the steep, lonely mesa if they came on. The rocks bore no trail, and the Kid was in cover. Flattened on the mesa, he could not be seen from below. But the faintest sign would not escape Sheriff Watson. The horsemen came on slowly, and they watched as they came. The Kid wondered idly whether they would pass by the mesa, and never know that he was there.

He felt no alternation of hope and fear. With the stoicism his hard, wild life had taught him, he waited and watched with indifference.

He saw the horsemen draw into a bunch and halt. The sheriff's hand was raised, pointing to the sky.

The Kid looked up.

Over the mesa, high above, a buzzard was wheeling. The Kid had noted the obscene bird before and forgotten it. But the buzzard was still there.

The Kid smiled bitterly.

The vulture knew that there was a wounded man on the mesa. The bird of prey was waiting to swoop, waiting till the Kid was dead or unconscious.

The horsemen came on again.

Now they were heading directly towards the mesa.

The buzzard was their guide. They knew that a wounded man or a dead man lay on the mesa, or the carrion bird would not have lingered there.

The hoofs clinked on the stony trail. Closer and closer.

Every eye in the sheriff's posse was watchful now. The Kid reached for his rifle and sighted it across the rock before him, and the muzzle bore on the sheriff of Frio.

Crack!
The sheriff's Stetson spun with the wind of the bullet as it passed.

"The Kid!"

It was a shout from the whole party. With almost ludicrous haste the Frio men leaped from their horses to take cover. Well they knew the aim of the Rio Kid.

A moment before six horsemen had been in view. Now six riderless horses were plunging free, and the riders had vanished among the boulders of the canyon.

The Kid laughed.

It was like the shifting scene of a theatre before his eyes. He sent a second bullet that spattered on the rocks.

Then he watched and waited.

Here and there, from moment to moment, he caught a glimpse of a hat or a boot as the Frio men, keeping in cover, worked their way among the great boulders towards the mesa.

But he held his fire.

Suddenly, from among the rocks, a gun barrel rose with a dirty white handkerchief fluttering from it.

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The Kid grinned at the flag of truce.

"That goes!" he shouted. "You can show yourself, Watson."

Sheriff Watson rose from cover and strolled towards the mesa. All his bulky form was in view now, and the Kid could have riddled him with lead before he had taken two strides. But the sheriff of Frio knew that the Kid was the slave of his word.

He stopped a dozen paces from the steep side of the mesa and looked up. The Kid rose into view, looking down at him.

"Howdo, sheriff?" he said genially.

"It's you, Kid!" said the sheriff. "I kinder suspicioned it was when I saw that buzzard. You're kenosed now, Kid."

"Quien sabe?" grinned the Kid.

"I guess you're hurt, Kid," said the sheriff, reading the white, strained face that looked down on him from the mesa—white, haggard, yet with its old mocking smile. "Old Man Dawncy sure told us about your trouble with the Black Sack crowd."

"And set you after me after I'd saved his life!" jeered the Kid.

"Nix. I reckon he wanted me to let up on you, Kid, and was sure mad when I told him it couldn't be did."

The Kid whistled with surprise.

"But we got you now, Kid," said the sheriff. "You're hurt, and I guess we'll treat you fine and tender. Put down your guns, Kid; this ain't no time for gun talk. You're sure cornered, and you may as well throw up the cards."

"Any more?" asked the Kid.

"You'll never get off that mesa, Kid, without cold lead in your slats," said the sheriff.

"Tell me some more!" said the Kid mockingly.

"I'm giving you a chance to do the sensible thing, Kid," urged the sheriff. "You'll get a fair show-down. I don't stand for a necktie party in Frio. You'll take your trial for what you've done—"

"And for what I haven't done, feller!" grinned the Kid. "They put it all on the Rio Kid. No sugar in mine, sheriff. But go on chowing the rag if you want."

"Come down outa that, Kid! Have a little hoss-sense. There's six of us hyer to talk to you."

"There won't be so many hitting the home trail, sheriff, by the time you're through."

"You're sure loco, Kid. I want to take you in alive," urged Watson.

"Throw it away!" jeered the Kid.

"Then it's shooting?" said the sheriff reluctantly.

"You can hit the trail as soon as you like, sheriff, if you like that better."

"You're sure talking foolish, Kid. We're hyer to get you."

"Not alive, feller," said the Kid pleasantly. "I give you ten seconds to get in out of the dust!"

He raised his gun.
Five seconds were enough for the sheriff. He vanished among the rugged boulders.

The Rio Kid sank back into the shadow of the pines. He sank heavily on the blanket, which was stained red. For a moment or two, as his weakness mastered him, the Kid's brain swam.

But the shuffling of spurred boots among the rocks called him back to himself.

Up the rocky slope of the mesa side six men, guns in hand, came in a desperate rush. And the roar of the Rio Kid's .45's awoke every echo of the canyon.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Rio Kid's Last Fight!

CRACK, crack, crack!
And the Rio Kid been his old self, not a man of the Frio sheriff's posse would have lived to tell what had happened up in the Huecas. But the Kid was not himself now. The hand that had never missed was shaking, the eye that had been as clear and keen as an eagle's was dim.

His shooting was wild.
Wild as it was, it told on the Frio men, as they rushed up the rocky slope, stumbling, tripping, and rushing on again.

The sheriff felt a bullet sear along his face, and he dropped; the next man collapsed with a ball in his leg. They fired, as they came, but their firing was wilder than the Kid's, as they rushed and clambered, and the lead screamed away wide.

Crack, crack, crack!

With a gun in either hand the Kid was pumping out lead.

It was too much for the Frio men.

Half-way up the slope two of them were down, and the bullets from above came like hail.

"Cover!" panted Hank Hanson.

He plunged into a gully behind a boulder.

His comrades scrambled into cover, breathless and enraged. The Kid was not shooting as of old; not a man would have reached the summit of the mesa alive, and they realised it. Four men in cover fired savagely; two wounded lay on the open rocks at the mercy of the Kid. Sheriff Watson raised himself on his elbow, his face streaming crimson. He stared round him dizzily.

A mocking call rang from the top of the mesa.

"Hustle for it, sheriff! My gun's looking at you."

Watson dragged himself to his knees. Slowly, painfully, he crawled into cover, and for minutes he was open to the fire from the Rio Kid had the Kid cared to pump lead at a wounded man. But no bullet struck the Frio sheriff as he crawled.

The man with a disabled leg still lay in the open groaning. It was long before he could crawl to safety, but he crawled unharmed.

The Kid laughed at himself as he reloaded his revolvers.

"You're sure plumb loco, Kid!" he said, in self-mockery. "They'll get you sure after sundown."

But he did not fire on the men who crawled into cover. Many a desperate deed was put down to the account of the Rio Kid, all along the Pecos and the Rio Grande. But there were things that the Kid would not do, even in the valley of the shadow of death.

On the rugged slope of the mesa, the Frio men lay close in cover among the rugged rocks.

The rush had been stopped. The Rio Kid had won the first round. From the Frio men rose a sound of groaning and cursing. But they did not show themselves.

The Kid waited.

There had been a time when this game of life and death would have been sport to him. But now he needed all his strength of will to keep himself up to the mark.

The weakness and dizziness from his uncared-for wound were slowly but surely overcoming him.

He laid his guns ready beside him, and drew a long draught from his water-bottle. It refreshed him, and cleared his dizzy head. He lay back by the pines, resting, idly watching the blue sky above him, where the buzzard

still wheeled and screeched. Another buzzard had joined the first now, and another. They wheeled in long circles high over the mesa, watching, waiting, ready to swoop. The Kid watched them, and watched another and another of the carrion birds winging out of the distant blue. A bitter smile curved his handsome lips as he watched.

But he listened, too.

An hour had passed, with no sound from the enemy, save an occasional impotent shot that whistled over the mesa.

Now there was a scraping on the rock, and the Kid grinned as he knew that one of the Frio men was creeping up the slope—creeping cautiously, but not cautiously enough to deceive the ears of the Kid.

The Kid gripped a gun.

morning to hunt the Rio Kid, only four remained to deal with him. And the Kid was still safe and untouched in his eyrie on the summit of the mesa.

"I guess we'll get him when the sun's gone," the sheriff said, between his teeth.

And the Frio men, loosing off an occasional shot to keep the Kid alert, waited for the sun to dip behind the sierra.

Lower it sank, in purple and gold, towards the distant mountains of New Mexico.

But other thoughts followed in his mind. The wide grasslands of the Double Bar, where he had ridden the ranges in the days before black trouble came; the men he had liked in the outfit, the cheery talk of the bunk-house; Fatty Tick's greasy face looking out of the hot cook-house when the boys came in to grub; it seemed to the Kid that he could see it again, that he could hear the calling of the cowboys, the lowing of the herds on the ranges.

He heard fancied sounds, and he did



CAPTURED AT LAST! With beating hearts the Frio men clambered up the slope to the spot where the Kid lay in the shadow of the rocks. Not a movement or a sound came from the young outlaw, and instantly four guns covered him. "Put 'em up, Kid! Pronto!" rapped out the sheriff. (See Chapter 3.)

He lay still, without a motion then, watching for a Stetson hat to rise over the level of the flat-topped mesa.

It came at last; but the Kid did not fire at the Stetson. He knew from its motion that there was no head in it. It was raised on a gun-barrel to draw his fire.

He grinned and waited, gun in hand, finger on trigger.

The Stetson sank again. Hank Hanson was satisfied that the Kid was caught napping. With a bound he covered the last few feet of the slope, and leaped on top of the mesa.

His gun was in his grip; his eyes stared for the Kid, and stared at a levelled gun.

Crack!

The deputy-sheriff of Frio reeled backwards, and went tumbling down the slope, yelling wildly as he tumbled. Loud and mocking rang the laugh of the Rio Kid.

"Try it again, hombres!" he shouted. A volley of curses and bullets answered the laugh. On the rocks of the slope Hank Hanson lay groaning, with a ball through his shoulder.

The sheriff of Frio gritted his teeth.

He had bound up his head with a neck-scarf, heedless of the pain of his wound. But two of his men were sorely wounded, and others had scratches. Of the six who had ridden out of Frio that

The shadows of the pines lengthened in the lonely canyon far up the stony Huucas.

The Kid drank from his water-bottle, and munched a hard flapjack. He knew that it was the end of his trail; his only thought was to finish fighting. Never, while he had power to draw a trigger, should the men of Frio see him brought in a prisoner. It should never be said at the Double Bar that the Rio Kid had been taken alive.

He leaned against a pine, watching and waiting, as darkness spread like a velvet cloak over the Huucas.

He was thinking, and his thoughts wore black and bitter.

"Plumb loco!" he muttered, and laughed scornfully.

But for the wound that sapped his strength and brought dizziness to his brain, he would not have feared the sheriff's posse of Frio. It was his wound that tied him down to his camp on the mesa, and robbed him of his pure aim. And he had gauged that wound in defence of Old Man Dawney, the unjust, hot-headed man who had driven him off the Double Bar, driven him to the lawless life that had since been his. All the Peecos valley knew that the Kid had sworn to get back on Old Man Dawney. And this was how he had done it. No wonder the Kid laughed in self-scorn as he thought of it.

not know that delirium was creeping on him. There were other sounds—real sounds—boots scraping on hard rock, hurried, suppressed breathing; he did not hear them. At long last the Rio Kid's iron strength had given in; the gun dropped from his idle hand, unnoticed. His eyes were fixed and glazed as he leaned against the pine in the darkness. He did not see shadows move; he did not know that the enemy wore stealing on him now that he was unconscious and powerless.

Slowly, with beating hearts, the Frio men clambered on the mesa, gun in hand, ready to shoot at a sound. In the darkness they meant to make a rush, to take the Kid alive or dead. But they could not understand the silence; they could not understand why the cornered Kid did not burn powder. Not a sound—not a movement from the shadow of the pines where the Kid lay extended. Deep as the shadow was they could see him now, and he did not stir. Only his fixed, white face glimmered at them.

And four guns were levelled, and the sheriff's hoarse voice rapped out:

"Put 'em up, Kid! Pronto!"

The Kid did not speak or move.

The sheriff, comprehending, stopped closer, still with finger on trigger lest it should prove a trick.

But it was no trick. His hand dropped on the Kid's shoulder, and still the Kid did not move. It was a face almost of death into which the startled eyes of the sheriff peered. "I guess he's got him," muttered Watson.

He shoved his gun back into the holster. It was not wanted now. The Rio Kid had fought his last fight.

Gently enough the sheriff of Frio raised the unconscious Kid to his feet. The others pounced upon the Kid's guns, eager to secure them, scarcely daring to believe that the desperate Rio Kid had fallen so easily into their hands. The Kid's weight hung dead on the sheriff. His eyes were closed now—to open again in the calaboose at Frio.

The burly sheriff's look was compassionate. The white, set face on his shoulder looked strangely boyish. The sheriff remembered how the Kid had spared him, how he had saved him once in the chaparral down by the Rio Grande.

"I swore I'd get you, Kid!" muttered the Frio sheriff. "But, by gum, if you could sit a bronc this minute I sure suspicion I'd set you in a saddle and tell you to ride for it!"

"We've got him, sheriff!" One of the posse stared into the set face of the Kid with gloating satisfaction. "There'll be a jamboree in Frio when we take in the Rio Kid."

"There sure will!" said the sheriff; but there was no satisfaction in his tone.

He carried the Kid in his sinewy arms down the slope of the mesa. He had sworn to get the Kid, alive or dead, and he had got him more dead than alive; but his triumph left a bitter taste in his mouth. But the rest of the posse, at all events, rejoiced. Long had the Rio Kid defied all the cow country in the valley of the Pecos, and he was a prisoner at last.

When the Rio Kid's eyes opened, which was not till some hours later, he

found himself lying on blankets, blinking at the gleam of a camp-fire. He moved, and discovered that his hands were bound.

He stared dizzily round him. The Frio men had camped in the canyon at the feet of the mesa. Two of them were groaning in their blankets. The sheriff bent over the prisoner. "You've come to, Kid! I sure began to think you'd cashed your chips for keeps."

"My luck's given out," said the Kid faintly and bitterly. "You've got me." The sheriff nodded. "We hit the trail for Frio at sun-up," he said. "You'd pass along with us now. Hyer's your supper when you want."

But the Kid turned his face away.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. The Prisoner!

Frio was in an uproar. Long before the arrival of the sheriff the news had come in.

The Rio Kid was a prisoner. The Red Dog Saloon buzzed with a swarming, excited crowd. Cowpunchers from all the ranches swarmed in the streets. There was only one topic in Frio that day—the Rio Kid! He was taken at last! The 'doby calaboose in Main Street was ready for him.

"The Kid's roped in!" The news had flown like wildfire. One of the posse had ridden in early with the news. Help had been sent to fetch in badly wounded men. And the sheriff was coming with the prisoner. An excited cowboy came galloping and whooping in from the trail, waving his Stetson.

"They're coming!" "There was a rush out from the Red Dog to see the sheriff ride in—to see the Rio Kid.

Among the crowd stood Old Man Dawney, boss of the Double Bar. Old Man Dawney was a great man in Frio

and all along the river. But he was unnoticed now. All attention was riveted on the riders that came in from the Hucocastrol.

"There he is!" "The Rio Kid!" It was a roar from a hundred throats. Grim-faced and weary, the sheriff rode in, leading a broncho upon which was mounted the Rio Kid.

The Kid was bound to his saddle, his hands were bound down to his sides. His captors were taking no chances with him, wounded as he was. His face was white as chalk; but a mocking smile was on his lips, and he stared coolly at the surging crowd that roared round him as he rode a prisoner into Frio.

Old Man Dawney stepped into the street, and the horsemen stopped. The sheriff nodded to him with a grim grin. But the rancher's eyes were fixed on the Rio Kid.

The Kid's lip curled as he gave the rancher look for look.

"You've got me, feller," he drawled. "Make the most of it!"

The rancher's hard face twitched. "I sure wanted the sheriff to let up on you, Kid, after what you did for me," he said in a low voice.

"Thank you for nothing!" snapped the Kid. "I'm asking no favours from you or from any man in the Double Bar outfit."

"This way to the calaboose," said the sheriff, pulling at the rein. He did not want to make an exhibition of his prisoner.

"One moment," said the rancher coldly.

He looked at the Kid again. "I drove you off the Double Bar, Kid, for good reason. I put a reward on you because you turned to rustling and night-riding. But that's washed out now. You've got a friend in Frio, and that's your old boss George Dawney."

There was a murmur from the surging crowd. Old Man Dawney flashed a grim glance round, and the murmur died away. There were a score of men of the Double Bar in the street, and every gun in the Double Bar outfit would have leaped from its holster at a nod from Old Man Dawney.

"I'm standing by you, Kid," said the rancher coldly. "Chew on that when you're in the calaboose."

The Kid's eyes gleamed. "Stand by when you're asked, feller!" he rapped. "Who's asking favours of you? If you set the door of the calaboose wide open, Old Man Dawney, I sure wouldn't walk out. Chew on that, and leave me alone!"

The sheriff pulled the rein again, the rancher stopped aside, and the prisoner rode on to the calaboose.

Old Man Dawney stood staring after him with contracted brows and a flush in his hard cheeks. A surging, roaring mob followed the Kid to the Frio gaol, where the sheriff took him from his horse. As Watson led him in there was a roar.

"Lynch him!" And the crowd surged forward. The sheriff's gun appeared in his hand as if by magic.

"Outa that, pronto!" he snapped. And the mob surged back.

But the cry rang in the ears of the Rio Kid as he lay behind bars in the calaboose, with all Frio simmering round the walls.

THE END.

(You'll meet the RIO KID again next week in another Roaring Western Tale, entitled: "LYNCH LAW!" Tell all your pals about this grand NEW series of stories, chums! They'll be pleased to read them.)

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Get To Know The Kid!

He's Sure Some Boy!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

In the Frio Calaboose!

"LYNCH him!" Like the murmur of the sea, innumerable voices buzzed and hummed round the lumber prison in the plaza at Frio.

The Rio Kid sat on the edge of the plank that served as a bed, and grinned. Sometimes a stone or a chunk of wood whizzed through the air, and crashed on the wall or the barred window.

"Frio is sure getting excited," the Kid remarked.

The Kid himself did not look excited. He seemed rather to derive amusement from the roar in the plaza.

"Have him out!"

"Lynch him!"

Frio was the roughest cow-town in the valley of the Pecos, and "noctie" parties were far from unknown there. More than one rustler or gun-man, lodged in the calaboose, had been taken out by an excited mob, before he could be removed to the safety of the county gaol, and strung up on a branch.

And of all the hard characters in the section, the Rio Kid, boy as he was, was the best known and the most feared.

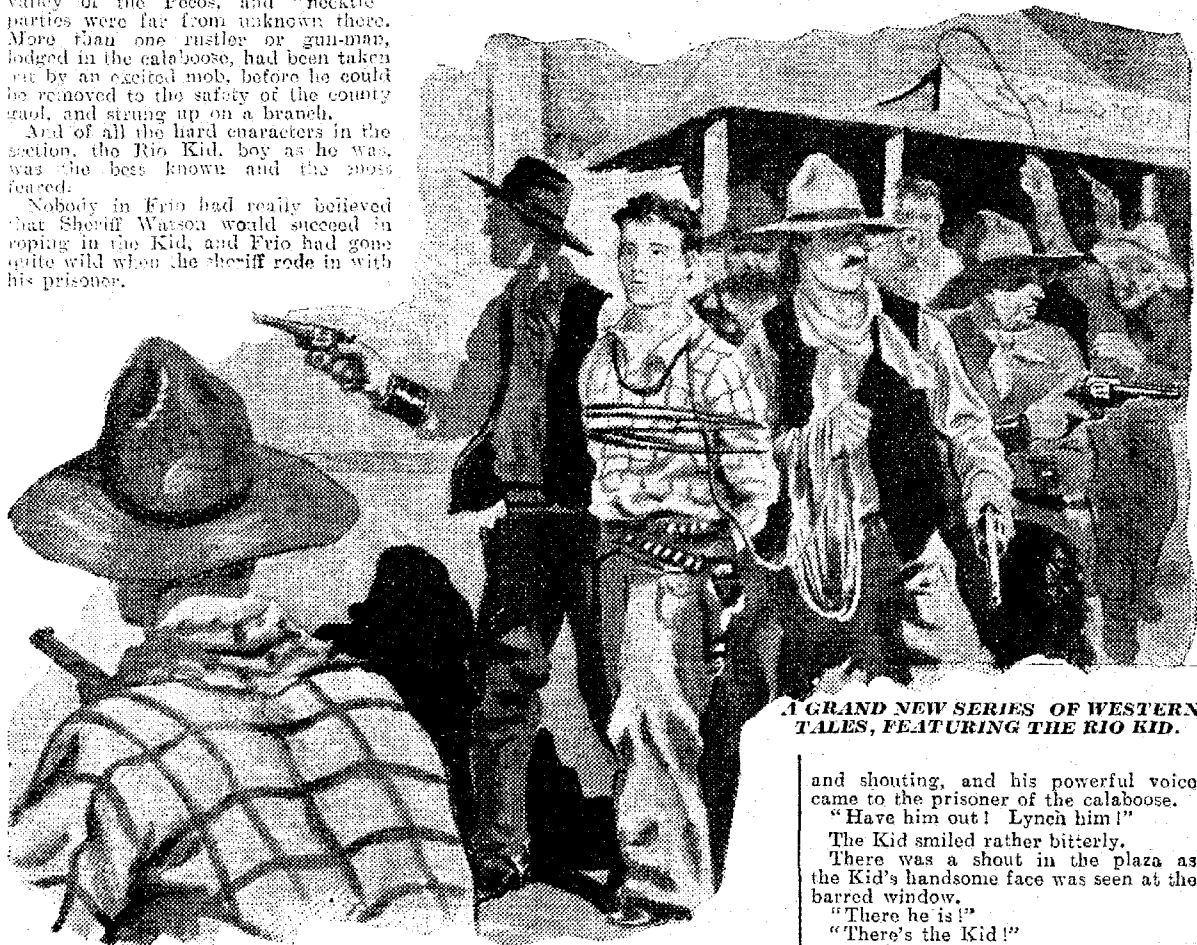
Nobody in Frio had really believed that Sheriff Watson would succeed in roping in the Kid, and Frio had gone quite wild when the sheriff rode in with his prisoner.

The RIO KID!



Ralph Redway

This week "LYNCH LAW"



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Day and night a crowd surged in the plaza. Every now and then some puncher from the ranches, having filled up on fire-water at the Red Dog, would roll down to the calaboose and loose off a succession of revolver-shots at the thick timber walls. More than once a hail had whistled in through the bars of the unglazed window.

"Lynch him!"

The Rio Kid stepped to the window of the little room and looked out, with clear, cool eyes.

He had a view of most of the plaza, with the Red Dog on the other side, and

excited crowd bunched outside the saloon.

A dozen punchers from the Double Bar had ridden in, and put up their horses at the hitching-rail, and joined the buzzing mob.

The Kid's smiling face clouded a little as he watched them.

He recognized most of them—Bud Wash, the foreman of the ranch; Fatty Tick, the ranch cook; Tex, the horse-breaker. Old friends of his in happier days, before Old Man Dawney had driven him off the Double Bar.

The Double Bar outfit seemed as keen against the Kid as the rest of Frio.

Bud Wash was brandishing a big Colt,

and shouting, and his powerful voice came to the prisoner of the calaboose.

"Have him out! Lynch him!"

The Kid smiled rather bitterly.

There was a shout in the plaza as the Kid's handsome face was seen at the barred window.

"There he is!"

"There's the Kid!"

And there was a rush across the plaza towards the lumber building.

The Rio Kid eyed the excited mob coolly, a smile on his lips. But he was well aware that one determined rush of the Frio crowd would have burst open the calaboose and placed him at the mercy of the lynchers. It was only a timber building—one end of it the sheriff's office, the other, three rooms that served as cells. It was not the lumber wall that had saved the Kid, so far, from the mob. It was Sheriff Watson, and the well-known fact that he would shoot if an attempt was made to rush the calaboose.

But the Kid knew that it would come. For days he had been a prisoner in the

In Texas, a land of raw-boned he-men, where life is held cheap, Judge Lynch rules with a rod of iron. And the rustler or outlaw who falls into the hands of the law, meets a swift and grim justice!

calaboose, tied down to his plank bed by his wound. But the hardy Kid was almost himself again now. He was well enough to be moved to a safer place of keeping. He knew that on the morrow he was to go. And he did not believe that Frio would let him get away, even in the sheriff's hands. Yet he smiled



as he looked out at a sea of threatening faces.

"So you're thar, Kid!" said Bud Wash, staring at the handsome sunburnt face framed in the little window. "Sure, old pard," said the Kid cheerfully. "Kinder friendly of you to pay me a call. How's things at the Double Bar?"

Bud grinned. "I allows you allers had a nerve, Kid," he said. "Lynch him!" "Have you fixed the party for to-night, you-uns?" asked the Kid carelessly. "You'll find me ready. I guess I shall be at home."

"Have him out!" "I'd be glad to see you if I had my Colts here."

Crack! A bullet struck the timber a few inches from the window.

The Kid laughed. "I guess you've forgotten how to shoot on the Double Bar since I left," he remarked.

"We ain't forgotten how to tic a rope, Kid!" said Tex.

"Has Old Man Dawney sent you in to town for me?" jeered the Kid. "That his thanks to me for gettin' him away from the rustlers up in the hills? I guess I was plumb loco to do it."

"Have him out!" roared a score of voices, and there was a surge towards the calaboose.

"Let up!" It was the sharp, harsh voice of Sheriff Watson.

The big, burly sheriff stepped out into view from the building, with his gun at a level. His grim face was dark.

"You ginks mosey on, pronto!" he rapped out.

"I guess we want the Kid, sheriff," said Bud Wash. "We've brought a rope for him from the Double Bar."

"Light out!" said the sheriff laconically, and his gun looked the Double Bar foreman full in the face.

Bud looked at him, shrugged his shoulders, and turned away. The mob, daunted by the sheriff, surged back across the plaza to the Red Dog.

The Kid smiled after them. Sheriff Watson stared after the retreating crowd with a grim, perplexed face. The westering sun was dipping down to the sierra, shadows were lengthening in the streets of Frio. When darkness came, he knew that there would be an outbreak. It was to be a wild night in Frio, and the sheriff knew it. He glanced angrily at the window.

"Get back there, Kid!" he rapped. "Why?" smiled the Kid.

"Do you want to stop a bullet, you young gink?"

The Kid laughed. "I guess a bullet's as good as a rope," he answered.

Watson frowned. "You're goin' to the county gaol to stand your trial, Kid," he said. "There

won't be any necktie party hyer while I can stop it."

"You sure can't, sheriff," drawled the Kid. "These hombres won't let me out of Frio now they've got me in. I guess you're as wise to that as I am. Best thing you can do is to be away from home when they call to-night. Hit the trail, sheriff, while it's open."

The sheriff grunted, and went back into his office. He felt that the Kid's words were true; but he had no intention of hitting the trail. He had his duty to do, and his duty was to defend his prisoner. But as he sat in his office, and listened to the roar of the mob surging round the Red Dog, it was borne in upon his mind that, in spite of him, that night would see the end of the Rio Kid's life-trail.

THE SECOND CHAPTER. The Lynchers!

FROM the locked and barred room that held the Rio Kid, as darkness deepened on the valley of the Pecos, came a tuneful whistle. Sheriff Watson, tramping, with a knitted brow, in the passage outside, frowned and wondered. The plaza was crowded with an ever-growing mob, and the roar of voices, the crackling of revolvers recklessly fired in the air, was incessant. Yet the Kid was whistling cheerfully a Spanish fandango tune, as if he had no care on his mind.

The sheriff unbarred the door at last and threw it open. From the shadows a mocking face looked at him.

"Say, sheriff, you're sure looking

troubled," said the Kid. "They'll be here soon. You want to hit the trail?" "Oh, cut it out, Kid!" growled the sheriff.

"If you don't stand for a necktie party, old hoss, Frio will want a new sheriff to-morrow," grinned the Kid. "Those hombres mean business, and they'll shoot if you stop them."

"I guess I know that." "It's you for the long trail, if you pull the trigger," said the Kid. "What's the use, sheriff?"

"They won't touch you s'long as a bullet is left in my Colt," grunted Watson. "They're sure wild to get you, Kid. Even the Double Bar men, what you worked with once—the whole outfit's in town, and yelling for you!"

The Kid's lip curled. "What have I done to them?" he said. "I've always left the Double Bar alone. It's Old Man Dawney at the bottom of it; he wants to get clear of me."

The sheriff nodded. "I allow it's that," he assented; "and it's queer, too. You saved Mr. Dawney from the rustlers when they had him by the short hairs. But for them you wouldn't be here. I don't figure we should have got you, when we trailed you in the hills, if you hadn't been wounded. But Old Man Dawney chipped in and asked me to let up on you, Kid. Now his whole outfit's yelling for your blood. They're the wildest of the lot."

The Kid's face hardened in the shadows.

He knew that. His old comrades of the Double Bar were the wildest in the lynch crowd.

Yet in all his wild deeds since he had left the Double Bar he had done them no harm. He had warned Bud Wash when the brand blotters were lifting the Double Bar steers; he had risked his life to rescue Old Man Dawney from the Black Sack crowd. Only the wound he had received in that desperate fight had brought him into the hands of the law. The Kid's face was hard and bitter as he thought of it.

"Old Man Dawney's a hard case, sheriff," he said. "He boosted me off the Double Bar, long ago, for no reason. He put 'thief' to my name in all the cow country, and never listened to a word I had to say. And the whole outfit followed his lead. And now they want to string me up. Sheriff, let me have my guns back."

Watson shook his head. "I guess your guns are in safe keeping, Kid," he said. "They won't get you till they get me first."

"That sure won't take them long, when they get going," said the Kid. "Where's your posse, sheriff?"

Watson shrugged his shoulders. "You're alone here?" "Yep."

"Even the gaoler's lit out?" "Yep."

The Kid laughed. "He's got sense," he said. "Give me my guns, sheriff, and light out yourself. You're throwin' it away."

But Watson shook his head again. "Hark!" said the Kid. "You can hear them! They're coming, sheriff!"

The sheriff was examining his revolvers. His face was hard and grim and determined.

The roar from the plaza was deafening now.

Darkness had fallen upon Frio. Across the plaza the naphtha lamps of the Red Dog flared and glared into the night. Cowpunchers rode up and down the rugged streets, with a wild rattle

of hoofs and harness, loosing off incessant shots. The Frio mob was working itself up into a fury—working up its courage to rush the calaboose, in spite of the grim and resolute man who stood on guard there. Not a man of the sheriff's posse had joined him to defend the calaboose. Some of them, indeed, were in the mob that roared round the lumber building. In all Frio there was only Sheriff Watson to stand between the captured Kid and the rope of Judge Lynch, but he stood like a rock of the sierra.

"Lynch him!" It was a deafening roar. The sheriff stepped to the little barred window and stared grimly out. The Kid sat on the edge of the plank bed and whistled again, a merry fandango tune.

"That's Buck Hawk," muttered the sheriff, as his eyes fell on a burly, powerful man who was mounted on a barrel outside the Red Dog, haranguing the crowd. "I guess he's the king-pin in this business. I guess he will get his first."

Buck Hawk's powerful voice came ringing across the plaza.

"Have him out! And if the sheriff chips in, string him up, too, along with the Kid!"

There was a roar of assent. Hawk waved a revolver in the air. "Foller me, boys!" he roared.

"Who's for Judge Lynch?" "Another roar."

"Lynch him!" "That's the music!" shouted Bud Wash. "Have him out of the calaboose!"

"Have the Kid out!" yelled Tex. The sheriff gritted his teeth.

From the flaring lights of the Red Dog the whole mob surged across the plaza towards the calaboose. And this time, as the sheriff knew, they would not be stopped. He had seen lynch crowds before.

He stepped back from the window. "Kid!"

The Kid ceased to whistle. "They're coming," said the sheriff. "Keep where you are, Kid. No hombre in that caboodle will get into this room while I'm alive. I guess that's all I can do."

"Cut it out, sheriff," drawled the Kid. "What's the good?"

"That's my business." "Crash!"

It was a thundering blow on the door of the calaboose. It was followed by a roar of voices.

"Sheriff!" "Sheriff Watson!"

"Where's he hiding?" roared Buck Hawk. "Show yourself, sheriff. You let us in, or this door goes to blazes, pronto!"

Crash, crash!

The sheriff stood in the doorway of the Kid's cell. The passage ran past the cell to the door of the calaboose. The keen edge of an axe was already glittering through the wood.

Crash!

The door shook and groaned. Under the heavy blows of the axe, and the pressure of the mob, it gave at last, and flew into pieces.

The mob of lynchers, with Buck Hawk at their head, swarmed into the calaboose.

The sheriff's gun came up. His steady eye glittered over the levelled barrel.

"Halt thar!"

The mob surged to a halt. In his cell behind the sheriff the Rio Kid was whistling a fandango again, with never a quaver.

"Back, you coyotes!" growled the

sheriff. "You, Hawk, put 'em up. You pesky gunman, it's you for the long trail if you take another step!"

"Let up, sheriff!" rapped out the gunman. "We don't want to hurt you; we want the Rio Kid."

"Lynch him!"

"I guess you'll hurt me first, and somebody else will get hurt, too," grunted the sheriff. "Back, I tell you!"

"We want the Kid!"

"You want ten years in the pen, you Hawk!" jeered the sheriff. "I guess I remember the Kid belting you with a trail-rope for ill-using a horse. Is that why you want him?"

The gunman gritted his teeth. "Stand aside, sheriff!"

"Not a step!"

"Foller on, boys!" yelled Hawk. And he rushed on, firing as he came.

But the sheriff pulled trigger first. There was a fearful yell, that rang above the roar of the mob, and Buck Hawk spun over and crashed on the floor.

With a gasping breath the mob surged back. For a tense moment they hung, glaring at the sheriff and his levelled gun, with the groaning gunman sprawling between. Then there was a deafening roar, and a score of guns were thrust forward.

A moment more and the calaboose of Frio would have rung and echoed to a desperate fight—one determined man against a savage mob. But in that moment the sheriff's gun-hand was suddenly forced up, as his arm was grasped from behind. And the Rio Kid's voice called coolly:

"All right for you-uns! Pronto!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Friends or Foes?

SHERIFF WATSON struggled savagely and desperately.

But the Rio Kid held him fast, and the Kid's muscles were of steel. His gun was forced above his shoulder; an impotent bullet went tearing through the wooden roof of the calaboose. A second more, and the Kid had knocked the gun from his hand.

"Kid!" panted the sheriff. "You mad gink! Let me go!"

The Rio Kid grinned in his face. "What's the good, sheriff? Your life's worth savin'!"

"Let me go!" roared the sheriff. But it was too late.

The lynchers came on with a desperate rush. Hands were laid on the sheriff on all sides. The Kid laughed and let him go, and stepped back into the cell. The sheriff, still struggling furiously, was dragged out into the passage; and at the same time three or four pairs of hands were laid on the Rio Kid.

"I guess this lets you out, Kid!"

Bud Wash, the foreman of the Double Bar, laid his sinewy hands on the Rio Kid.

"Correct!" assented the Kid. "No need to be rough, gents; I'm coming like a lamb!"

In the passage, the sheriff was still struggling and spitting out curses. Fatty Tick, grinning, drew a trail-rope round him.

"You're sure out of this deal, sheriff," grinned the cook of the Double Bar. "I guess I'm going to tic you up for your own sake, sheriff. You won't do yourself any harm with your hands tied."

Three or four cowpunchers were grasping the sheriff, and the Double Bar cook bound his hands together, and then his ankles. Then the sheriff, panting with rage, was cast aside, helpless.

Round the Rio Kid the lynchers

gathered, with triumphant faces. He made no resistance, and the cool smile never left his face. The Kid knew how to take his gruel with a stiff upper lip. Bud Wash bound his hands behind him. Tex looped the end of a riata round his neck. There was a roar from the mob outside. "Bring him out!" "Let's see the Kid!" "Get going, Kid, pronto!" rapped out the foreman of the Double Bar.

The Kid eyed them. Bud Wash held his right arm. Tex gripped his left. Round him the Frio men thronged and surged. Within the calaboose Buck Hawk, the gunman, lay groaning unheeded—as unheeded as the sheriff, who was streaming lurid "cuss-words" at the lynch-crowd. There was a swarming at the Kid, but Bud Wash shoved back the roo-eager. "Easy, gents—easy!" said the burly foreman of the Double Bar. "I guess

indifference. The men he had known on the ranch where once his home had been seemed keenest to drag him to the rope that was to end his trail. They packed round him, and every man had a gun in his hand; and the mob had let them take the lead in the affair. Past the Red Dog saloon they marched the Kid. The moon was coming up, and a silvery radiance mingled with the glare of the naphthalamps. Down Main Street, towards the open plain the lynchers marched the



"VISITORS" FOR THE KID! Under the heavy blows of the axe, and the pressure of the mob, the door gave at last and flew into pieces. The mob of lynchers swarmed into the calaboose. "Where's the kid!" The Sheriff's gun came up. "Halt thar!" he growled. (See Chapter 2.)

"I guess I'm at your service, gents!" drawled the Kid. "Pleased to meet you all—more pleased if I'd had my guns!" He walked out of the cell in the midst of the lynchers. He gave the bound sheriff a smile in passing. "So-long, sheriff! I guess I've saved your life! You'll be glad to-morrow, sheriff!" "You fool, Kid!" panted Watson. "I guess you're plumb loco!" The Kid grinned. "You'd have been over the range by this time, sheriff, if I hadn't hooked your gun away!" he said. "What was the use?" And the Kid, his head erect and his face smiling, walked out of the calaboose in the grasp of many hands. The sheriff dragged wildly at his bonds. But the trail-rope held him fast, and the Kid disappeared from his eyes as he lay struggling on the floor. Outside the calaboose a thunderous roar greeted the appearance of the Rio Kid. "Hyee he is!" "Lynch him!"

we're doing this thing in order! Who's got the rope?" "Here you are, Bud!" grinned Mezal Pete, of the Double Bar. "Rope all ready on the Kid's neck!" "This way!" said Bud. "Bring him over to the Red Dog!" roared five or six voices. "Lynch him over the doorway!" "Quit that!" snapped Bud. "He's goin' up on a tree! Make way, you hombres!" The Rio Kid was marched forward through the roaring crowd. He walked steadily and coolly. He noted that the Double Bar men were closing round him, keeping the Frio crowd off from close quarters. They packed him like a guard as he crossed the plaza. Men from other ranches—the Circle Cross, the Bar-O, the Golden West, and many more, were shouting in the crowd, along with the Frio townsmen, the loungers and gunmen of the saloons. But the Double Bar crowd were more than twenty strong, and they kept together. It surprised the Kid, though he took it with his usual cool

Kid, to where tall trees nodded in the moon glimmer. "You're wastin' time, hombres!" said the Kid. "But I'm enjoying this little paseo with my old pards." "Lynch him!" The mob poured out of the town, and stopped at the clump of trees by the side of the rugged trail. There the Kid was halted under a high horizontal branch. Tex threw the end of the lasso over the branch, and caught it as it came down. The riata tautened, and the noose gave the Rio Kid's chin a sharp jerk. "Up with him!" "Pronto, pards!" crawled the Kid. "The gents are gettin' impatient for the show." "You're a cool little cuss, Kid!" grinned Tex. The Kid smiled, with a glint of fire in his eyes. "If I had a hand loose and a gun in it," he sighed, "I guess some of these ginks would be hittin' it for home, instead of howlin' like a pack of coyotes!" THE POPULAR.—No. 473.

But the game's up, and I guess I'm not squealin'. Put her through!"

"Up with him!" roared the Frio mob.

"Bring the boss!" shouted Bud Wash. And a Double Bar puncher came pushing through the crowd, leading a grey mustang.

The Kid's face changed.

It was his own mustang that he had not seen since he had left it free in the Hueca hills, the day he had fallen into the grip of the Frio sheriff and his posse. The mustang whinnied softly as he recognised his master, and thrust a soft muzzle against him. The Kid's face, hitherto cool and recklessly indifferent, worked.

"You could have left that out, Bud," he muttered. "I guess you might have scared up any old cayuse in the burg. You ain't a white man, Bud, to play a trick like this."

Bud Wash made no answer. From the crowd surging round the doomed Kid and the Double Bar punchers came a yell. They recognised the Kid's well-known horse, and yelled again as he was hoisted into the saddle.

Bud Wash lifted the lithe figure of the Kid into the saddle. The Kid's face was a little whiter now; the sight of his horse, the one creature he loved in all Texas, had shaken him for the moment.

But as Bud was placing him in the saddle, he whispered, and his whisper electrified the Kid.

"Watch out, Kid! When you hear my gat, ride hell-for-leather for the Double Bar."

The Kid's cool brain swam for a moment.

The next, Bud Wash stepped back. He waved his hand, with his gat in it, driving back the eager crowd.

"Clear back, gents! Give the Kid room."

There was a laugh from some of the lynchers.

"Give him room to swing."

The Kid sat his mustang like a statue. The Double Bar foreman's whisper was still in his ears; hope, in the hour of shadow and death, ran through his veins like wine.

His hands were bound behind his back; but that mattered little to a rider like the Kid. Often had he guided his horse only with a pressure of the knees in a wild crowd of steers. His feet were in the stirrups; he could ride—he would ride, if there was a chance. But the bridle was held by Tex, to lead the mustang from under the Kid as soon as the rope was pulled taut and to leave him swinging.

The mob backed away, breathing hard as they watched.

"I'm givin' the word!" shouted Bud Wash. "When this gat goes, drive on that cayuse, Tex."

"You bet."

A puncher pulled at the rope to tauten it. The Kid caught his breath as he felt the noose slipping. The knot was not tied—it was a trick. He understood at last, but his face gave no sign. Had the Frio mob understood, a hundred guns were ready to riddle the Kid with bullets before he could escape.

But the Kid knew.

He knew why the Double Bar men had taken the lead in the lynching now. He knew that as soon as the mustang started, the noose would slip from his neck, leaving him free.

His heart beat.

"She goes!" roared Bud.

He lifted his gat high.

Bang!

The roar of the .45 was followed by the rush of the mustang, led onward by Tex's grip on the bridle.

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The next instant the Kid should have been swinging at the end of the rope over the branch.

But the loose loop slipped from his neck, and he went on with the mustang. Tex released the bridle, and struck the animal a quick blow with his quirt. The mustang leaped forward into the crowd.

There was a wild swaying away from bared teeth and lashing hoofs, as the mustang plunged into the mob. Wild yells and shouts rose on all sides.

"Shoot, you ginks, shoot!" roared Bud Wash, and his own revolver barked out bullets.

But the Kid, though the lead whistled close, knew that none would hit him. He drove on the mustang with his knees, and the horse fairly tore through the swaying, surging crowd, kicking and plunging and snapping. In a few seconds he was through, and the Rio Kid was riding for his life under the dim gleam of the moon.

He left a roaring mob behind him, yelling, raving, loosing off shots. The Frio crowd did not yet understand the trick that had been played, and how their victim had been snatched from them, under their eyes, by the Double Bar outfit. Bud Wash was roaring for his horse, and the Double Bar men were the first in the saddle to pursue the escaping Kid. Behind them came a crowd of Frio men who had got at their horses. But the Double Bar men had had their bronchos near at hand in readiness, and they had a good start of the Frio crowd, and were close behind the Kid.

The Rio Kid rode hard.

Behind him the roar of Frio died down; but he heard the thudding of rapid hoof-beats.

He laughed aloud as he rode.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Back to the Double Bar!

"PULL in, Kid!"

It was the hoarse voice of Bud Wash shouting behind.

A pressure of the Kid's knee's, and the grey mustang slackened speed.

With a shout and a clatter of hoofs, the Double Bar outfit rode up and surrounded the Kid.

Bud grinned at the Kid's bright face. "Hyer you are, you young gink. I

guess it was a close thing—but we've pulled it off."

The Double Bar punchers cheered wildly, waving their Stetsons.

"You had me beat, Bud," said the Kid. "I'd never have figured it out that this was the game. I reckoned you was all keen on getting me strung up—keener than the hombres in Frio."

The Double Bar foreman chuckled.

"I guess there wasn't any other way, Kid. We couldn't have hooked you out of the calaboose without fighting all Frio. But I reckon as soon as they started talking of Judge Lynch it was easy going. Them ginks in Frio don't savvy yet, but they've got it coming."

He slid his knife across the rope that fastened the Kid's arms, and freed him. The Rio Kid reached for his reins.

It was like a dream to him; only minutes could be counted back to the moment when he had been a helpless victim in the grip of the lynchers, and now he was riding on the open plain under the stars, with his mustang between his knees, free and light of heart.

Bud Wash gave an anxious glance back.

Horsemen were pushing on from Frio. A hundred men or more had followed the Double Bar punchers in pursuit of the Kid.

"This-a-way!" muttered Bud, and he turned off the trail, and the punchers rode across the open plain.

"Where are we going, Bud?" asked the Kid.

"To the Double Bar, I reckon."

"You'll get fired for this, Bud."

"Guess again," grinned the foreman.

"Old Man Dawney will fire you, as sure as shooting," said the Kid. "He won't stand for me getting away with it this-a-way, Bud."

"Forget it, Kid," said Bud Wash.

"Do you figure it out we'd have woke up Frio without orders from the boss?"

The Kid started violently.

"Old Man Dawney's orders?" he exclaimed.

"Old Man Dawney hasn't forgot that you hooked him away from the rustlers, Kid. Didn't he tell you, when you was brought into Frio, that he was standing by you?"

The Kid nodded, still amazed.

"I guess it was Old Man Dawney put this up," said Tex. "Not that we'd have let those ginks lynch a feller what had run with the Double Bar outfit. But the boss planned it all. We'd have had to fight the hull town to get you out of the calaboose. But Old Man Dawney knew. He put us up to takin' the lead in the lynching. Savve?"

"And I reckoned—" muttered the Kid.

"Course you did," said Bud Wash. "If we'd let out what we'd reely come for we'd be fighting all Frio at this blessed minute. But bein' as we was yelling for your blood, they gave us the lead. Pull in here for a spell, you-uns."

The punchers rode into a shadowy motte and drew rein under the trees. Far in the distance, they listened to galloping hoofs. The pursuit from Frio swept away under the stars, and the galloping died into silence. Bud Wash chuckled grimly.

"I guess those ginks have gone," he said. "They've missed us in the dark. But it was sure a close thing."

The punchers resumed their ride, the Kid in the midst of the hilarious crowd of horsemen. Across the shadowy plains they were riding for the Double Bar Ranch.

THE END.

(Boys! There's a thrill in every line of next week's roaring tale of the Rio Kid, entitled: "The Whip Hand!")

THE MAGICAL CUP!



All about Saturday's Cup-ties in the Fifth Round and who should win. See this week's

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CLEARING HIS NAME!

At the Double Bar Ranch, the place where he had once been a cowpuncher and whence he had been driven out as a thief, the chance is given to the Rio Kid to clear his name! And you can bet your life the young outlaw takes it!

THE RIO KID!

by RALPH REDWAY This Week: *The WHIP HAND!*



HERE'S ANOTHER OF OUR ROARING WILD-WEST TALES, FEATURING THE AMAZING BOY OUTLAW, THE RIO KID!

THE FIRST CHAPTER. Sheriff Watson Looks In!

THERE was a clatter of hoofs and a jangling of bridles outside the Double Bar ranch-house. Old Man Dawney, in the rocker on the ranch veranda, removed his feet from the rail, and the black Mexican cheroot from his mouth, and rose. He leaned on the cedar rail and looked down at the bunch of horsemen who had drawn rein.

Sheriff Watson of Frio stared up at him from under the shadow of his Stetson. His bearded face was grim.

"Mornin', rancher!" he grunted.

"Morning, sheriff! You're coming in?"

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"I guess I'm coming in for the Rio Kid, rancher, unless you hands him out, pronto!" said the sheriff.

"The Rio Kid?"

"We sure know he's here," said Watson. "We've come for him, Mr. Dawney. We want the Kid."

Old Man Dawney stared steadily at the Frio sheriff.

"If you want the Kid, sheriff, you should sure have kept him when you had him," he answered. "You had him in the calaboose at Frio yesterday. If you let a lynch crowd hook him out it's sure your own funeral."

"I guess we're wise to that now!" growled Watson. "The Double Bar crowd chipped in jest to save him from

lynching. I'm sure obliged to them for saving my prisoner. But if they figger on keeping him, wash it out, rancher. The Kid's my game, and we want him."

"I guess you can want."

Old Man Dawney spoke quietly and coldly.

Watson's rugged brow darkened. His hand rested on his gun-holster as he sat his horse under the veranda rails. The six men who rode with him had their hands on their guns.

"I reckoned that was the game, rancher," said Watson. "But it cuts no ice with me. You don't stand for taking a prisoner outa the hands of the law, George Dawney."

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"I did not take him out," said Old Man Dawney coolly. "You let a lynch crowd take him. You failed to protect your prisoner, Sheriff Watson, whether it was your fault or not. The Double Bar outfit had to save him. They're keeping him."

"Cut it out, rancher. We're lectured, and we've come for the Kid. If there's shooting, you take the blame. You're sure a big man in the Pecos Valley, rancher, but you ain't so all-fired big that you can snap your fingers at the law. You'll hand over the Kid."

The rancher shook his head. "He's here?" demanded Watson. "I guess I'm not answering questions," drawled Old Man Dawney. "If you figure that he's here, you can look him out by legal process. Get an order from Judge Pink at the county town, sheriff."

"While you put him on a cayuse and start him safe over the border into Mexico!" snapped Watson.

The rancher shrugged his broad shoulders.

"It won't wash, rancher," said Watson. "The Rio Kid's my meat, dead or alive. We want him, and we mean business. Your outfit sure put the goods on Frio last night; but you ain't fooling me. Where's the Kid?"

"You jaspers will have to find him if you want him," said the rancher. "The Kid's a pesky little fire-bug. I allow; and it was me that boosted him off this ranch long ago. But since then he has saved my life from the Black Sack rustlers, sheriff, and George Dawney don't stand for forgetting a thing like that. Cut it out!"

"We shall search the ranch for him," said the sheriff.

"I guess not. You won't step into this ranch," said Old Man Dawney. "And there's a crowd of punchers hyer that will tell you so."

The sheriff glanced round.

Twenty men of the Double Bar were gathering on the spot, and they had rifles in their hands. The sheriff's posse exchanged uneasy glances, and moved closer together. They had come armed and ready to fight for the young outiaw if he was not handed over peaceably. But they realised that they had to think again, if Old Man Dawney's outfit were prepared to stand by the Kid. A volley from the punchers' rifles would have emptied every saddle there. Watson gritted his teeth.

"If you're puttin' up a fight for the Kid, rancher—"

"Just that," said the rancher coolly.

"I guess these hombres will think twice afore firing on the sheriff's posse."

"Guess again, sheriff!" grinned Bud Wash, the foreman of the Double Bar. "You pull a trigger hyer, feller, and you'll never pull a trigger agin on this side of Jordan. What Mr. Dawney says goes."

The sheriff breathed hard.

"You'll have all Frio at the ranch afore sundown, Mr. Dawney. They don't stand for allowing you to run things just as you please. You'll get burnt out."

"Ali Frio's welcome, if they want bad trouble," said Old Man Dawney coolly. "I don't give a continental red cent for all Frio, with every other cow-town on the Pecos thrown in. Hit the trail, sheriff, while the going's good."

The sheriff of Frio looked at his men. They had withdrawn their hands from their guns.

"I guess they've got us beat, sheriff," said one of the posse. "It's a cinch for them."

"That's loss-sense," said the rancher,

with a nod. "Keep your prisoners when you've got them, if you want them."

"I'm not goin' without the Kid!" said Watson. "This is too late in the day for you, George Dawney. It was you that boosted the kid on this god-darned ranch, and turned him into an outiaw. I never quite cottoned to it that the Kid had done what you believed; and he says he didn't. But he's done enough since to hang a dozen hombres, and we want him. You started him as an outiaw, and you can't alter it now."

The rancher's face hardened.

"I did the Kid no injustice," he said. "What I believed then, I believe now. But he's saved my life since, and I'm not goin' back on him. Hit the trail, sheriff, while the going's good!"

"Not without the Kid."

The Double Bar punchers exchanged glances, and the rifles were at a level. It needed only a sign from Old Man Dawney, for the sheriff and his posse to be swept out of existence. It was plain that the punchers would pull trigger at a sign from their boss. Sheriff Watson did not falter; but his followers were not made of the same stern stuff. They wheeled their horses and rode for the trail.

"Foller on, sheriff!" grinned Bud Wash.

"Not without the Kid!" said Watson, between his teeth. "I've got my duty to do, and my duty's to take the Rio Kid to the county gaol to stand his trial. Shoot'n be durned to you!"

Whiz!

A rope sang in the air, and a loop dropped over the sheriff's shoulders. The rope twanged, and the sheriff of Frio was plucked from his saddle, falling with a crash to the ground. Tex the horse-breaker ran forward, dragging in his lasso as he ran.

There was a bang from the sheriff's Colt, but the lead was wasted as he rolled over in the grip of the riata. The next moment the gun was kicked from his hand.

"I guess that fixes you, sheriff!" grinned Tex. "I'd be sorry to see a good man like you cashin' in his chips for nothin'!"

"You durned gink!" roared the sheriff, struggling madly with the rope.

There was a roar of laughter from the punchers. A dozen hands grasped the struggling sheriff of Frio.

Mr. Dawney smiled coldly from the veranda.

"Don't damage him, boys! Ride him off the ranch!"

"You'll hear agin of this!" raved the sheriff. "By the holy smoke, I'll bring half Frio here and wipe out the bull outfit!"

"Ride him off!" said the rancher.

Bud Wash and Tex gripped the sheriff and hoisted him into his saddle. Tex leaped on his broncho and rode; the lasso, still gripping the disarmed sheriff, led him after the horse-breaker. A roar of laughter from the Double Bar outfit followed them as they rode, and the enraged sheriff disappeared in the bunch-grass in the distance.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Kid's Choice!

THE Rio Kid laughed. The Kid, from a window of the ranch-house, had been watching the scene at the veranda rails.

At the sight of the sheriff of Frio, the Kid's hand had gone instinctively to his belt. But the holster at his belt was empty; the Kid's guns were gone. The Double Bar outfit had saved him

from the lynch mob in Frio, and brought him to the ranch, and the Kid knew that he owed his life to Old Man Dawney. But what the rancher's intentions were he did not know yet. He was unarmed, and he was not permitted to leave the ranch. But the Kid did not worry. He had slept soundly through the night, and turned out cool and cheery in the morning. Whatever was coming, the Kid was sure to meet it with a cool and smiling face.

He laughed as he watched the sheriff ride off at the end of Tex's riata. His laugh rang cheerily.

Old Man Dawney was standing by his friend, as he had said that he would when the Kid was taken a prisoner into Frio. The Kid had saved his life at the hands of the Black Sack crowd, and the rancher was not the man to remain under an unpaid obligation. The account was square now. The Kid wondered what was coming. He wanted no more favours from the man who had once driven him off the ranch at the muzzle of a Colt. He wondered what Old Man Dawney's intentions might be. But he would not have waited to learn, had a chance offered to reach the corral and his mustang, and ride for the Rio Grande.

But he was a prisoner. The door of the room where he stood was locked. But the Kid was not an easy man to keep.

There was a click of a key, and the door opened. It was Old Man Dawney who entered.

The Kid gave him a rather mocking smile.

"Morning, rancher!" he drawled.

Old Man Dawney closed the door and sat on a pinewood settle, facing the Kid. At a movement of the Kid, he drew forward his gun-holster a little. The Kid laughed.

"I've no gun, rancher," he said banteringly.

"I guess I'm not trusting you too far, Kid," said Dawney dryly. "I've saved your life, and you know it; but if you get your ears up with me, I'd let daylight through you before you could say, 'No sugar in mine.'"

"I get you!" assented the Kid, showing his hands into his pockets. "What's the game, rancher? Have you come here to chew the rag?"

Old Man Dawney nodded.

"I've come to talk to you," he said. "You saw Watson and his posse ride in. They're gone; but Watson isn't the man to swallow it. He will sure get you if you hang on to the Double Bar."

"My mustang's in the corral," said the Kid. "What's the matter with riding for Mexico?"

"I guess it's not so easy. You saved my life, Kid, and I've saved yours. But you're a gun-man—a bad egg—and I guess I don't know that I can let you loose on the plains again. You're a bad man to let loose, Kid, and all the ranchers along the Pecos will curse me if I let you loose again!"

"They sure will!" agreed the Kid. "But you ain't turning the Double Bar into a calaboose, rancher?"

"None!"

"You'll have to keep me or let me go," grinned the Kid. "Better let me go, rancher. I'm not a safe hombre to keep around."

"That's got to be settled," said Dawney. "I was thinking of taking you to the county gaol to stand your trial. But I guess I might as well have left you to Judge Lynch."

"Right in once!" assented the Kid.

"You washed out the Black Sack

crowd, and that would count in your favour. But—"

"But there's too many ginks along the Pecos who are sure keen to get me," said the Kid.

"That's it."

The Rio Kid shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm asking nothing of you, George Dawney," he said. "I never asked you to look me away from Judge Lynch.

"That isn't the talk for a man who holds your life and liberty in his hands, Kid!"

"It's the talk you'll get from me!" said the Kid disdainfully. "Why, you was plumb loco to believe what you did. A bunch of greasers held me up when I was bringing the pay from the bank in Frio, and got away with the greenbacks. You figured it out that I hid the money, and fancied the hold-up!" The Kid's lip curled. "It was like you, George Dawney—you was always a hard and suspicious man. I never did it, and if you'd given me a show, I'd have got after those Mexicans and got back the goods. You called me a thief and drove me off the ranch!"

"Cut it out, Kid—that talk does no good!" he said. "What I thought then I think now."

The Kid gave another shrug. For a moment he had been betrayed into anger; but he was cool again at once.

"Then what's the palaver about?" he asked. "You've got me here."

"I'm not handing you over to the law," said Old Man Dawney. "And I can't let you go free on the ranges. I want you to get out of the country."

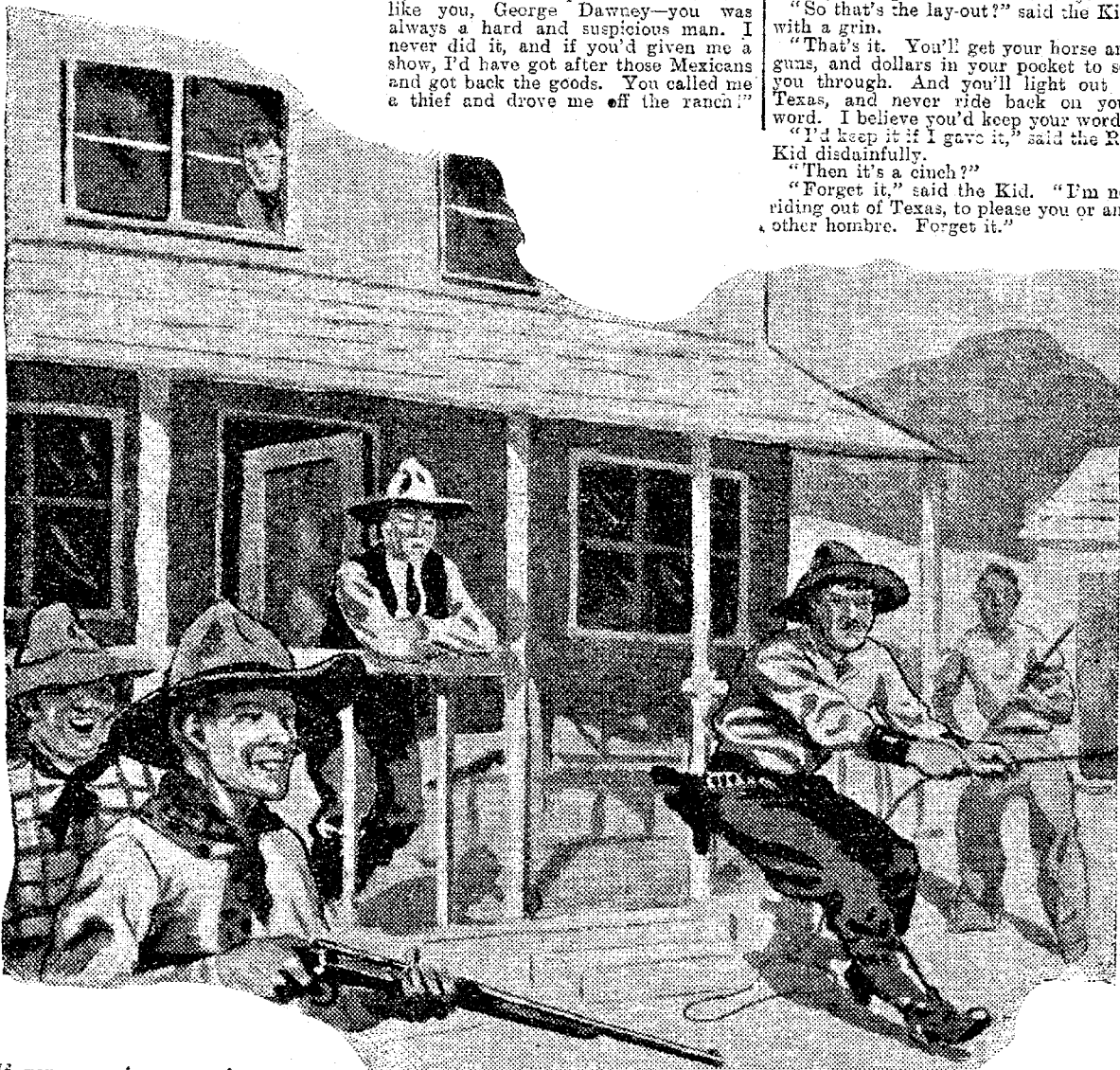
"So that's the lay-out?" said the Kid, with a grin.

"That's it. You'll get your horse and guns, and dollars in your pocket to see you through. And you'll light out of Texas, and never ride back on your word. I believe you'd keep your word."

"I'd keep it if I gave it," said the Rio Kid disdainfully.

"Then it's a cinch?"

"Forget it," said the Kid. "I'm not riding out of Texas, to please you or any other hombre. Forget it."



If your conscience worries you any, keep in mind what the sheriff told you."

"And what's that?"

"That I never did what you believed when you boosted me off this ranch!" snapped the Kid, with a glint in his eyes. "What I became after that, you made me, Old Man Dawney."

"Cut it out, Kid!"

"You don't believe that?"

"No."

"Suit yourself, rancher. You always were a hard case," said the Kid, with an amused smile. "I'd never have robbed the ranch where I was raised, and where I had friends—even after I'd taken to the trails. And you figured it out that I'd robbed you when I was a puncher here. You was always a hard man. Believe what you like, and be darned to you!"

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The Kid's eyes glittered, and his voice vibrated. "You was a fool, rancher, as well as a pesky cuyuse. You was always too high-handed. I swore I'd get back on you, but—" The Kid broke off with a laugh. "I've let the Double Bar alone. I was raised here, and you treated me well once. That's why."

The rancher watched him with a thoughtful look, but he shook his head. It was not easy for an opinion once formed to change, in the hard and imperious mind of the boss of the Double Bar.

The rancher's brows contracted darkly.

"That's the best I can offer you, Kid," he said. "I ain't letting an ornery cayuse like you free on the plains. It's that or trial in the county town. Horse and guns and dollars, and a ride into the next State and a promise to stay there."

"Keep your dollars!" jeered the Kid. "And I'm freezing on to Texas! Now what're you going to do, rancher?"

George Dawney rose from the settle. "That's your last word?" he asked quietly.

"Correct."

"Then it's you for the county gaol," said Old Man Dawney, "and my punchers will ride you there safe."

He turned to the door.

His hand was on the door, when the Rio Kid made a sudden spring—sudden and swift as the leap of a cougar. George Dawney went staggering as his gun was whipped from his belt by a swift hand. The next moment the muzzle of the Colt was grinding into his neck.

"Jest one yaup, rancher, and you're dead meat!" hissed the Kid, and the shout died unuttered on the lips of Old Man Dawney.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Whip-hand!

THE bantering grin was gone from the Kid's face. His features were set and grim, his eyes gleamed like polished steel, his teeth shut hard. The rancher, black

You bring the punchers here, and you're a dead rancher, and I'll take my chance of fighting my way out. I'd be sure sorry to pull trigger on the galoots who got me away from Judge Lynch, but a man's life is his to fight for. Sabe? Don't drive me to blotting out any of your punchers, Old Man Dawney. And take it from me that you'll go first over the range. Sabe?"

George Dawney nodded.

He was cool, watchful, holding back his fury.

"Your game, Kid," he muttered. "You was too spry for me. I oughta never trusted you close. You'll pay for this."

"Sorry you yanked me away from Judge Lynch?" grinned the Kid.

"None; that was a debt I had to pay. But I've sure paid it now, and after this, Kid, I'll hunt you like a wolf from the Ilano!" His voice was hard as ice, his eyes glittering. "I'll never quit till you're strung up, Kid, if you don't hand me that gun instanter!"

"I'll hand you hot lead if you blow off your mouth too much!" said the Kid. "No more than that! Our account's square, feller, and I'm goin' to hit the trail. Worse luck for you if

robbed the ranch where I was raised to save my life! I tell you again, with a gun at your head! What about it?"

The rancher's lips curled.

"I don't believe you!" he answered coolly.

The Kid's finger seemed to quiver on the trigger of the Colt.

"You're a hard case, George Dawney," he said, "but you've sure got grit. I ain't putting your light out if I can help. But my gum, if you get your ears up afore I'm clear of the Double Bar, it's you for the long trail! You wronged me, and I said I'd get back on you, and instead of that I saved your life. But it's cold business this time. By the holy smoke, you give me half an excuse, and the Double Bar will want a new boss!"

The Kid almost hissed the words.

"You've got me fixed!" said the rancher coldly. "It's your say-so, till I get the upper hand; and then, watch out!"

"Step to the window!"

The rancher crossed to the window, which looked out over the veranda. The Kid stood by his side there, with the revolver grinding on the rancher's ribs. But to anyone outside the ranch-house they looked simply as if they stood side by side at the window looking out at the plains.

"There's Mezcal Pete," said the Kid.



with rage, stared at that set, deadly face, and was silent, choking back his fury. He read death in the eyes of the Kid, in his snarling lips, in the grind of the gun-muzzle on his neck. The Kid's words were not idle. One shout for help, to alarm the punchers, and Old Man Dawney would never have uttered another cry but his death-cry. He would have lain dead on the floor while the Kid fought his way to freedom. Old Man Dawney knew it, and though rage choked him, he was silent, staring at the Kid with burning eyes.

"You've said your say, George Dawney," said the Kid, between closed lips. "Now it's your turn to listen.

TROUBLE AT THE DOUBLE BAR! "I'm not going without the Kid!" said the sheriff. "I've got my duty to do. Shoot'n be durned to you!" Whiz! A rope sang in the air, and a loop dropped over Watson's shoulders. The rope twanged and the sheriff of Frio was plucked from his saddle. (See Chapter 1.)

you don't leave me alone after. By gum! I don't know what keeps me from blowing your cabeza into little pieces now. I guess I'd get clear, too. You put the brand of thief on me, you ornery cuss, you did! Now I tell you again that that hold-up long ago was the truth, and that I'd never have

"Call to him, and tell him to bring my mustang from the corral."

Old Man Dawney breathed hard and deep.

"Tell him," went on the Kid mockingly, "that you're letting me run, and they're to leave me loose. And we're

parting friends. Tell him that, feller, before you're stopped from tellin' any hombre anything."

The rancher ground his teeth. Almost he resolved to take his death at the Kid's hands, and trust to his punchers shooting the fugitive down before he could get clear. But life was dear to the rancher, and it was by no means sure that the Kid would be stopped in his flight. Loose, with a gun in his hand, the Rio Kid would not be easy to stop. Well the rancher knew it. "You hear me sing?" snapped the Kid.

"It's your say-so," muttered the rancher.

He opened the window and called to Mezal Pete, who was rubbing down a horse near the veranda rails.

"Pete!"

"Hello, boss!" The puncher looked round.

"The Kid's goin'. We're parting friends," said the rancher. "Bring his hoss here from the corral, Pete, and tell the boys to let the Kid ride loose."

"I'm sure glad to hear it, boss!" said Mezal Pete, "No hombre on this ranch wants to hurt the Kid." And he gave the Kid, standing at the window, a cheery grin. "I'll sure have your cayuse here inside five minutes, Kid, saddled and ready."

"Pronto!" snapped the rancher. Mezal Pete strode away round the building to the horse corral. The rancher's eyes glittered at the Kid. Life was dear, but pride and arrogance were almost dearer to the boss of the Double Bar.

"That goes," said the Kid. "Now git!" muttered Old Man Dawney. "And as sure as there's a sky above us, Kid, I'll ride you down, if I have to ride you to the Rockies."

The rancher's hard voice shook with suppressed fury.

"You're seeing me safe off the ranch, I guess!" jeered the Kid. "That's your hoss yonder, and you're mounting and riding with me to the last fence, feller!"

"Keep it up while you may," said Dawney. "You'll pay for it all in a lump when I get you where I want you."

"Hump it!" said the Kid.

He marched the rancher out of the room, the revolver close to his side. George Dawney was swinging away towards the door, but the Kid stopped him.

"Not that-a-way," he said coolly. "I guess it's us for your office, feller."

Silently, but shaking with rage, the rancher turned down the passage to his business-room. A peon servant was crossing the passage, and he stood back for his master to pass. The Kid's revolver was out of sight now, but it was ready to show, as Dawney knew. He did not speak a word to the peon as he passed him, though he longed to call to the man to yell to the punchers. The rancher and the Kid passed into the ranch office, and the Kid kicked the door shut behind them. Old Man Dawney's eyes glittered at him like points of steel.

"It's a hold-up?" he asked savagely. "You've said it," assented the Kid. "I guess I know how much you generally keep in that safe, feller. Hook it out!"

Without a word, under cover of the gun in the Kid's steady hand, the rancher took out a key, and opened the big steel safe.

The Kid glanced over his shoulder into it.

Coolly he pointed out what he wanted. His face white and drawn with rage,

Old Man Dawney picked out the rolls of notes.

"Ten—twenty!" chuckled the Kid. "You can afford to give away twenty thousand dollars, feller, and you the richest hombre in Texas!"

The rancher did not speak. Rich as Old Man Dawney was, twenty thousand dollars was a large sum to lose. The look on the rancher's grim face might have scared anyone but the Rio Kid. But the Kid was enjoying the situation. "Hand it over, feller," he drawled.

The Kid took the fat roll in his left hand and dropped it into his pocket. Dawney watched it go, and a quiver ran through his muscular limbs. But there was death in the gun the Kid held.

"And that's the galoot that asked me to believe that he never robbed me," said the rancher bitingly. "That's the hombre who would not rob the ranch where he was raised. You're going with that roll of dollars in your pocket, Kid. You'll repent it."

"I guess not. Walk, feller," said the Kid. "I'm putting this gun in my pocket when we get outside. Don't forget it's there. You've seen me shoot through the lining in the old days, rancher. It's you for the long trail if you try any *shenannigan game*. Git!"

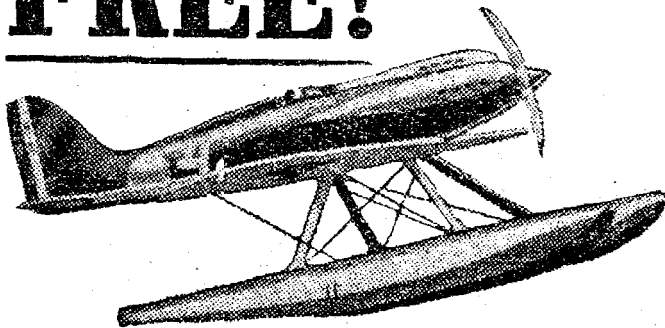
With his hand in his pocket on the hidden gun, the Rio Kid walked out of the office with the rancher.

Old Man Dawney went quietly and sedately. He was under dog now, and he valued his life, if only to get back on the Rio Kid when his time came. They stepped out under the ranch-house porch.

Mezal Pete was leading up the grey mustang, saddled and bridled.

The Kid gave Old Man Dawney an expressive look.

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"Saddle up my claybank, Pete," said the rancher. "I guess I'm riding with the Kid to see him safe off my land."

"Sooner the healthier, boss," grinned Mezcal Pete. "Sheriff Watson will sure be back afore sundown with a crowd."

"I guess we're hittin' the trail lively, Pete," said the Kid. "Waitin' for you, Mr. Dawney!"

Old Man Dawney swung himself into the saddle. His lips opened. One word to Mezcal Pete, one shout to the punchers within sight, and a dozen guns would have leaped from their holsters to deal with the Rio Kid. But the Colt in the Kid's pocket bulged in view, and the glance of his steely blue eyes was ruthless. It was death to speak.

"Ready, Kid!" choked the rancher. The Kid swung himself upon the mustang. He rode close by the rancher.

"I guess I'll have to go without my guns," he remarked. "Sheriff Watson's got my old guns safe in his office in Frio. P'r'aps I'll call on him some time for them."

Mezcal Pete chuckled.

"Ride!" muttered the rancher. The position was gall and wormwood to Old Man Dawney.

"So-long, Kid, and good luck!" sang out Mezcal Pete.

"So-long, old hoss!"

And the Rio Kid and Old Man Dawney rode away from the ranch side by side, and the Double Bar punchers round the corrals waved their Stetsons and shouted a cordial good-bye as the Kid went.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Rio Kid's Farewell!

"**H**ALT right here!" The Rio Kid pulled in his mustang.

Five miles lay between them and the ranch-house; round them lay the rolling prairie, dotted with scrubby sage-bush, and herds of steers, but with no human being in sight. Old Man Dawney had not uttered a word during the ride, but his grim, savage face told of his repressed rage. He drew rein.

"We part here, feller," said the Kid, smiling. The gun reappeared in his hand. "I guess Sheriff Watson and all the ginks in Frio will never ropc me in now."

The gun came up to a level.

"And what's to stop me from getting back on you now, George Dawney, as I always said I would?"

His eye glittered mockingly along the levelled barrel at the rancher.

George Dawney sat like a statue on his claybank. Only a slight pallor showed on his bronzed face.

"What about it?" jeered the Kid.

"Shoot, and be burned to you!" said the rancher grimly.

The Kid laughed and thrust the revolver into his holster.

"You're a hard case, Old Man Dawney," he said. "Harder'n your saddle-leather, I opine. I told you I never fingered the pay-roll that day long ago, and that a bunch of Greasers had it. You never believed me, and you don't believe me now. I'm goin' to make you."

The rancher shrugged his shoulders. The Rio Kid drew the roll of notes from his pocket. He tossed the roll across to the rancher. Old Man Dawney, in amazement, caught it. He stared blankly at the Kid.

"You gink!" said the Kid. "You sure allowed that I was cleaning out your safe. Well, there's your dollars—

twenty thousand. Is that good enough for you, George Dawney?"

The rancher only stared.

The Rio Kid laughed loud and long, as he looked at the rancher's amazed face.

"I tell you I was jestin'," he said. "You figured out that I'd touch your dirty dollars. Take them and ride, rancher."

The Kid swung round his mustang, and the rancher still sat the claybank and stared.

But as the Kid rode, Old Man Dawney called out:

"Kid!"

The Rio Kid looked back, with a grin. "Are you satisfied now, feller?" he drawled.

The rancher looked at the thick roll of notes in his hand. The Kid had tossed the twenty thousand dollars back to him, as if the roll was so much dirt.

Old Man Dawney's face changed. He was slow to believe, but he had to believe at last.

"Kid, I'm a hard man, as you say, and perhaps I was hasty in believing that against you. But—"

"You was hasty," said the Kid, "and you was hard—hard as rock. You'd believe it still, if I hadn't made you give in. I tell you again that I never touched the pay-roll that day, and a gang of Greasers held me up and pouched it. You ought to have taken my word."

"I believe you now, Kid," said the rancher, with an effort. "Perhaps I was hard. I was kinda mad with you, and you gave me lip. But I take your word now, Kid; and by the holy smoke, I'll take you back into the Double Bar outfit if you'll ride with me. You've given me a lesson, Kid, and I'm sure sorry I ever doubted you. Ride back and join the Double Bar again."

For a moment the Kid seemed to waver. But he shook his head, with a bitter smile on his handsome face.

"Too late, rancher," he said. "I ain't the puncher I was when you boosted me. I'm the fire-bug that's wanted by every sheriff and town marshal between the Pecos and the Rio Grande. I guess Watson wouldn't leave me to punch cows peaceable on the Double Bar. It's too late, feller. I guess it's me for the pen, if I hang around where them ginks can find me."

"I'll stand by you, Kid. The Double Bar outfit will stand by you to a man!"

The Kid shook his head again.

"Too late, rancher. But if you figure to part friends, there's my fist on it."

He rode back and put out his hand. Old Man Dawney grasped it. The hard face was no longer hard.

"Kid, come back with me!"

"Too late. I'm hittin' the trail pronto."

And the next moment the Kid was galloping. George Dawney, sitting his horse, watched him out of sight in the bunch-grass, and then turned and rode back to the Double Bar, a deep cloud on his face, and many thoughts working in his mind.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

A Late Caller!

"**C**OME in!" growled the Sheriff of Frio.

The hour was late.

The Red Dog saloon in Frio was still in full blast, with naphtha lights flaring. But the rugged streets were dark and deserted. Sheriff Watson, in his office in the calaboose building, had heard a horseman dismount outside, and there was a thump at the door. The sheriff's brow was dark. That day he had been busy, and he was

tired with hard riding. Old Man Dawney had sent him word that the Rio Kid was gone from the Double Bar, and saved the sheriff another visit to the ranch. Watson and his men had ridden far and hard, seeking a trace of the vanished Kid, but the wide plains had swallowed him up, and they had returned late to Frio, savage and disappointed. The sheriff was thinking it over glumly when the knock came at his door. He called to the late visitor to enter, hoping that it was news of the Kid. And it was—though not in the way that he hoped.

The door swung open.

Sheriff Watson leaped to his feet, reaching for his gun, as he found himself looking at a levelled Colt, with the Rio Kid's handsome face grinning behind it.

"The Kid!" gasped the sheriff.

"Put 'em up, sheriff!"

Slowly the sheriff's hands went up over his head. He glared at the cool Kid as if he could eat him.

"You here—in Frio?" he panted.

"I guess I've called for my guns, sheriff," said the Kid cheerily.

"Gee!" muttered the sheriff.

"You'll hand them over," grinned the Kid. "I'm used to those guns, and I want them. Put 'em over, sheriff, and don't try any gun-play if you want to see the sun rise again on Frio."

He stepped forward, took the sheriff's Colt, and stamped his heavy boot on it on the floor.

"I'm waiting, sheriff."

Without a word Sheriff Watson took the Kid's walnut-butted, notched guns from a locker and banded them over. The Kid slipped them into his holsters with a laugh.

"Thanks, sheriff. You're sure an obliging cuss, when a galoot has a bead on you. So-long, sheriff! If you want to see me again, follow me up into the Huecas, and you'll find me at home." He tramped out of the sheriff's office, leaving Watson dumb with rage and astonishment. There was a clatter of hoofs as the Kid rode away across the plaza. Watson rushed to the door and tore it open and roared.

"It's the Kid—the Rio Kid!"

A horseman rode into the flaring light of the Red Dog saloon. He rode with his knees gripping his mustang, and a .45 in either hand. Bang! Bang! Bang! rang the revolvers as he rode by the saloon, and the bullets crashed through the windows of the Red Dog. There was a rush and a roar.

"The Rio Kid!"

Guns blazed and roared in the street, but only the beat of galloping hoofs answered. The Rio Kid had said his emphatic farewell to Frio, and he was gone, laughing aloud as he hit the trail for the open plains.

THE END.

Another Thrilling Yarn
of the RIO KID
next week, chums,
entitled:

"THE TRAIL
OF DEATH!"

Be sure you do NOT
miss it!