

**THE RIO KID NEVER MISSES—**  
**DON'T MISS HIM — HE'S INSIDE!**

# The POPULAR

2<sup>d</sup>

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**"HANDS UP!"**

# A BOY OUTLAW'S FORTUNE!

Three thousand dollars—all his own, to start life afresh in a new country. So thinks the RIO KID as he rides lightheartedly through the hills. But Fate steps in and ordains that those dollars should be put to quite another use!

# The RIO KID!

by RALPH REDWAY



ANOTHER BREATHLESSLY THRILLING LONG COMPLETE WESTERN YARN, FEATURING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW OF TEXAS!

## THE FIRST CHAPTER. Held Up!

THE Rio Kid was rich. He smiled cheerily as he thought of it.

With the Kid, as is the way of the punchers, it was easy come and easy go, as far as money was concerned. It was unlikely that the Kid's roll would last him very long. But there it was, so long as it lasted—three thousand dollars in good notes packed away inside his belt. He smiled when he thought of that deal in cows at Blue Pine that had turned out such a bonanza for him. With three thousand dollars in his belt the Kid felt as rich as a Rockefeller.

Many half-formed plans were revolving in the Kid's mind as he rode at an easy trot by a trail that wound among wooded hills and islands of trees and scrubs. With so many dollars at his command he could abandon, if he liked, his roving life, and buy a share in a ranch on some region where the name and fame of the Rio Kid had not penetrated. That thought was a tempting one, though the Kid shook his head over it. He would have liked to ranch in the Frio country, and ride with the Double Bar bunch; but the Frio country was barred to the Kid, except for flying.

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## This week: Saved by an Outlaw!

visits when the longing to see the old lay-out was too strong for him to resist.

Another stunt that came into the Kid's mind was to light right out of Texas and break new country on the western side of the long range of mountains. More than once he had dallied with the thought of the gold-mining country over in Arizona. And yet another idea was to cross the Rio Grande into Mexico, and set up in that country, where he would be secure from Texas sheriffs in a ranch of his own.

None of these stunts had come yet to a definite decision in his mind. The Kid was in no hurry. His roll was safe in his belt, and he rode the plains a free man, enjoying every minute of the day under the blazing sun, and sleeping at night by the side of his mustang as soundly as an infant. There was heap time for making up his mind, the Kid reckoned; and in the meantime he revolved all sorts of tempting schemes, all made possible by that roll of three thousand dollars that he had cinched in a deal in cows.

But among the many thoughts that were passing in the Rio Kid's cheery mind, as he rode along the trail among the cottonwood-trees, the thought of losing his roll was not one. The Kid packed two guns, and was remarkably useful in handling them, and he would not have turned an inch out of his way to avoid any gang of rustlers in Texas. And he was not in a rustler's country now; he was riding through a region where settlers had settled thick, and there was no lawless rider to be looked for, unless it was the Rio Kid himself. But, little as the Kid suspected it, the danger of losing his roll was very near and close.

He checked his horse at the sight of smoke rising from a distance across the cottonwoods. A cowman to his fingertips, the Kid hated the settlements that were driving the cows out of the country, and he would not pass near by one of the homesteads if he could help it. He had had enough of them and their wire fences up in the Alamito, and here, in the Buttes country, he did not want to see any more of them. And as the Kid pulled in the grey mustang a man stepped out of the trees with a rifle at his shoulder, and the muzzle bore fair and full upon the horseman.

"Put 'em up!"

The Kid laughed. There was no man in Texas quicker

on the draw than the Rio Kid; but he knew when he had a chance and when he hadn't. With a rifle muzzle bearing directly upon him at a distance of three yards, the Kid did not think of touching a gun. He lifted his hands over his head, letting his reins drop on his mustang's neck, and laughed as he looked at the man with the rifle. It was no swaggering gunman or rough-riding rustler who had held up the Kid. The man, in his ragged store clothes and tattered Stetson, his hard, scrubby-lined face, was evidently a settler, and one who had struck hard luck. Grim trouble and hard poverty could be read in every line of his rugged face and a light of desperation in his eyes. The Kid laughed; he could not help it. He had carried his roll safe through some of the hardest sections of Texas, only to be held up at the finish by a farming jasper—a nesting Rube. But the man, farmer, or sheep-herder, or whatever he was, was obviously in grim and desperate earnest, and his eyes burned at the Kid over the levelled rifle.

"Say, feller, you've got me beat!" said the Kid good-humouredly. "Is there anything in that gun?"

"You'll sure find there is if you begin any fooling," grunted the settler. "Light down and pony up what you've got in your rags." He made a threatening motion with the rifle. "I guess you look a piece of a gunman. Well, you touch a gun, stranger, and it will be the last thing you do on this side Jordan."

The Kid dismounted without touching a gun.

"Keep 'em up!" grunted the man. "Anything to oblige, feller—so long as you're holding the gun," smiled the Kid. "I reckon you're not used to this game. You don't strike me as a rustler."

The settler smiled bitterly.

"No. I've got to raise a stake or go under—not only me, if you want to know. But I mean business."

"You look as if you do, hombre," smiled the Kid. "You look as if you've had bad luck; but you've struck it lucky this time. You're holding up a man that's got three thousand dollars to his name!"

The settler stared at him.

"Pony up!" he said briefly.

"How can a galoot pony up with his paws patting the top of his hat, feller?" remonstrated the Kid. "I guess if you want my roll you'll have to take it."

"Keep 'em up!"

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

The man advanced on him, holding the rifle in his right hand, the butt under his arm, his finger on the trigger. But the muzzle never wavered for a moment. With his left hand the man detached the Kid's two guns, one after the other, from their holsters, and dropped them in the grass. Then he stepped back a pace or two.

"You can put your paws down now and hand it over."

"Sure!"

The disarmed Kid dropped his hands. He slid his right hand into the pocket of his buckskin breeches, as if the roll was there. In that pocket, the Kid's tenacious fingers gripped the little derring-pistol that was concealed there. He smiled good-humouredly. Many a time, in a close corner, had the Kid fired from the pocket, without drawing the weapon, and never had he missed his aim. The rifle was still bearing upon him, but the life of the man who had held him up was the Kid's for the taking. An experienced trail-thief would never have allowed the Kid to get his hand into his pocket; but this

man was evidently new to the game, and did not savvy. The Kid's blue eyes gleamed with merriment. He knew that he could lay the unsuspecting jasper dead at his feet by a movement of his finger, the man was quite unconscious of it. The situation appealed to the Rio Kid as comic.

"Pronto!" rapped out the hold-up man.

"Pronto sure!" grinned the Kid.

Bang!

The rifle flew up and exploded harmlessly as a bullet ripped along the jasper's right arm, and he staggered back with a gasping yell. Loud rang the merry laugh of the Rio Kid. The rifle thudded down from a helpless arm, and at the same moment the Kid's guns were snatched up and bore full upon the hold-up man.

"Your turn," said the Kid pleasantly. "Put 'em up, Rube!"

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### The Settlers!

"FRANK!"

It was a woman's voice calling. The Rio Kid started.

He could not see who called; the thick cottonwood-trees hid her from sight. But the look of the hold-up man told that he was the "Frank" to whom the unseen woman was calling.

The man had not put up his hands at the Kid's order. He stood before the Kid like an image of dull despair, his hands at his sides, the right drenched with the blood that ran down his arm. Almost the length of his arm the Kid's derring bullet had ripped, and the blood flowed freely. The man stood in his tracks, staring almost stupidly at the Rio Kid.

"Frank!"

The voice came again—from the direction of the curling smoke that the Kid had discerned over the thickets.

The Kid's expression changed.

"Say, Rube, who's calling?" he asked quickly.

The man stared at him dully without answering.

"Spill it!" snapped the Kid.

"My wife!"

"You've got a wife, and you're such a durned gink as to play this game!" snapped the Kid contemptuously.

"Shoot, and be hanged to you!" muttered the settler.

The Kid's guns dropped back into his holsters.

"I'm sure not wasting powder and lead on a dog-goned rube!" he grinned. "Why, you gink, as soon as I had my hand in my pocket, you was a dead geek if I'd wanted! I've let you off with a scratch on your arm, and you've got off cheap! Sabe?"

The man nodded, without speaking.

There was a sound in the thickets of someone approaching, and the woman's voice called again. The man shivered.

"She'll be here in a minute or less," said the Kid. "You don't want to put her wise to this. I guess she doesn't know?"

The man shook his head.

"I reckoned not," assented the Kid. "You're hard hit, and you wanted to make a raid, and this stunt came into your cabeza. I guess you spotted me far off and laid for me here?"

The man nodded again.

"Keep to your sheep, hombre!" said the Kid banteringly. "You're sure not cut out for a road-agent or a rustler! Look here, she'll be here in a shake of a possum's tail! You've had an accident with your gun, and hurt your arm. Sabe?"

"You won't tell her?"

"Ain't I shouting to you that I

won't?" growled the Kid impatiently. "You've sure had a gun accident, and I'm binding it up for you! Give me your fin, feller! Pronto!"

He ripped off the man's rough coat and rolled back the shirt-sleeve. There was an ugly gash along the brawny arm. The man was staring dully and wonderingly at the Kid. Only a few minutes before his rifle had been threatening the Kid's life, but the Kid seemed to have forgotten that. He was only thinking of the woman who was coming through the trees—who was not to know that "Frank" had attempted a robbery on the trail.

A few seconds more, and she came out of a hidden path in the mesquite and saw them.

She ran forward, with a cry.

"Frank, didn't you hear me call? I heard a shot! What has happened?"

The Kid lifted his Stetson hat.

"Your husband has sure had a little accident, ma'am," he said. "Only a scratch. I was going to bind it up for him. I guess you'd better tell him to be more careful in handling a gun! I reckon he's more used to the plough!" The Kid stopped back. "You'll sure handle that scratch better than I could, ma'am."

The woman gave him a quick look. She was young, and had been good-looking, but the hard life of the frontier had lined her face. In her careworn face, indeed, the Kid could read the reasons that had driven the settler to his desperate act. Possibly she surmised that there had been something more than an accident; but, if so, she made no remark. She turned to her husband at once. His eyes dropped before hers, and his face was burning.

"I guess this will be useful, ma'am," said the Kid.

He handed her a silken neck-scarf.

She thanked him with a nod, and bound up the gash on the wounded arm. Her fingers were trembling.

"It's only a scratch, Netta!" muttered the wounded man huskily, finding his voice at last. "Only a scratch, my dear! Nothing!"

The Kid turned to his waiting mustang, but he did not mount.

The settler's haggard eyes were watching him over the woman's shoulder in mute appeal.

The hapless man, driven to a desperate deed by some pressing, bitter necessity which the Kid could only surmise, was obviously at heart no robber or hold-up man. Why the Kid was hiding his guilt he did not know, but he was intensely glad and relieved. His stare told of gratitude and dumb appeal. He was grateful for the Kid's generosity, but he wanted to see the stranger ride on—ride on and disappear, taking away with him the possibility of the woman learning what her husband had done or attempted to do.

The Rio Kid understood perfectly, yet he hesitated.

There was something in this couple that appealed to the Kid. The man, worn and weary as he was, was not over twenty-five, the woman years younger. They had hit a bad streak in the nesting country, and worn themselves down in a struggle with grudging Nature. The Kid had seen their kind before; he could divine their history easily enough. He could guess that they had come out to settle in a new country, deluded by the glowing tale of some Western land-agent, and sunk their little capital in the purchase of a holding that required further capital to make it pay—and the further capital was wanting. The next step would be a mortgage, and then

there would be the interest on the mortgage to meet, and after that a weary losing fight till the inevitable end came. And the Kid calculated that that end was very near—that attempt to hold up a passing traveller was an indication of it. The mute appeal of the man's anxious eyes urged the Kid to ride on and mind his own business. But he did not ride on.

"Say, Rube," he drawled, "I guess you've got a barn or something near by your shebang where a pilgrim can bed down for the night?"

The settler set his lips.

"Yes," he said in a low, husky voice.

"No objection, madam?" asked the Kid politely.

The woman shook her head.

"Ride on, and you'll see it!" muttered the settler.

And the Kid thanked him smilingly, and rode on to the homestead.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

#### The Kid Does Not Ride!

**T**HE Rio Kid camped in the barn. His first care was for his horse—that was always the Kid's first care. Then, in the glowing sunset, the Kid took a walk abroad.

Of the settler and his wife he saw nothing.

They had gone into the homestead—a frame-house, neatly built, standing in a garden that was carefully tended. It was a large holding, watered by a stream that came down from the hills, and on all sides the Kid saw the evidences of long and patient labour. Miles

of mesquite and pecan had been cleared and planted; wire fences—hateful to the cowpuncher's eyes—ran for great distances. A man was at work in the fields, cutting the alfalfa for the cattle, but of other hired labour the Kid saw no sign. There was little stock, but much more than one man could well tend.

The Kid's handsome face was thoughtful as he strolled about the homestead, and a little clouded when he returned to the barn at last as night deepened over the hills.

A single light burned from a window of the frame-house. The Kid looked at it for some minutes before he went into the barn.

The night deepened.

The moon rose over the hills—the glowing moon of the south. There was a step in the wide open doorway of the barn.

It was the settler.

His arm was bandaged; in the glimmering moonlight the Kid could see that his face was pale. For a moment the Kid's hand hovered over a holster, but he saw that the homesteader carried no weapon.

"You're here?" muttered the man, peering into the shadows of the barn.

"Here!" drawled the Kid.

The man came towards him. His eyes gleamed through the shadows at the Kid.

"I guess you weren't looking for a show to bed down when I met you in the mesquite?" he said in a low voice.

"Nope!" agreed the Kid.

"Why didn't you ride on, then?"

"Ask me another, feller," said

**THE KID CAMPS DOWN!** There was a step in the doorway of the barn, and the settler appeared, his arm in a bandage. The Kid's hand hovered above his gun-holster. "You camping here?" muttered the settler. (See Chapter 3.)



the Kid, good-humouredly. "I just reckoned I'd bed down right here."

"You can do as you like, I guess," muttered the homesteader, "so long as you don't tell her."

"I reckon not," said the Kid. "Say, feller, I guess you was plumb loco to try on that game of holding up a pilgrim on the trail. It sure ain't in your line at all."

"No; I was mad, I guess. And I'm glad I slipped up on it, though you mayn't believe me," said the young man. "It was for her sake. But when I thought that she'd know what I'd done I—"

He choked. "Keep that to yourself, stranger. You've come to no harm, anyhow, and your roll is safe so long as you hang on here—I swear that!"

The Kid smiled. "I guess I know how to keep my roll safe," he said. "Safe from any galoot except my little self, anyway."

"I'm sorry for what I did. I'm glad I failed. I guess I was a little out of my senses," said the nester.

"I guess so," assented the Kid.

"I'm at the end of my tether here," said the man. "That's my excuse—if it's any excuse."

"I guess I know how you're fixed," said the Kid. "You sank all you had in the homestead, and you sure couldn't carry on."

"That's it." The man leaned on the wall of the barn and gazed moodily at the Kid in the dusk. "I struck a bad season the second year, and then—"

"Then the pesky mortgage followed," said the Kid. He knew the story by heart.

"Yes; I raised three thousand dollars, and it saw me through. But the interest on the mortgage, and the want of capital—I guess you know how it works."

"I know."

"The mortgage expires to-day, and Judge Shandy, of Butte—that's the man who holds my paper—won't renew it. I guess he wants the holding. Five years of labour are in it. It's worth three times as much. Shandy's the richest man in the Buttes country, and I guess he's made it all the same way," said the settler bitterly. "He won't give an inch. He will be here to-morrow for his money—or the land."

"Three thousand?" said the Kid thoughtfully.

"Just that."

"And you've got—"

"Ten cents," said the settler.

The Kid laughed.

"I guess I've heard of Judge Shandy, of Butte," he said. "It won't be any use offering him ten cents."

"The game's up for me—and for her," said the Settler wearily. "Five years, and all we had, gone—to make Judge Shandy a little richer. Things are looking up now; we've turned the corner here, but for that. That's why it came into my head this afternoon, when I saw you riding up in the mesquite—"

Es broke off, his face crimson.

"I guess I was out of my senses. I'm glad I failed. So long as she never knows—"

"She won't know," said the Kid.

"I guess I've no right to ask it of you. If you hadn't been so handy with your shooter I—I might have—"

"Heap things would have happened, one time or another, if I hadn't been handy with my shooter," smiled the Kid. "I don't owe you any grudge for what you tried on, Rube. You don't want to let that worry you. How's the fin?"

The man glanced down carelessly at his bandaged arm.



**SOME SHOOTING!** The judge came thundering on. As he sighted the Kid he dragged at his horse, and a gun leaped into his hand. Bang! But that gun flew from Judge Shandy's hand the moment it left his belt. "Forget it, feller," grinned the Kid. "You sure ain't handy enough with a gun to pull on me!" (See Chapter 1.)

"That's nothing—only a scratch."  
"I should sure be sorry if I'd spoiled you for the plough," grinned the Kid. "But I reckon I only aimed to make you drop that gun. Next time you hold up a pilgrim on the trail don't let him get his hand into his pocket. He might have a derringer there, and he might know how to shoot through the lining. Sabe?"

The settler smiled faintly.  
"There won't be any next time," he said. "I tell you I was loco just then, and I'm plumb glad I failed. Money got that way will never do any good. I guess you're a gunman, from the way you handled me. But you're a white man, whoever you are!"

"Sure thing!" smiled the Kid.  
"You're welcome to bed down as long as you like. Only, after to-morrow this shebang will belong to Judge Shandy, of Butte, and you will want to hit the trail," said the settler. "I guess the judge ain't hospitable to strangers. He will be here to take possession at ten in the morning."

"If you don't square?"  
"He sure knows I can't square. He will bring his agent with him to take over. Good-night, stranger!"

"Good-night, feller!"  
The settler was gone.  
The Rio Kid unrolled his blanket on a stack of straw. He lay down to sleep. But sleep did not come quickly.

For a long time he watched the stars, through the open doorway of the barn, gleaming like points of fire in the dark, velvety sky.

Through his mind were running the various plans he had been revolving that afternoon as he rode along the trail. His roll was still safe in his belt, and all those plans were still practicable. The Rio Kid shook his head at last, and closed his eyes in slumber.

He turned out early in the fresh, sunny morning, and joined the settler and his wife at breakfast in the frame-house.

After that he went for his horse. He

saddled the grey mustang, but still did not mount and ride.

The Rio Kid seemed to be in a state of doubt.

He left his mustang hitched by the barn and strolled moodily on the trail that led towards the distant town of Butte. By that trail Judge Shandy was to arrive. Judge Shandy was nothing to the Kid. The whole affair was no business of his. Yet, somehow, he seemed unable to make up his mind to ride. The Rio Kid was still loafing about the trail when two horsemen came in sight from the direction of Butte.

The Kid looked at them. He had seen Judge Shandy before; he knew the grim, hard-faced man. The other man was apparently the agent of whom the settler had spoken.

The judge drew rein at the sight of the handsome young puncher in the trail. He stared at the Kid.

"Do you belong here?" he asked.  
"Sort of, just at present, feller," drawled the Kid.

He knew the judge, but the judge did not know him. The Kid smiled inwardly at the thought of what Judge Shandy's thoughts might be had he guessed that he was addressing the Rio Kid, wanted by half the sheriffs in Texas.

The judge frowned. He was a great and important man in the Butte country, and he did not "stand" for being addressed so carelessly by a cow-puncher. "I guess I never knew that Frank Hedworth had hired men about his shebang," he snapped.

The Kid laughed outright, rather tickled at the idea of being taken for a hired man.

"You want to keep civil, young man," said the judge grimly. "If you're Frank Hedworth's man now you'll be my man within the next half-hour. And I guess you'll be fired."

"I guess I shouldn't wait to be fired if I was your man, judge," grinned the Kid. "You ain't the kind of boss I'm

looking for, nohow. And the shebang isn't yours yet, judge."

"What do you mean, you fool?" snapped the judge harshly. "I guess that fellow hasn't found three thousand dollars all of a sudden. Why—what—what—"

The judge broke off with a yell as a six-gun looked into his hard face, with the Kid's smiling face behind it.

"You're sure no end of a big man in this country, judge," said the Kid, "but you can't call a galoot fancy names."

"Put down that gun!" roared the judge.

His hand went to the revolver in his belt.

"Don't touch it," advised the Kid. His face was still smiling, but the glint in his eyes was a warning. Judge Shandy withdrew his hand very hastily from his belt.

"I guess a lot of galoots in the Butte country would jump for joy, judge, if I dropped you off that hoss," said the Kid musingly.

Then, as he caught sight of Netta Hedworth's startled face looking from the doorway of the frame-house, the Kid's Colt disappeared into its holster again. He laughed.

"You can ride on, judge, and be durned to you!"

He stepped aside from the trail, and the judge, scowling blackly, rode on with his man.

The Kid stood where he was. He saw the judge hitch his horse outside the frame-house and enter. And he strode into the framehouse with the air of a master.

"That gink sure gets my goat!" the Kid muttered, biting his lip.

The Kid moved slowly back along the trail to where he had left the mustang hitched by the barn door.

He rubbed the mustang's neck, and the grey muzzle nuzzled under his arm. The Kid regarded his steed thoughtfully.

"I guess it's time we hit the trail, old hoss," he said slowly. "I guess we've got no business hyer. I guess we're lighting out for a cow country where the folk ain't heard of the Rio Kid, and we're going ranching, old hoss. I guess we're done with riding the trails and camping in the chapparal, and shooting up the camps, and keeping out of the

way of the sheriffs. I reckon we're going ranching, and that roll in my belt will see us through, old boss."

The Kid placed his hand on his saddle. But he did not mount.

His eyes were on the frame-house, where the judge had entered, his man remaining outside with the horses.

The Kid sighed.

Leaving his mustang, he walked across to the house. The judge's man eyed him curiously and suspiciously as he came up. But he made no hostile movement; he had not forgotten the extremely slick way in which the Kid had drawn a six-gun on the judge.

The Kid gave him a cheery nod. "I guess your boss is here to take over this god-darned shebang," he remarked.

"You can put your boots on that," was the reply.

"Your boss is a durned skinflint, hombre."

The man grinned.

"He sure knows his way about," he assented.

"But he might slip up on this raffle at the very last minute," the Kid suggested.

"I guess not."

"Suppose there was a fool galoot loping about this section with a roll in his belt and without boss-sense enough to look after it?" argued the Kid. "Suppose a feller had made a heap dollars by a deal in cows, and the dollars was burning a hole in his belt? S'posing all that, your boss might slip up on this deal and ride back to Butte with three thousand dollars in his pocket, instead of roping in a homestead worth three times as much."

The man stared at him, evidently not understanding in the least.

The Kid passed him, and went into the frame-house.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.  
Money Talks!

JUDGE SHANDY was sitting at the bare table in the clean, neat room. His face was, in expression, like unto that of a graven image. Not a trace of human feeling was to be seen in it.

The judge was known in the Butte country as a hard man, hard in his looks, in his ways, in his dealings—hard as iron. He had never held the bad end of a bargain, and he had never let off the other man without extracting every ounce of his pound of flesh—and a few ounces over if he could. Frank Hedworth knew it, and he had no hope. Yet, because so much depended on it, he was pleading with his creditor, pleading for a little time and a little chance. The judge let him run on without interruption, because it was not yet ten o'clock. At ten precisely the money was due, according to the letter of the bond, and the judge knew well that his debtor had not the money. When the clock struck ten it would be time for the judge to speak; until then the ruined homesteader was welcome to chew the rag as much as he liked.

The Kid, looking in, observed the scene. The judge, sitting like a graven image, said nothing—Frank Hedworth, leaning passionately over the table, talked and explained and put his case. Netta sat at a little distance, her face white and set. She knew that there was no hope.

"Your interest's safe, judge," said the settler. "I keep on telling you I've turned the corner. The stock's turning out well; I've got the fields planted up. One more season will set me right. I tell you, I've got here some of the best land in the Butte country."

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Then the judge spoke.

"I guess I'm wise to that!" he remarked. "That's sure why I lent you money on it."

The settler stared at him.

"You mean you aimed to get it away from me?"

The judge replied only with a slight laugh, but not in words. He took out his watch and glanced at it.

"Ten!" he said.

"Judge!" muttered the settler.

"I guess you've been chewing the rag some, Frank Hedworth," said the judge, with a yawn. "I guess I've heard enough, and a little over. I've called for three thousand dollars that was due at ten o'clock this morning."

Hedworth made a gesture of despair.

"Money talks!" said the judge. "All other talk is just chewing the rag, I guess. Pony up."

The settler dropped his head upon his hands.

The Rio Kid loafed into the room, a smile on his face, and his mind made up, if it had not been made up before. All the plans that had been in his thoughts, founded on the roll in his belt, had been dismissed now. The Kid was not to go ranching; it was still riding the trails and camping in the hills for the Rio Kid.

The judge glared at him under his bent brows.

"You're not wanted here, puncher," he snarled. "You hoof it out of this, pronto."

The Kid only smiled.

Hedworth raised his head.

"Stay where you are, if you choose, lad," he said. "This is still my house, till the law gives that skinflint possession of it. Stay."

"It's your say-so, feller," agreed the Kid.

The judge gritted his teeth.

"I guess it won't be for long," he snarled, and he rose from his seat. "I guess—"

"Guess again!" grinned the Rio Kid.

"Money talks, as you said yourself, judge. You ain't foreclosing this mortgage, feller—not by long chalks, when my partner here is ready to pay on the nail."

Hedworth stared at him.

"Where's the money?" sneered Shandy.

"Right here."

The Kid unpacked his roll.

The settler stared in blank amazement as bills to the value of three thousand dollars were flung on the table. The judge's face became as black as midnight. It was not his money he wanted; it was the homestead and the land enriched by years of patient cultivation, worth three or four times the sum. That was what the judge wanted; but the money was there for him to take.

"What does this mean?" exclaimed Hedworth hoarsely, staring at the bills, and then at the Rio Kid. Netta Hedworth started to her feet with a cry.

The Rio Kid laughed lightly.

"What does this mean?" he repeated.

"Money talks, I reckon. I'm lending you three thousand dollars to square this bloodsucker. There's the greenbacks, feller—pay the vampire, and kick him out of your shack."

"I can't take it from you, a stranger," muttered the settler hoarsely.

The Kid chuckled.

"You was sure thinking different yesterday, feller," he said. "Forget it, pard. Pick up the greenbacks and don't chew the rag. You've got to do it—for her sake," he added, in a low voice, with a nod towards Netta.

Hedworth glanced at his wife.

"I'll pay—some day—every cent," he breathed.

"Some day," smiled the Kid. "Some day I'll call around—not for a while, I reckon; I'm hitting a long trail to-day. Some day, when I'm back from Arizona. So long, settler: good-bye, ma'am."

The Rio Kid strolled out, smiling.

He stopped to give the judge's man a word as he passed him.

"You'll sure be riding back to Butte," he said. "Your boss won't be roping in this shebang, not this journey. I'll tell the world. Your boss sure looked as mad as a hornet, feller. You tell him that if he's hunting trouble with a little man about my size, I'm riding up the trail, and I'll give him time to come up if he's bright and spry."

"I'll sure tell him."

The Kid walked across to his mustang and mounted. He rode away down the trail at a gentle trot. His handsome face still thoughtful, but cheery and light-hearted. The Kid's roll was gone, and with it had gone his dreams of ranching in a cow country. But the Kid did not care. He had his guns and his horse, and perhaps, at the bottom of his heart, he was glad to think no longer of giving up the wild, free life of the prairie and the trails.

A smile broke over his face as he heard the hurried clatter of hoofbeats behind him, a few miles from the homestead he had saved from the clutch of the user. He halted his mustang beside the trail, and sat in the saddle, looking back, his hand resting on a six-gun. A horseman was galloping up the trail in a cloud of dust.

"That galoot is sure in a hurry," the Kid grinned.

The judge came thundering on. As he sighted the Kid by the trail, he dragged at his horse, and a gun leaped into his hand.

Bang!

The gun flew from Judge Shandy's hand the moment it left his belt. He gave a yell.

"Forget it, feller," grinned the Kid. "You sure ain't handy enough with a gun to pull on me, judge."

The judge sat his horse panting. His gun lay in the trail: his hand was numbed by the shock. His eyes blazed at the Rio Kid.

"I don't know who you are," he said at last, between his teeth. "A gunman from the cow country, I reckon. You've got me beat."

"Sure!" smiled the Kid.

"I sure reckoned on cleaning up that settler, and you beat me," said the judge. "But any man in the Butte country will tell you that Judge Shandy is a bad man to meddle with. Ride as hard as you like, puncher; you won't get out of the Butte country to brag of it."

"Do I look like riding hard?" said the Kid banteringly. "You're such a big man at blowing off your mouth, judge. I reckon you don't scare me worth a Continental red cent." He waved his hand towards the green hills that shut in the horizon to the westward. "If you figure on gunning after me, judge, I'll tell you where to find me. I'm camping three days in the Buttes, and I'll look for you and any gang of bulldozers that you can bring along."

And with a scornful snap of the fingers, the Rio Kid wheeled his horse and rode away to the west.

THE END.

(You'll find the Rio Kid in another sparkling tale of the West, entitled: "HELD TO RANSOM!" Be sure you do not miss it!)

# TRAILING THE KID!

Judge Shandy of Butte vows to bring the Rio Kid to justice, but when he sets out to fulfil that vow, it is borne in upon his mind that "trailing the Kid" is a very dangerous game to play!

# TIME

# RIO KID!

by

## RALPH REDWAY



A ROUSING LONG COMPLETE WESTERN YARN, FEATURING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW OF TEXAS.

### THE FIRST CHAPTER.

#### Trailing the Kid!

**T**HE Rio Kid smiled. It was a smile of genuine amusement, though it was called forth by a sight that would have made few smile—the sight of six armed men riding on his trail, seeking his life.

They saw nothing of the Kid, though he lay within twenty feet of them. The Rio Kid lay doggo in the sassafras and dwarf pecans, high up the steep side of the narrow ravine. Twenty feet below him the horsemen rode, between walls of rock that made the path too narrow for more than two men to ride abreast. The Kid could have tossed a pebble upon the Stetson hats that bobbed below. The six-gun in his hand could have picked them off one after another, like so many prairie-rabbits, before they had had a chance of hunting cover. But the Rio Kid only smiled, and waited and watched for them to pass.

He could see little of the riders, save their big Stetson hats; but one of them he knew—Judge Shandy, of Butte. The judge was speaking, and his hard, metallic voice came clearly up to the Kid.

"We're sure close behind the dog-goned puncher now, I guess."

The man riding beside the judge drew in his horse.

"Sure?" he answered.

"What are you pulling rein for, Long Bill?"

Long Bill, without replying, dropped from his horse, and bent to examine the trail he was following. The other horsemen halted behind him.

"What is it?" exclaimed the judge impatiently. "We're wasting time. The sign's plain enough."

"The trail's sure fresh," said Long Bill slowly. "I reckon it's not an hour since the mustang came up this ravine. It's sure the same trail that I picked up 'way back in the mesquite. That puncher ain't fur ahead of us now. But—"

"But what?" snapped Shandy.

"We want to keep our eyes peeled, boss. We're riding into a blind gulch. There ain't any way out of it except by this ravine, unless a galoot had wings to fly with."

"All the better. He won't be able to get away."

"Nope. But—"

The judge muttered an oath.

"You're wasting time, Long Bill."

"I reckon I don't figger it out, judge."

That puncher has had heap time to find out that there's no way out of the gulch ahead, and, naterally, he would ride back and pick another way. But there's no back-tracks. He never came back this way unless he blanketed his trail; as he came. That means that he's waiting for us ahead, with his six-gun handy."

"Camped, most likely," said Shandy.

"The durned galoot told me he would camp three days in the buttes, to give me a chance of hunting him if I wanted. He's camped in the gulch ahead."

"If he's camped, we'll soon rouse him out, judge. But more like he's behind a rock with a six-gun in his grip."

"And what's the matter if he is?" snarled the judge. "I've picked out five of the toughest gunmen in Butte to

ride this trail, and that puncher won't have a dog's chance. You're not scared of a cow-puncher with a six-gun in his fist?"

"Nope! But you allow he shot a gun out of your hand, judge, so he's handy with his shooter," said Long Bill. "We're sure going to shoot up that puncher, judge, whoever he is; but I guess we want to keep our eyes peeled if he's waiting for us in the gulch."

"Keep your eyes peeled, then, but come on!" said Judge Shandy. "We've been riding his trail most of the day, and now we've run him down where he can't get away. I tell you, I wouldn't let that puncher ride safe out of the butte country for a thousand dollars. He beat me in a deal, he shot a gun out of my fist, and he defied me to follow him into the buttes. I tell you, I'll get him if I have to ride all the way to New Mexico on his trail."

Long Bill grinned.

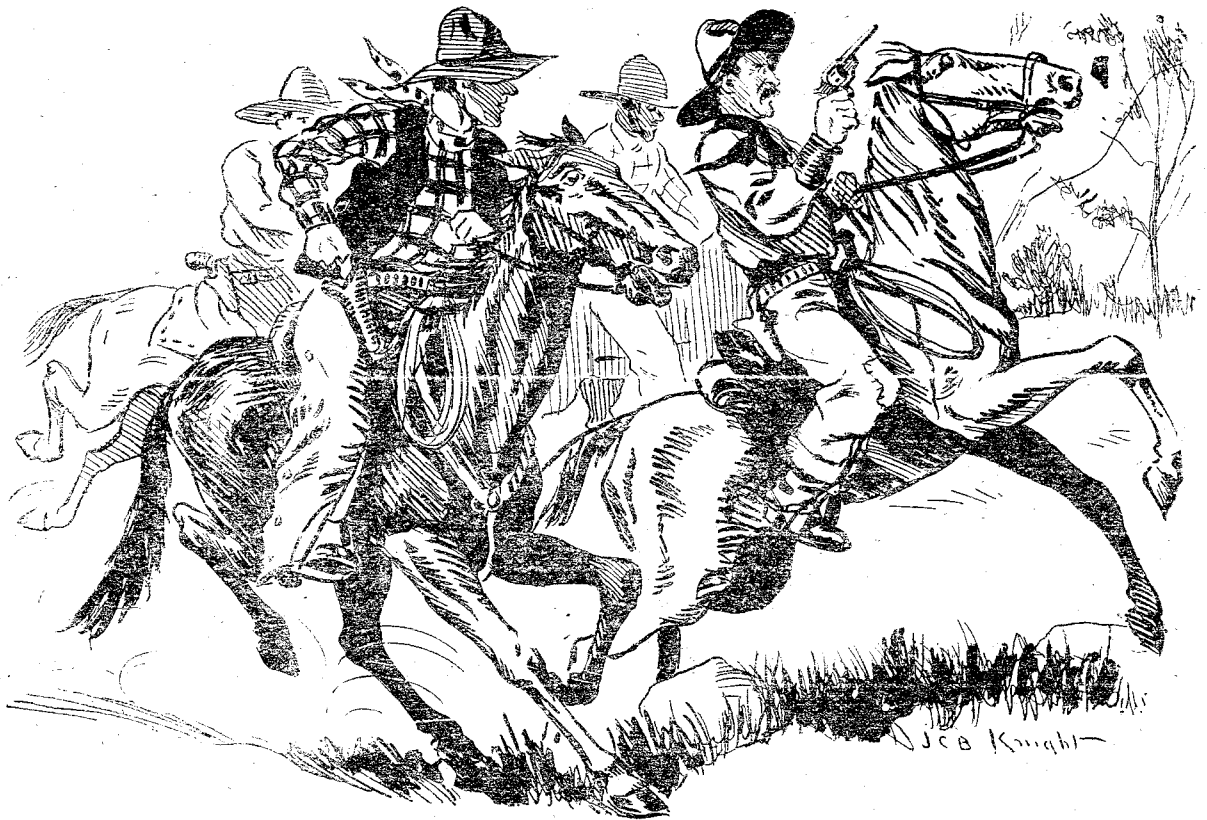
"You sure won't have to ride so far as that, judge. A quarter mile ahead of us, nothing but a bird could get farther. Unless he came back this way and blinded his trail, we've got him cornered."

"Come on!"

The judge rode on again, and the gunmen followed.

They had their guns in their hands now, and their eyes watchful on all sides as they rode.

Before them the trail of the Rio Kid's mustang ran, and not a single back-track was to be seen. All the signs indicated that the puncher had ridden through that ravine into the locked gulch ahead and stayed there. If he had camped, unknowing that foes were on his trail, the task of the gang of gunmen from Butte was easy. If he knew that they were after him, and had turned at bay among the rocks, the



task was not so easy. It was likely to prove dangerous if the puncher knew how to handle his gun. Dangerous enough to have scared even that tough gang into flight had they known that the puncher they were following was the Rio Kid.

From the thicket high above, the Kid watched them winding down the ravine, till they disappeared into the gulch beyond.

He smiled.

Leaving his cover, the Rio Kid swung himself down the steep side of the ravine, from rock to rock, with the activity of a mountain goat. In a few minutes he stood in the trail where the horsemen had passed. Ahead, among the rocks, he could hear the clink of hoofs, but the riders from Butte were out of his sight—and he was out of theirs.

"I guess those galoots won't get out so easy as they got in," the Rio Kid said to himself.

He glanced round him, and picked out the narrowest throat of the ravine. There he settled down behind a great, rugged boulder, between which and the steep wall of the ravine, was a narrow crevice, through which he could watch the way the riders had taken. Lying behind the boulder, watching through the crevice, with his six-gun in his hand, the Rio Kid waited patiently.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Trapped!

**J**UDGE SHANDY swore savagely. In the locked gulch in the heart of the hills, the gunmen had halted, at a loss.

Long Bill was on foot now, searching for sign. The other ruffians sat their horses and waited. The trail of the Kid's mustang, which had guided the man-hunters so far into the very heart of the desolate hills, had failed. Right up to that point the trail was clear—so THE POPULAR—No. 480.

clear that it looked as if it had been purposely left as a guide. And there it stopped suddenly, as if the puncher and his mustang had flown into the air from that spot. The judge was angry and puzzled, but Long Bill was figuring out what had happened.

Shandy had spent most of his life in the butte country—called "butte" because of the range of rocky hills covering it on all points of the compass—but he knew little of the trails. He was a man of the office and the lighted street. In his office in the town of Butte, Judge Shandy, the moneylender, usurer, and skinflint, was a powerful man, little liked, and greatly feared. But in the wilderness of the rocky buttes he was little better than a tenderfoot.

His followers—gunmen—accustomed to loafing about the saloons of Butte—were little more, with the exception of Long Bill, whom the judge had selected for his knowledge of trailing, to track down the puncher in the buttes. The whole gang were perplexed, with the exception of the long-limbed ruffian now examining the sign.

"Well, what do you make of it?" demanded the judge at last, as Long Bill rose from his minute examination of the sign left by the puncher.

"I guess we've been played for suckers, judge," answered Long Bill. "That puncher, whoever he is, knows his way about. He wanted to get us landed in this locked gulch, and, by gum, he's done it!"

"What the Moses do you mean?" snarled Judge Shandy.

"The feller rode on as fur as this, and turned-back," said Long Bill, with a grunt.

"Can it, Bill," said one of the gang. "There ain't a single back-track all the way."

"I guess you know more about shifting fire-water than tracking a puncher in the buttes, Jake Peters," granted Long Bill. "I tell you he stopped hyer,

and turned back, and blanketed his trail. 'Cause why, there ain't any other way out of it, nohow. Hyer his tracks stop, and I sure reckon he never flew up into the air. He turned back hyer and rode out by the ravine, and blinded his trail arter, like the Injuns do. He left an easy trail for us to foller into this gulch, but he never left a sign of his back-track. He's sure a good man on the trail, that puncher is, whoever he may be."

"And where is he now?" snapped the judge.

Long Bill shrugged his shoulders. "Ask me some more," he said. "He got out of hyer afore we came up, and I guess he may have lit out in any direction. We've got to get back through the ravine yonder into the open, and I guess I'll pick up his sign again sooner or later, if—"

"If what?"

Long Bill was staring back at the narrow ravine, where it opened into the locked gulch. Like a narrow corridor it ran between-high rocky walls.

"If he lets us get out," he answered. "He's fooled us into getting into this pesky corner, and if he's looking for a scrap he's got us fair and square. In that narrow way yonder one man who knows how to handle a gun could hold up fifty."

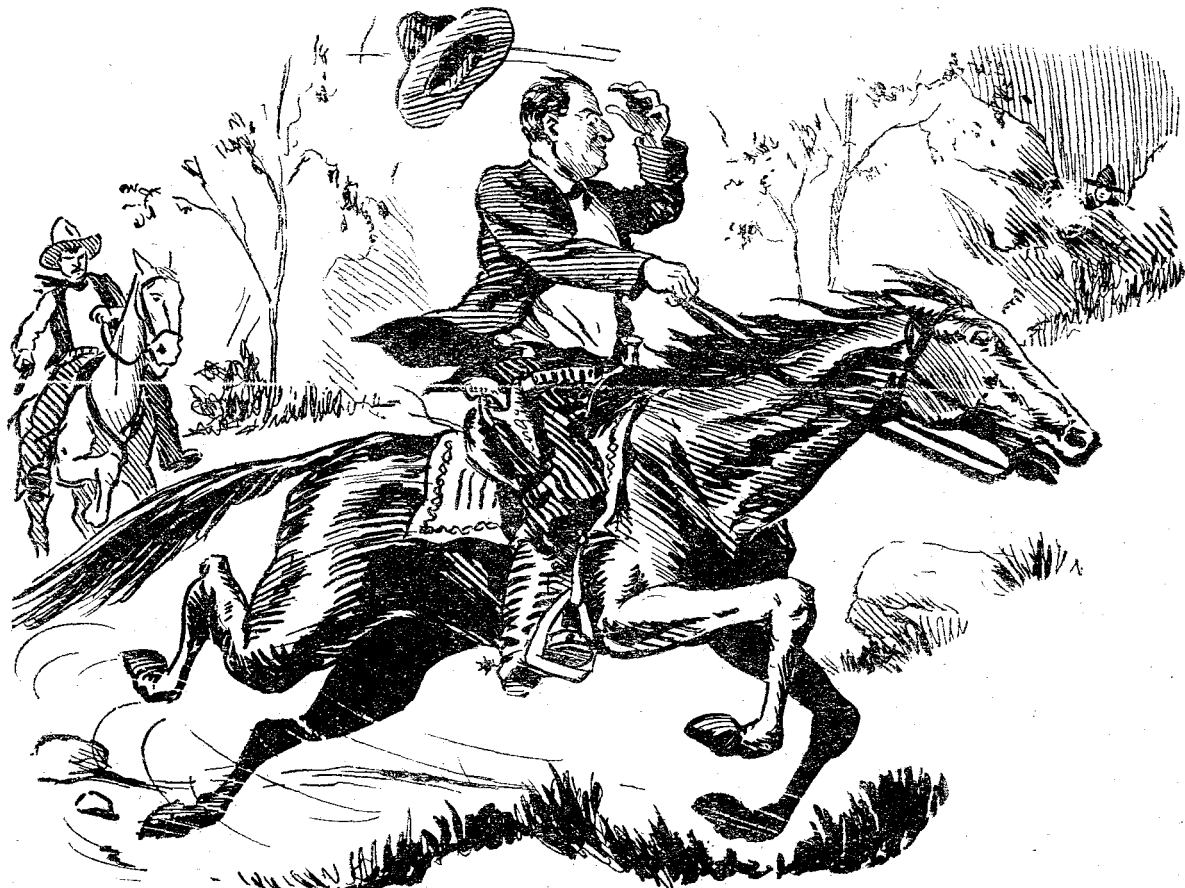
"Follow me!" snarled Judge Shandy. He wheeled his horse, and rode back towards the ravine, the only outlet from the locked gulch.

The gunmen followed him, their faces serious now.

If Long Bill knew what he was talking about, the puncher they were tracking had deliberately tricked them into that lonely recess in the buttes, and if he was barring their way out by the ravine their situation was a perilous one. The judge's opinion was that the puncher had tricked them merely to gain time for flight, and he rode back into the narrow ravine at a gallop

Bang!





**AMBUSHED!** Leading the way, the judge rode into the narrow ravine at a gallop. Bang! From among the rocks came the sudden report of a revolver, and a bullet tore the hat from Judge Shandy's head. "Halt, you 'uns!" came the Kid's voice, and the gunmen dragged in their horses in ludicrous haste. (See Chapter 2.)

From among the rocks came the sudden report of a .45 Colt. The bullet tore the hat from the head of Judge Shandy and dropped it behind him. A voice rang out after the shot:

"Halt, you 'uns!"

The judge reined in his startled horse. The gunmen dragged at their reins with almost ludicrous haste.

They knew now what had happened.

The puncher was in the ravine by which they had entered the locked gulch, and he had cut off their retreat. To ride through that narrow way, in the face of a six-gun, was to ask for destruction.

"I guess that galoot has got us beat!" said Long Bill coolly.

The judge gritted his teeth.

"Keep clear, you 'uns!" rang out the mocking voice of the puncher hidden among the rocks of the ravine. "The first who comes a yard nearer drops in his tracks!"

"Let up, feller!" called out Long Bill. "You hold the cards."

"I guess so," chuckled the Rio Kid.

Judge Shandy clenched his hands.

"You dog-goned puncher," he snarled, "I'll never let up on you till I see you swinging from a branch!"

The Rio Kid laughed.

"That's tall talk, judge, when my six-gun is looking at you this very minute," he said. "Get off your horse."

The judge did not stir.

"You better, judge," whispered Long Bill. "The galoot can sure drop you where you sit."

"Never!"

The judge glared into the rocky ravine. Not a sign was to be seen of the puncher, only his voice told that he was there. But the whole group of

horsemen were exposed to his aim, and they knew it; and every man sat his horse like a stone image, fearing to draw a shot by stirring. The bullet that had carried off the judge's hat could just as easily have been driven through his head, or any head there. The whole gang had been trapped, and were at the mercy of the man they had been trailing.

The Kid's voice drawled on cheerily:

"Light down, judge; I'm telling you."

Judge Shandy set his teeth and dragged round his horse to gallop back into the gulch.

Bang!

There was a sharp cry from Shandy, and he dropped like a log from the back of his horse. The gunmen stared at him as he crashed helplessly on the rocky ground and lay there—still!

"I reckon the judge has got his." The Rio Kid's voice rang out sharp with menace. "You 'uns want any? say!"

"Let up, puncher," gasped Jake Peters—"let up! We ain't asking for any trouble."

"Get off your critters."

The five gunmen dismounted. They hardly glanced now at the still form of the judge, stretched on the ground. The judge's horse galloped on through the ravine, passing the hidden cover of the puncher and clattering on to the open valleys beyond.

The Rio Kid, kneeling behind the boulder, watching the gang through the crevice, grinned. Through the crevice his six-gun was aimed, and he could have shot down the whole gang with ease, long before they could have rushed his cover, or retreated into the gulch behind them. The Kid had laid

his plans well for dealing with the gang of gunmen from Butte.

"That's better," called out the Kid. "Now drive on your cayuses. I guess you can get back to Butte hoofing it, fellers."

"Say, pard—"

"I guess that's enough chinwag. I'm waiting, and I'm sure getting tired of holding this gun."

"You've got us, feller," said Long Bill; and he struck his horse and sent the animal galloping up the ravine.

The other horses followed.

"Now drop your guns."

The five ruffians drew the revolvers from their belts. They did not think of seeking to use them. They stood in the open, under cover of a gun that was hidden, but which they knew bore full upon them. Their weapons clattered to the ground.

"You 'uns sure know how to do as you're told," chuckled the Rio Kid. "I guess I'm through with you. You can beat it, fellers. Get back into the gulch, and don't come this way again before sundown. I'm shooting at sight next time I see you. You get me?"

"It's your say-so, puncher," said Long Bill philosophically. "I reckon we'll carry the judge away with us."

"I reckon you'll leave him right there," rapped out the Kid. "I want the judge, and I don't want you. Get!"

"But look here, feller—"

Crack!

A bullet tore a strip of skin from Long Bill's ear. He gave a yell, and started back down the ravine at a run. His comrades went after him helter-skelter. That hint was enough.

The Rio Kid's laugh followed them.

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In a couple of minutes the gang of gunmen, dismounted and disarmed, were tramping out of the ravine into the locked gulch, leaving Judge Shandy lying where he had fallen, on the rocks. "I sure reckon this is my game!" chuckled the Rio Kid; and he came out of his cover at last.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER. The Prisoner!

**T**HE judge opened his eyes. He stared round him wildly. His head was aching, and he strove to put his hand to it, and made the discovery that his hands were bound to his belt.

He was lying on a blanket on a bed of sassafras, and his dazed eyes, as they started round, saw only walls of rock. His hands were bound, and his feet were shackled with a trail-ropo. He was a prisoner, that was clear to him, dizzy as he was. He lay in a cave, with rugged, rocky walls, and a wide opening through which he could see the stars glinting in a sky of deep dark blue.

He was alone in the cave. Of what had happened since the puncher's bullet had struck him down, the judge knew nothing. Many hours had passed, he knew that, since it was now night. He was a prisoner—evidently in the hands of the puncher he had trailed; but the puncher was not to be seen.

The judge sank back on his blanket with a groan.

For a long time he lay motionless, but after a while he stirred again, and began to struggle with the rope that held him. He struggled in vain, and gave it up at last. He had been tied with care and skill: the bonds caused him no discomfort, but they were as secure as iron shackles. He was helpless, and he soon realised it. He lay down on the blanket again and waited for his enemy to appear—and at last he slept, undisturbed by a voice or a footstep.

When he opened his eyes again, the sun was glimmering in at the mouth of the cave. The judge sat up and looked round. It was high morning, the sun blazing in a cloudless sky. He found that he could get upon his feet and move about within a radius of a couple of yards: the trail-ropo, knotted to a peg driven in the ground, prevented him from moving further. He could not reach the opening of the cave, but he could stand and look out, and he realised at once that he was high up in the buttes. From the cave, hill and valley stretched before him like a panorama, and far in the distance, he saw a winding river on the green plains beyond the buttes, and a collection of buildings tiny in the distance. And he realised, with a start, that it was the town of Butte that he was staring at—visible in the clear air, but many a long mile away.

There was a step in the mouth of the cave, and a handsome young puncher stood there, smiling at the judge.

"Morning, feller," said the Rio Kid cheerily.

Judge Shandy gave him a black look. "You!" he said, between his teeth.

"Nobody else," smiled the Rio Kid. "I reckon you're fixed up hyer comfortable, judge. Not quite like your house in Buttes, perhaps—but safe—quite safe, judge."

He laughed lightly.

"You want to know where your gunmen are? I guess they hoofed it home to Butte last night, and I sure opine they were tired when they got there. Their cayues are wandering somewhere in the buttes—along with yours, judge."

And you're here—you're my guest, judge. You're here for a quiet time, feller. Nobody will nose you out up here, at the top of the buttes—I guess we're over a thousand feet up, and I've sure blanketed the trail we came by. You let me know when you get tired of your quarters."

"What does this mean?" hissed Shandy. "You shot me down—"

"I guess I only creased you, judge, same as I used to crease ornery steers on the ranch," grinned the Rio Kid. "Jest a crease along the top of your cabeza, judge—it stunned you and put you to sleep, and you was sure sleeping sound when I brought you here. Don't you be scared that I'm going to shoot you up. You're sure too valuable."

"You can't keep me here long," hissed Shandy. "You opine not?" asked the Rio Kid. "Why, feller, I played your gang of gunmen like a set of suckers, specially to rope you in. That was all I wanted—jest to rope you in, judge."

The Rio Kid sat on a boulder at the mouth of the cave, and fixed his eyes on Judge Shandy.

He was still smiling, but there was a merciless gleam in his eyes.

"You listen to me, feller," he said quietly. "You're a hard-fisted man, judge, and there's a heap folk in Butte would be glad to hear that you'd gone up the flume. You've grown rich by money-lending, and taking up mortgages and foreclosures, and ruining men who was working while you sat in your office like a spider getting them into your meshes. You're a bad egg, judge—bad through and through. What made you go gunning after me?"

The Kid paused a moment.

"You had a galoot in your clutches and I lent him the dollars to get clear of you, and that sure made you mad with me," said the Kid. "You pulled a gun on me on the trail, and I shot it out of your fist. You couldn't let up at that. You sure had to get a gang of gunmen and follow me into the buttes, and you'd have shot me up if I hadn't been too wide for you, judge. You'd have left me for the buzzards."

"I'll leave you for the buzzards yet, you durned puncher," said Shandy, between his teeth. "Ask any galoot in Butte, and he'll tell you that Judge Shandy ain't the man to be beat up by a cowpuncher."

"You're beat by me, judge," said the Rio Kid coolly. "You're sure beak. You're a hard man, judge, and a hard grinder, and now, by the holy smoke, you'll be ground hard. You can chew on that."

"You figure on keeping me hyer?" "You've said it," assented the Kid.

"I guess I'll be searched for and found, and that'll mean ten years in the pen for you, puncher, if you ain't shot up."

"I reckon they can search from now till the cows come home, and they won't find you," grinned the Kid. "I'm sure taking the chance of it, anyhow. Bless your little heart, judge, I had all this cut and dried. I trapped your gang down in the gulches, jest for this reason—because I had this little shebang all ready for you, judge. And you walked into the trap like a good little man—you was so keen to get me."

And the Kid laughed heartily.

Judge Shandy's eyes glittered. "And if you keep me here, what then? Do you figure on getting a ransom out of me?"

"I'm not a Mexican brigand to hold a galoot to ransom, judge."

"Then, what?"

"Don't I keep on telling you you're my guest here?" said the Kid

banteringly. "I'm keeping you for the pleasure of your company. Besides, I'm selling you food."

"Selling me food?" repeated the judge.

"Yep—if you want any."

It was long past the judge's usual hour of breakfast. In the keen, sharp air of the high buttes, Judge Shandy was already hungry. He stared hard and savagely at the Kid.

"If you keep me a prisoner, dog-gone you, you'll have to feed me," he snarled.

"Not unless I choose," reminded the Kid. "It's my say-so, judge—you don't amount to shucks hyer. You ain't in your office in the Main Street of Butte now, talking to a settler that owes you money. If you want a can of bully beef and a frijole for your breakfast, judge, you've only got to say the word and pay the figure. Prices are high in this hotel—higher'n the interest you charge on a loan, you durned money-grabber. Breakfast costs you a thousand dollars."

"What?" yelled the judge.

"Every meal you take here will cost you the same," drawled the Rio Kid. "No extra charge for bringing in the meals."

"You gol-darned hobo!" yelled Shandy. "I'll starve first!"

The Kid nodded.

"You're free to do that," he agreed. "It's sure a free country, and any galoot who wants to starve can sure do it. Starve, then."

And the Rio Kid lounged away from the mouth of the cave, leaving Judge Shandy grinding his teeth with rage.

### THE FOURTH CHAPTER. The Ransom!

**T**HE day passed, in the cave in the high hills, every minute on leaden wings.

Judge Shandy raved and cursed and raved again, hoping every moment to hear the sounds of rescue, yet knowing in his heart that there would be no rescue. Only too well he knew that this puncher—whose name even he did not know—had taken every care. He was miles, he knew, from the gulch where his gang of gunmen had been trapped—the route by which he had been brought lay over mile on mile of barren, trackless rock. The keenest trailers in Texas might hunt for him for weeks without finding a clue to his hiding-place. He knew it only too well. And who, after all, was to hunt for him? He had hired a gang of gunmen to ride down the puncher and "shoot him up," but they were not likely to range the buttes in search of him. The sheriff of Butte and his men might search for a time, but they were not likely to spend days in searching for the best-hated man in the town. The judge was a hard man, a hard-fisted and hard-hearted man, and he had chosen rather to be feared than liked; but those who feared him were little likely to trouble their heads about his disappearance. It was forced into his mind that he was a prisoner without hope: his fate utterly dependent on the will of the unknown puncher—and from that puncher, what had he to expect? He had trailed the puncher down to take his life, fiercely, lawlessly, ruthlessly. He knew that he had no mercy to expect, and that he deserved none.

The judge was a hard man—stern to inflict, and stubborn to endure. In the keen air of the buttes hunger assailed him fiercely. But he would not yield: he was determined not to yield. All through the weary day he raved and cursed, and tramped about the rocky cave at the end of his tether, tethered

like a beast in a cage. But he would not call out—he would give no sign of surrender. The day passed, and night fell once more on the buttes. Far away, across the plains, he could see the twinkling lights come out one by one in the town of Butte—the town where he was a power, the town where he had sat in his office, like a spider in his web, spinning meshes for his fellow-men. The twinkling lights mocked him from afar.

Hunger gnawed him; but he called out no word to recall the puncher to the cave. Late in the night he threw himself on the bed of sassafras, and tried to sleep. He tossed there fitfully till morning came and the light of a new sunny day streamed down on the buttes.

No sign, no sound had come from the puncher; and a terrible fear came into Shandy's heart that the man was gone, had gone and left him to perish there, caged in the cave. His fierce anger and pride were quelled at last, and he called; and as there came no answer, he shouted, and shouted again. Only the echoing of his voice among the rocks answered him. The puncher was gone—but would he return?

It was high noon when the Rio Kid looked into the cave again. He gave the white-face, furious man a cheery nod.

"I reckon I've been away a time, judge," he remarked. "Did you want me, feller?"

The judge panted.

"Give me food."

"You pay the figure?" smiled the Kid.

"Yes!" groaned Shandy. "Anything—anything you like! Only give me food."

"You haven't got the dollars in your rags, I guess?"

"No."

"Then you want to sign a draft on the bank in Butte. I guess I'll let loose one of your fins to write it out. I've got the things here you'll want. Make it all square, judge; if the draft ain't paid I guess I'm riding on the western trail, and I shan't come back here. If you play any gun-game with that draft, judge, you'll never play another!" said the Rio Kid grimly.

But Judge Shandy was past trickery now. For his own sake he hoped fervently that the puncher would have no difficulty in collecting the money on the draft.

His right arm was released, and he wrote out the draft. The Kid examined it carefully, and put it in his belt. Then he tossed the judge a tin of bully beef and a tough frijole, and handed him a can of water. The judge devoured the food like a famished animal, the Kid watching him coolly. When the meal was over the judge's arm was bound again, and the Kid left him.

From somewhere in the distance the judge heard the sound of hoof-beats, the puncher had his mustang at hand. The prisoner of the cave threw him self upon his rough bed and groaned.

The hot day wore itself away.

Night came once more.

The judge called, and called again; but there was no answer. The puncher, he figured out, had gone down to Butte, and was in no hurry to return. Whether he had gone to Butte or not, the puncher did not reappear all through the long, weary night. The judge was tormented by fears—fears that the draft had not been paid and that the puncher had made good his threat to ride away and abandon him; fears that the puncher might have fallen in with the gunmen and been "shot up,"

That was what Judge Shandy had planned for him; but he was in mortal dread now lest his plans should have taken effect.

When dawn came up once more over the buttes the judge watched it with haggard, sunken eyes.

The hardest man in Butte was changed now. He lay on his rough bed in misery when the Rio Kid looked into the cave once more, with the rising sun behind him.

"Morning, feller!" said the Kid.

"Give me food!"

The judge was almost whimpering. The hardest man in Butte was broken now.

"You've got another thousand dollars to spend, judge?" asked the Kid coolly.

"Anything?"

"I guess the folks in Butte would hardly know you now, judge; you've grown so polite and obliging," said the Kid.

"Let me out of this," said the judge hoarsely. "You've got me beat—you've got me broke! Name your figure, and let me loose!"

The Kid regarded him coolly.

"Ten thousand is the figure," he answered.

The judge groaned.

"It's almost all I have!" he muttered.

"How did you get it, judge? Does it sure belong to you?" asked the Kid banteringly. "It's other men's money, judge, though you've banked it. But take your choice—I ain't in a hurry to ride out of the buttes. I'm for New Mexico when I ride out of hyer, but New Mexico can sure wait till you've made up your little mind, feller."

"I'm beat! Give me the pen."

"You've said it, judge," smiled the Kid. "Make it nine thousand dollars this time, and when it's clear you're a free man—and I sure hope the lesson will do you good."

The draft was written, and the Kid belted it. The judge was left with a free hand, and an ample supply of food and drink.

He ate and drank, and ate and drank again, as if he would never have his fill. The puncher was going; but he stepped into the cave again as the judge began to fumble with his bonds.

"Not yet, feller!" smiled the Kid.

And the judge's free hand was bound once more.

A little later he heard the clatter of a mustang's hoofs dying away into the silence of the buttes.

Food and drink were within the prisoner's reach, and he could help himself, bound as he was. When the night came he slept.

With the morning the puncher did not return. The sun rose higher and higher, and he did not come. The judge groaned in anguish of spirit. The terrible thought haunted him that the puncher, now that he had obtained the ransom, had abandoned him to die. What better did he deserve at the hands of the man he had sought to hunt down to his death? The judge watched the golden sun rise higher and higher in the sky, till the heat of noon was blazing down on the plains and the buttes.

There was a footstep at last.

He turned his weary head to the mouth of the cave. But it was not the puncher that entered.

"Long Bill!" said the judge faintly.

"You're here, judge!" exclaimed the gunman.

"Let me loose."

Long Bill came across the cave. His keen bowie-knife glided over Judge Shandy's bonds, and he was a free man. He staggered to his feet and sank down on a boulder.

"How did you find me?" muttered the judge at last.

"I reckon that puncher put me wise," said Long Bill. "He held me up with a gun this morning, and I guessed who he was—though I hadn't set eyes on him afore. I sure allowed that it was the long trail for me; but he only wanted to chew the rag. He told me where to find you, and allowed you'd be glad to see me up hyer in the buttes, judge. I reckon I've been all the morning getting hyer. Say, you look as if you'd had a bully time, judge."

The gunman fumbled in his belt.

"He sure handed me a billy-doo for you, judge, and I reckon I've got it hyer. Hyer it is."

The judge took the letter, and unfolded it. His haggard eyes ran over the pencilled lines. Then the paper fluttered from his hand, and the gunman picked it up and glanced at it.

"Oh, holy smoke!" ejaculated Long Bill. "The Rio Kid! It was the Rio Kid we was trailing, judge. I reckon I ain't surprised that we slipped up on it, nohow. The Rio Kid is bad medicine, judge."

There was a grin on his rugged, bearded face as he looked at the Rio Kid's "billy-doo," as he called it, again.

The Kid's note was brief:

"I'm giving this to your bulldozer to bring to you, judge. Your dollars have gone to the hospital in St. Antone; your money's sure too dirty for me to touch. I told you you was my guest, judge, and you've had your fodder free. Follow my trail into New Mexico if you want to see the Rio Kid again."

"The Rio Kid!" muttered the judge.

He said no more; and uttered no word on the way down from the high buttes to the town. Whether that lesson had done the judge good, or whether it left him the hard-fisted rascal that it had found him, the Rio Kid never knew; he had left the buttes country far behind, and Judge Shandy was dismissed carelessly from his mind as he rode on the trail for New Mexico and the gold-mines.

THE END.

(There will be another stirring yarn of the Rio Kid next week, chronicled: "THE CALL OF HIS RACE!")

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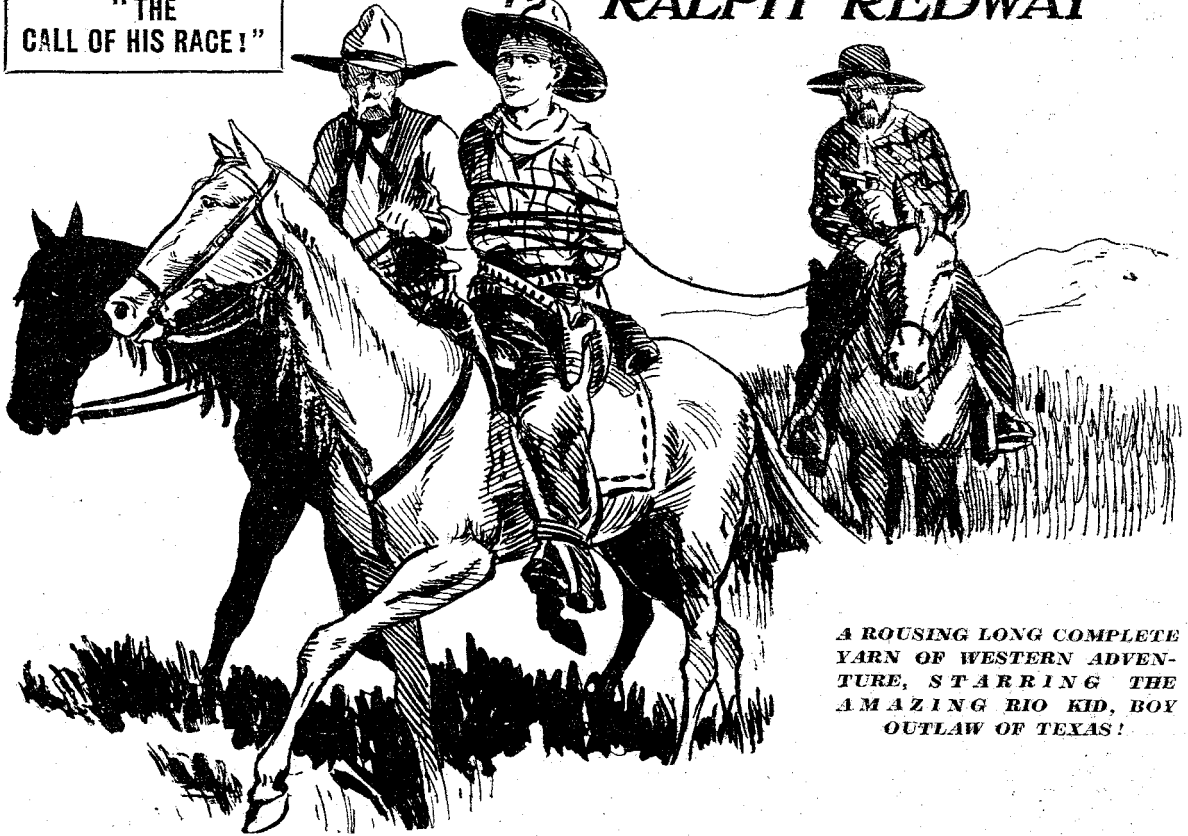
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**CAPTURED!** The Rio Kid is captured at last—roped in on the plains. But the Kid's not dismayed at the grim prospect before him. Many things can happen, he knows, before he is shut off from the world by iron bars!

# The Rio Kid!

This week:  
"THE  
CALL OF HIS RACE!"

BY RALPH REDWAY



A ROUSING LONG COMPLETE  
YARN OF WESTERN ADVENTURE,  
STARRING THE  
AMAZING RIO KID, BOY  
OUTLAW OF TEXAS!

## THE FIRST CHAPTER. Roped In!

THE Rio Kid could, have laughed at the grim irony of it, only the affair was rather too serious for laughing.

At long last, after many doubts and much debating with himself, the Kid had made up his mind. He was tired of the whole game—tired of being hunted by Texan sheriffs, tired of riding lonely trails, tired of solitary camps in the chapparal. Texas, as he told himself, was not the whole wide world; outside the borders of the Lone Star State there were lands where the name and fame of the Rio Kid were unknown; where the arm of the law was not stretched out to seize him; where he could look his fellow-man in the face without gripping a gun at the same moment.

To turn his back on his own land was not easy to the Kid; though in his own land he was an outcast. But he had resolved on it at last; resolved to ride to the west, and seek a new country beyond the desert. He had faced the setting sun and ridden. The lonely

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wastes of the Staked Plain, the drifting sand that hid the trails, the savage Redskins that wandered in that last refuge of the native, had no terrors for the Kid. And when the grasslands of Texas dropped behind him he gave little or no thought to the sheriffs and town marshals who wanted him, or the bills that were stuck up on nearly every dead wall between the Pecos and the Rio Grande, offering five hundred dollars reward for the Rio Kid, dead or alive. The old life was thrown behind the Rio Kid; or so he thought. But it was not so easy to shake off the past, as he grimly reflected now—now that he was riding back with his face to the east, his feet tied to his stirrups, his hands bound to his belt, his guns in the keeping of the two burly men who rode, one on either side of him.

Three days before the Kid had ridden through the last camp on the edge of the desert, and there he had seen, and read, with a smile on his face, a bill posted on a tree in the street, offering five hundred dollars for his capture. In a playful mood, the Kid had shot that bill to pieces under the eyes of a staring score of men who did not ven-

ture to touch a gun while the Kid sat his mustang there with a .45 in either hand. It was the Kid's last defiance to the law that had made him an outlaw by no fault of his own; and he had forgotten the episode as he rode on his lonely way by desert trails; but others had not forgotten.

Perhaps the Kid had grown a little careless in his belief that he had left Texas and all his foes behind him. Perhaps, thinking of the new life before him, he had dismissed the old too soon and too easily. Certainly he had not reckoned that he would be followed from that camp on the Rio Toro where he had shot the bill to pieces on the tree, neither would he have guessed that any man could trail him for three days in the desert unknown to him. But Hank Harker, town marshal of Toro, knew his business; he had tracked many a rustler in the Staked Plain; and now he had tracked the Kid. In his solitary camp at the bottom of a rocky valley, sleeping beside his mustang, rolled in his blanket, the Kid had been awakened by the cold touch of a Colt on his forehead; and he did not argue. The Kid

knew when he had a chance to draw—and when he had no chance. And on the present occasion he had not the ghost of a chance.

And now he was riding back to Texas, tied on his horse. Many times the mustang turned his muzzle round, and his intelligent eyes stared at his master, as if in perplexity. It was the first time that the Kid had ridden the mustang bound hand and foot, a prisoner, his reins held by another rider. Not only was the Kid bound, and his reins held by Hank Harker, but a lariat was looped round him, and grasped by the man on his other side. The Kid was well known to be a slippery customer, and the town marshal of Toro was taking no chances with him.

There was a smile on the Kid's handsome face as he rode between his captors, under the blazing sun; but black care was in his heart. In the very hours when he had thrown his old life behind, his old life had risen against him like this and smitten him down. A bound prisoner, he was being led back to answer to the law he had defied and derided more recklessly than any rustler or gun-man in Texas.

It was a ride of two days back to Toro; and the first day of blazing heat and dust was drawing to its close. The Toro marshal and his man, Buck Carson, were fatigued, grimed with the dust of the desert, and still uneasy lest their prisoner should slip through their fingers. Bound as he was, helpless in their hands, each of them kept a gun handy, ready to shoot him dead at the first effort to escape. They were going to take him in alive if they could; but, dead or alive, they were determined to take him.

But the Rio Kid made no effort to escape. It was futile to make any such attempt, and he was not the man to waste his energy. If a chance came that was a different matter. But what chance was likely to come? There was no one to aid him in the lonely desert; and when he came to the haunts of man, no hand would be raised for him—all would be raised against him. The chapter of chances held nothing to which the Kid could pin the slightest hope; and yet he had not abandoned hope. Hope and confidence were a part of his nature.

The sun was sinking towards the sierras of New Mexico; the few stunted pecans that dotted the arid plain were casting long shadows. The town marshal and his man still rode on doggedly. The Kid glanced from one to the other with a mocking smile. He knew how gladly they would have ridden right on, with never a halt till they had landed him safe in the calaboose at Toro; but it was not in horse-flesh to do it. Already their horses were weary and slacking; even the black-muzzled mustang showed signs of fatigue. They had to camp one night in the desert; there was no help for that. Camp they must, and take the chance of the Kid slipping through their fingers in the hours of darkness. But not till the rim of the red sun touched the sierra to the west did Hank Harker unwillingly draw rein.

"Light down, Buck!" he said gruffly. "I guess the cayuses are ready to drop. We hit the trail again at dawn."

"Sure!" assented Carson.

"You're sure going to let me loose on the night, marshal," said the Kid, with a grin. "I reckon I should lose in heavy sleep, roped up like this." "Forget it," said Harker curtly. "I'm sure taking no chances with you,

Kid. You've given us the slip too long and too often."

The Kid laughed, still sitting bound on his horse, while the others had dismounted. His eyes, keen and searching as an eagle's, roved over the darkening plain. He had worn a smile while black care sat at his heart; but now the care was lifted, and his laugh rang with a joyous note. Perhaps on the shadowing plain the Kid's eagle eye had picked up some sign that was unseen by the town marshal of Toro and his man—thinking only, as they were, of their weariness, and of their anxiety to keep their prisoner safe for the calaboose.

Harker stared at the Kid suspiciously. "You want to remember that you're our meat, dead or alive, Kid," he said, with menace in his voice. "You lift as much as an eyelid, and you get yours. I've told you we're taking no chances."

"I reckon I shan't be in a hurry to part company with you, marshal," smiled the Kid. "I like you too much, feller."

The marshal grunted.

"You sure won't have a chance of parting company," he answered.

And the town marshal of Toro made very sure of that.

The Kid was released from the saddle and lifted to the ground. His ankles were tied to two pegs driven into the ground. His hands were released to let him share the supper of his captors, but while he ate a revolver was held to his head, with a finger on the trigger. One suspicious movement, and a bullet would have been driven through his brain. But the Kid was not the man to throw his life away, and he made no suspicious movement. He ate and drank with a good appetite; cold bully beef and biscuit, washed down by lukewarm water from the bottles. Harker did not care to light a camp-fire, lest its light should attract any of the lawless wandering outcasts of the Staked Plain.

After his supper the Kid's hands were roped behind him, and both Harker and his man examined the knots of the rope with care. The lasso was looped round him again, the rope twisted round the town marshal's arm when he lay down in his blanket. Not a movement could the Kid have made without awakening Hank Harker. And all through the night one or the other was to keep watch, gun in hand.

Harker rolled himself in his blanket, and slept almost as soon as he closed his eyes, so weary was he from the long trail after the Rio Kid, and the hard day's ride that had followed the capture. Buck Carson was keeping the first watch, and he sat with his back to a stunted pecan, a revolver in his hand, his eyes on the prisoner. Weary as he was, he did not close his eyes. But the Kid, lying bound in his blanket, unable to move hand or foot, closed his eyes and slept as peacefully as ever he had slumbered in the bunk-house in the old days at the Double Bar ranch.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### The Kid's Last Chance!

STARS were gleaming in the sky when the Rio Kid awakened. He did not stir.

It still wanted an hour to midnight; and the Kid had awakened then, because he had determined to waken then, before he closed his eyes in slumber.

To the watchful eyes of Buck Carson, sitting against the pecan, with his gun in his hand, his gaze fixed on the

prisoner, it seemed that the Kid was still sleeping.

But never had the Kid been wider awake.

He was very careful not to stir; he did not desire to awaken the town marshal of Toro, breathing heavily a few feet from him.

From the shadows, the Kid's eyes, half-opened, watched. The glimmer of the stars showed him the recumbent figure of the sleeping marshal, and the watchful face of Carson. The gun, resting on Carson's knee, caught the starlight and gleamed.

The Kid lay still—and waited.

From the darkness round the lonely camp in the heart of the desert, came the faint hoot of an owl.

It was answered by another hoot, as faint, on the other side of the camp, and then by another and another.

The Kid smiled, with his half-closed eyes on Carson.

The marshal's man was heavy with fatigue and the desire to sleep; but he was grimly remaining awake and watchful, till midnight, when Hank Harker was to take his turn to watch.

The faint hooting of the owls did not disturb him.

The Kid felt a twinge of compunction. He knew what the faint, almost inaudible hooting meant, if the marshal's man did not. He knew that death was stealing through the darkness upon the man who watched, gun in hand, the prisoner who could not harm him. It was on the Kid's lips to utter a warning whisper. But he checked it. His own life was at stake; he might save Carson a dozen times over, and yet he would be led a bound prisoner into Toro. The ropes that bound him irked him terribly; he was aching with their cramping grip; yet no pleading would have induced his captors to loosen an inch; even a movement to ease his cramped limbs might have drawn a hasty shot. The Kid was not in a position to play the Good Samaritan to the men who were leading him to death, tied up like a wild beast. He felt compunction, but he was silent and still.

The hooting of the owls had died into silence.

The Kid knew what that meant.

His keen eyes had read the sign of the desert, before his captors had halted to camp. A turkey-buzzard rising from a gully, a shadow that stirred where other shadows were still, had been enough—more than enough—for the Kid. He knew that some savage crew of desert outcasts had sighted the party from afar, and tracked them—waiting only for the cover of night to close in on the lonely camp. So wary, so cunning, was the trailing, that even the Rio Kid, watchful for the slimmest chance that might stand between him and the calaboose at Toro, doubted once or twice whether he had read the sign aright. But in his heart he was sure; yet till he heard the hooting of the owls, he could not tell whether the hidden trailers were white men or red.

Now he knew!

Some gang of redskin outcasts—some crew of savage Apaches who had never bent their necks to the white man's yoke—ferocious, greedy, ruthless, were closing round the solitary camp in the desert of the Staked Plain. Whether he had more mercy to expect from them than his captors had to expect, the Kid could not be sure. As likely as not, they would kill him as ruthlessly as the others, and his scalp would hang as a trophy at a Redskin belt. Better that than the calaboose at Toro, and the triumph of the enemies who had so long

hunted him in vain. But it was on the cards that, finding him a prisoner in the hands of their foes, the Apaches might spare him—at least, only make him a prisoner; and the change of captors would be a change for the better. In the remotest recesses of the desert to which they might bear him, there would be hope of escape—the Rio Kid was a hard man to hold. At the very worst, better to join the Redskin gang than to be handed over to the sheriff's rope.

It was a chance—a slim chance, but it was all that the Kid had. Life or death hung on the passing minutes for him. He was coolly prepared for whatever might befall; ready to face it when it came, whether it was freedom, or a change of captivity, or the thrust of an Apache knife. With such thoughts in his mind, the Rio Kid had slept peacefully, knowing that he could rely upon himself to waken when he would; and knowing that the attack, which was certain to come, was not likely to come before midnight. And now it was coming.

Those faint, almost inaudible, hoots from the silent night were the signals of the Redskins to one another, as they surrounded the camp in the dense darkness. When the circle was complete, and all was ready, the rush would come, as the Kid knew. He had not seen one man—not a shadow of one—but he knew that at least a dozen savage foes were circling round the camp, closing in, closer and closer.

Buck Carson stirred and yawned. He had not noted the faint hoots of the night-owls; had he noted them, he would never have recognised them as human imitations. His ear was not trained to the sounds of the desert like the Rio Kid's.

But now the hooting had ceased; all was silent. The circle was complete; and close—close at hand now, though the darkness still hid the savage rovers of the Staked Plain.

The Kid waited grimly.

If the creeping Indians noticed him at all, they believed him sleeping, as he lay motionless, as Buck Carson believed. But the Kid was not sleeping; he was watching tensely.

Behind the stunted pecan against which the marshal's man sat, a shadow stirred among other shadows.

The Kid felt a pang.

A few moments more, and he knew that a stealthy hand would reach round the slender trunk, and a knife would be driven between the shoulders of the man who sat there unsuspecting.

The man was taking him to his death; but the Kid was a white man. To see a white man slaughtered helplessly, treacherously, by a lurking savage, was not possible to him. For the moment he forgot that he was the Rio Kid, hunted by all Texas; and remembered only that he was a puncher of the Double Bar ranch, a white man bound by all laws to stand by his race against foes of another colour. He lifted his head.

At the movement, Buck Carson's hand came up, with the gun in it, his finger on the trigger. But the shadow behind the pecan, which had been stirring, was stilled. The creeping Apache had paused. The Kid yawned, and smiled at the watchful, suspicious face of the marshal's man—watchful where no watch was needed, unguarded where his life depended on his guard.

"No games, Kid," said Carson. "I'd sure be sorry to blow your cabeza into little pieces, but you get yours if you try it on."

"Mayn't a man speak a little word, feller?" yawned the Kid.

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"Can it, and go to sleep!"

The Kid laughed.

"You ain't interested?" he asked.

"Nope."

"I guess I'd sure be interested if a galoot was telling me that a Redskin was just behind my shoulder, with a knife in his paw," drawled the Rio Kid.

Carson did not stir.

"Cut it out!" he grinned. "You don't draw me so easy as that, Kid. I guess there ain't no Redskin nearer than a day's ride."

"You dog-goned loco galoot, I'm warning you that there's Redskins all round the camp, and that your life ain't worth shucks!" said the Rio Kid contemptuously.

"Forget it, Kid," grinned Carson.

Hank Harker stirred at the sound of voices and sat-up in his blankets. His gun was in his hand.

"Midnight, Buck?" he asked.

"Nigh on, marshal."

"Chewing the rag?" The Marshal of Toro glanced from Carson to the prisoner. "I guess you'd better sleep, Kid. You ain't got to keep watch."

The Rio Kid laughed.

"You've got me tight, feller," he said. "You ain't letting up on me at any price, not if I save your life ten times over—what? But you're a white man, marshal, and I guess I'm white. There's the Injuns round the camp as thick as fleas on a Mexican dog."

Buck Carson chuckled, evidently taking no stock in the Kid's warning. But Hank Harker was on his feet with a bound. His eyes glared into the thick shadows round the lonely camp; his finger was on his trigger.

"The Kid's foolin', marshal!" said Carson. "I guess there ain't no Redskins around without my knowing it. I— Oh!"

The marshal's man broke off with a choking cry and pitched headlong to the ground. He did not stir after he touched the earth, and as he lay on his face the feather of an arrow could be seen sticking from his neck. From the darkness the arrow had sped, winged with death, and the marshal's man lay dead at the feet of the Marshal of Toro.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

#### Surrounded!

**B**ANG! Bang! Bang!

With a gun in either hand, the Marshal of Toro blazed away into the darkness round the camp.

But he was not standing now.

He had thrown himself on the earth, taking what cover he could—his horse, and the stunted pecan, and the blankets, and the body of the man who lay prone. With the roar of the marshal's revolvers came a wild yelling from the Apaches, like a chorus of demons bursting out in the darkness. Five or six arrows whizzed through the air and two or three bullets—some of the Redskins had rifles. Then for a minute shadowy forms showed up in the night, rushing in.

But only for a minute. The blazing Colts drove the Apaches back, three or four of them yelling with the pain of wounds, one of them falling as he went and never stirring again.

The shadowy figures faded into the darkness again, and demonic yells came ringing back.

Then there was silence.

But the silence did not mean that the Apaches were gone. The Town Marshal of Toro knew that only too well. The camp was ringed by foes, watchful, ferocious, ruthless, waiting for a chance to get the white man with an arrow or a bullet, or screwing in their

courage for another rush in face of his revolvers.

The marshal panted as he crammed fresh cartridges into his Colts. The Kid grinned at him from his blanket.

"Feel like letting me loose, marshal?"

No answer.

"I reckon you're in a close corner, feller. You know I can handle a gun," said the Kid persuasively. "You can't stall off a gang of Apaches on your own, marshal! Have a little hoss-sense!"

"Shut up, Kid! Chewing the rag will draw their arrows! They can hear you!"

"What do I care!" grinned the Kid. "A Redskin arrow is no worse than the rope of Judge Lynch, feller!"

"You warned me!" muttered Harker. "If you hadn't warned me, Kid, I'd be lying beside Carson this minute!"

"I warned Carson, but he knew too much!" said the Kid. "I was a fool to do it, but a feller can't forget his colour! I reckon if you go up the hume, marshal, I stand a better chance with the Injuns than with Judge Lynch!"

"You do," agreed the marshal.

"Well, then, you durned galoot, let me loose and give me a gun!"

Harker shook his head.

"I'm taking you back to Toro, dead or alive, Kid! I guess I'm obliged to you for putting me wise about the Injuns, and I'll make things as easy for you as I know how. But you're my prisoner, and you're staying my prisoner!"

"I guessed you'd say just that," assented the Kid. "I knew I was a durned fool to put you wise! But you ain't got me to Toro yet, feller! Them Red bucks will have a word to say about that!"

Harker made no reply.

He was straining his eyes into the darkness of the night, and straining his ears to listen.

At any moment the rush of the Redskins might come, and he knew now that he had more than a dozen foes to face.

Gladly enough he would have had a man like the Rio Kid at his side, gun in hand, to withstand the rush when it came. But with a gun in his hand, the Kid was not the man to be taken to Toro afterwards. And the marshal was hanging on to his prisoner so long as life remained.

Whiz! Whiz! Whiz!

Arrows were dropping into the camp.

The Apaches were shooting into the camp so that the arrows dropped almost vertically on the camp, and, in spite of the darkness, their aim was uncannily good.

An arrow passed through the Kid's blanket, but its force was spent, and it barely scratched him.

He heard a muttered curse from Harker as another barbed shaft grazed the marshal's neck.

There was a sudden squeal from Carson's horse, and the animal struggled up, an arrow sticking in its flank. The terrified horse trampled away into the darkness, and a yell from the unseen Redskins told that they had caught it.

Hank Harker ground his teeth savagely.

He had followed the Kid far into the wilderness of the Staked Plain, thinking only of his capture, reckless and heedless of the lurking dangers of the desert, which he had faced many a time unheeding. The Kid was in his hands now, and the unheeded dangers of the desert had closed in on him. A gang of thief-Apaches—outcasts, half-famished wanderers of the desert—held him at



**UNDER FIRE!** A shower of arrows dropped into the camp, one pinning the Kid's blanket to the ground. The Redskins were shooting into the air with an aim that was uncannily good. "Wake me when they've finished," yawned the Kid from his bed, and he turned over and went to sleep. (See Chapter 3.)

lay, and well the Marshal of Toro knew that only a miracle could save him.

Buck Carson lay dead, and ere another sun rose over the Staked Plain Harker expected to join him. There was no help a day's ride from the nearest white man's camp, no chance of succour, and not the remotest chance that the Apaches would relinquish their prey. The guns and horses alone were a great prize to the ragged thieves of the desert.

The Rio Kid yawned.

"You staying awake, marshal?" he asked banteringly.

Harker grunted.

"Wake me half an hour before dawn, then?" grinned the Kid. "I'm going to sleep. They'll finish just before daylight."

"You know a lot, Kid?" snarled the marshal.

"I guess I know Injuns and their ways," drawled the Kid. "They'll keep up this game with their arrows to get you rattled, but they won't keep it up after dawn. Just before sun-up, feller, there'll be a rush. You're a good man, marshal, and you'll pot three or four, and the rest will carve you into small pieces! Wake me for the finish, feller!"

The Kid closed his eyes.

Harker did not heed him; he was watching with painful intensity. He knew that the Kid was right—that the threat of attack was to hang over him till day was near to keep his nerves at full tension, and that the last fatal rush would come before the new day gave him light for sure shooting.

In the meantime, a chance arrow might disable him and throw him, an easy prey, into the hands of the Apaches. He knew it well enough, and

he knew that he would never ride into Toro again, with or without his prisoner. But he was still dogged and determined, still inflexible.

That the Kid was sleeping he did not believe, but after a time he peered at the prisoner in the darkness. The Kid's eyes were closed, his breathing was soft and regular. Harker stared at him in wonder. The Kid was sleeping as peacefully as a child, while round the camp lurked the savage Apaches, and arrows still dropped from the air. Yet when the Redskins' final rush came, the chances were that the Kid, prisoner as he was, would share the fate of the Marshal of Toro.

"Some nerve!" muttered the marshal.

He watched again.

Twice dim shadows flitted in the darkness, and he fired. Once a yell told that the lead had taken effect.

Still the rush did not come.

Harker lay between his horse and the body of his follower, crouching in whatever cover there was, watchful, savage, bitterly resolute.

But as the stars paled, he knew that the end was drawing near.

It wanted half an hour to daylight; and within the next fifteen minutes, at most, his fate would be decided. And it would only be decided one way.

He did not waken the Kid. But a mocking voice at his side told him that the Rio Kid had awakened.

"Saying your prayers, marshal?"

Harker made no answer.

#### THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

##### The Kid Keeps His Word!

**T**HE Rio Kid sat up in his blanket. He was stiff and cramped; yet in spite of the discomfort, he had slept soundly. Now he was wide awake, and there was a gleam of amuse-

ment in his eyes. Just before the dawn it was darker than ever; he could scarcely make out the figure of the Marshal of Toro so close to him. The Kid was thinking now.

He knew what the end must be—Hank Harker, fighting to the last, would go down under the rush of the Apaches. The Redskins, finding a bound prisoner in the camp, might spare him, as a foe of their foes. The Kid could speak to them in their own tongue; it was likely enough that the Apaches had heard of the Rio Kid, more than likely that they would welcome him into their gang if he cared to save his life by turning Redskin—for a time. At all events, the Kid's only chance, his only hope, lay in the victory of the outcasts of the Staked Plain. Yet he had deliberately postponed, if not frustrated, that victory, by warning his captors of the impending attack. And now—the Kid smiled at his own weakness, but the call of his race was too strong for him to resist.

"Marshal," he drawled.

Harker peered at him.

"Forget it, Kid," he said. "I'm not letting you loose. I'm holding on to you as long as I can."

The Kid laughed.

"I guess you know I'm a man of my word, marshal. They say a lot of things about the Rio Kid, but no galoot ever figured out that my word wasn't good enough for him."

"I know that, Kid."

"Well, then," drawled the Kid. "Let me loose, feller, and give me my guns; and when the circus is over, I'll sure hand you the guns again, and let you rope me up."

Harker was silent.

"I reckon I've got a chance if the Redskins wipe you out, marshal. But it sure

goes against the grain to let a gang of dirty Apaches wipe out a white man. I'll stand the racket with you, marshal, and afterwards I'm your prisoner again. Is it a cinch?"

Still the marshal hesitated.

Not that he doubted the Kid. He knew that the Rio Kid's word was as good as gold; that he would do exactly as he promised, if he survived the fight. Well he knew, too, the difference it would make, with a man like the Rio Kid fighting at his side when the rush came. But to owe his life to the Kid—and still to take him a prisoner into Toro—that was what made the marshal hesitate. And he had his duty to do—the Kid was his prisoner, and his duty was clear.

"Is it a cinch, feller?" yawned the Kid. "There ain't much time for chewing the rag—they'll come any minute now. I reckon you can trust me to keep my word."

"I guess I can trust you, Kid," said the marshal slowly.

"Then it's a cinch?"

"I can't let you go, Kid," said the marshal huskily. "You know that. If we beat the Apaches, I've got to take you into Toro, alive or dead."

"I guess I'm wise to that, marshal."

"If you mean business, Kid—"

"Sure thing!"

"It's a cinch, then," said the marshal at last.

His knife glided over the ropes that held the Rio Kid.

The Kid was a free man. The marshal pushed over to him the two notched, walnut-butted guns that had been taken from him when he had been captured. The Kid did not touch them for a moment. He was chafing his cramped limbs, stiff from the ropes.

But at last he grasped the guns. He examined both of them with care, and gave a soft chuckle.

"What a chance, marshal," he murmured, "if a man wasn't a man of his word. I reckon one ball would give you your ticket for soup; and once on my mustang, I'd take my chance with all the Apaches in the Staked Plain. What a chance I'm missing!"

And the Kid sighed.

Hank Harker did not speak. He was watching. Dawn was drawing near, and he knew that the rush impended.

Some faint sound from the darkness made the Kid alert. A glint came into his eyes, and he gripped his guns hard. "They're coming, marshal! You want to watch out," he drawled.

The rush came.

From the silence and the darkness there broke out a sudden storm of savage yells, and from all sides the shadowy figures of the Apaches rushed in on the camp.

More than a dozen of them, knife or tomahawk in hand, leaping out of the darkness like phantoms, yelling like fiends.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The Rio Kid grinned over his guns as he fired. Hank Harker was firing, too; but the fire of the Kid was like lightning. He seemed to be able to see like a cat in the dark—and every time he pulled trigger, a death-cry answered the shot. Shadowy figures, fiendish, painted faces, yelling mouths, and snarling teeth, surrounded the two white men, as they stood and faced the desperate rush—a rush that would have overwhelmed the marshal, alone, in a few seconds. But good man as the marshal was, the Rio Kid was worth five or six of him in a desperate affray of this kind.

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Bang! Bang! Bang!

It was more than the Apache gang had counted on.

For little more than a minute the scene was like pandemonium, and it seemed that the two white men must be overwhelmed by the yelling demons that had leaped out of the darkness. And then—

Then three or four screaming savages were fleeing wildly in the darkness, and the fight was over. The Rio Kid, laughing, pumped out lead after the Apaches as they ran.

"Our game, marshal," he chuckled.

He caught Hank Harker as he reeled. Blood was streaming down the marshal's face.

"Hurt, feller?"

Harker dabbed away the blood.

"I guess that tomahawk went close," he said coolly. "Not close enough, though. We've licked them, Kid."

"We sure have," assented the Rio Kid.

The marshal bound his neck-scarf round his head, where a tomahawk had made a deep gash. The sounds of the fleeing Apaches had died away in the desert. From the east came a glimmer of light. Dawn flushed up over the desert of the Staked Plain.

Two groaning Apaches were crawling away, unheeded. The Kid glanced carelessly at the dead Redskins sprawled round the camp; the slain men who might have saved him, had he passed unheeded the call of his colour. He hardly knew whether he regretted the line he had taken. But the die was cast now, regret or no regret. The sun that was rising over the edge of the barren desert, was to see him a prisoner in the calaboose at Toro before it set.

Hank Harker looked at him grimly.

"You've saved my life, Kid."

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

"I've got to take you into Toro."

The Kid looked thoughtfully at the guns in his hands, the guns that had dealt death to the Apaches, and that were now empty. Deliberately he had fired his last cartridge after the fleeing Apaches, and left himself defenceless. Slowly the Kid reversed the guns in his hands and took them by the barrels, extending the walnut butts towards the marshal of Toro.

The marshal took them from him.

"I'm plumb sorry, Kid," he muttered.

"But I've got my duty to do; I warned you, Kid."

"What's the good of chewing the rag?" drawled the Kid. "I'm your prisoner, marshal."

The Kid's hands were still free, as he breakfasted with the Marshal of Toro on stale flapjacks and lukewarm water. With his free hands he saddled the black-muzzled mustang, while the marshal was piling the desert sand over the body of Buck Carson. And when Hank Harker was ready to hit the trail, the Rio Kid mounted his mustang, with a mocking smile on his face.

Harker hesitated.

"I guess if you give me your word to ride quiet, Kid, I'll let you off the ropes," he said.

"I guess not," smiled the Kid. "I'm your prisoner, marshal, but you won't get me as far as Toro if I can help it. Put on the ropes, feller."

And it was with his feet tied to his stirrups, and his hands bound to his belt, his reins held by the Marshal of Toro, that the Rio Kid rode away under the rising sun.

THE END.

(There will be another grand Rio Kid yarn in next week's issue, entitled: "A LIFE FOR A LIFE.")

## A WORD WITH YOUR EDITOR!

### CHEERS FOR THE RIO KID!

"H AS the Rio Kid come to stay?" That question appears in scores of readers' letters of late, and it just shows how successful this new series of stories is. Everyone wants the Kid to become a fixture with the old POP, and readers are not slow in making this demand at the source of affairs.

Of course, there's no doubt about it, our Western yarns are the finest of their kind that have ever been written. You can read any other story of the roaring Wild West and you won't find as many thrills and surprises in them as you will in one of the Rio Kid yarns. And there's the local colour—it's there, plain to the eye, and vivid to the imagination. As you read the stories you feel just as if you were yourself charging across the rolling prairies, camping in the chaparral, and watching the golden sun sink behind the sierra.

When a story makes you feel like this, it proves it's the "real goods." But I have wandered off the main question: "Has the Kid come to stay?" Well, he'll stay some time yet, anyway, for I dare not take him away, even if I want to, and I certainly don't want to. So will my many reader-chums be satisfied with that answer for the moment—the Kid's here, anyway, and that's all that matters, doesn't it?

### NOT 335 DAYS.

"I'm certain that I've dropped a few days out of this last year," writes P. I., of Islington. "Here we are in April, and it seems only a few weeks ago that I was arranging last year's Easter vac."

Of course, P. I., if you have been working and playing hard this last year, you will certainly not notice the rate the days fly past. But I agree with you; it is somewhat disconcerting when you suddenly realise that twelve months have sped away when you've had your back turned, so to speak.

But take a look back on those days, and you'll see, after a little reflection, the profit of your hard work and hard play. You mightn't notice the time, but you will notice your little progress in this great wide world, and then you'll feel glad, and you'll want to go through this coming year in the same way. Good luck to you!

### NEXT WEEK'S STORIES.

Now turn to page 11 of this issue for a complete announcement of next week's school, detective, and Western stories. They're all tip-top yarns, and if you're wise in your generation, you'll see that your newsagent has your order for next week's issue well in advance.

Cheerio, chums!

Your Editor.



**THE KID IN PERIL!** Little did the Rio Kid realise when he did a tender-foot a good turn, that a time would come when that same tenderfoot would be in the position to return the compliment!

# THE RIO KID!

RALPH REDWAY ~



This week  
"A LIFE FOR  
A LIFE!"

A GRIPPING  
LONG COMPLETE  
WESTERN YARN,  
STARRING THE  
RIO KID, BOY  
OUTLAW OF THE  
TEXAN PLAINS!

## THE FIRST CHAPTER. Going Back to Frio!

**T**HERE was something familiar about the man, but for his life, the Rio Kid could not place him.

He had seen the fellow before somewhere, he was sure of that. But where, and in what circumstances, he could not recall. It was odd, and it bothered the Kid a little, for usually he had a remarkably good memory for faces.

Not that it mattered a heap. The man, whoever he was, was simply the gaoler at the calaboose in Toro town—and the Toro calaboose was merely a temporary abiding-place for the Rio Kid. From the calaboose he was going back to Frio—just as soon as Watson, the Frio sheriff, could arrive to take him in hand. Watson was not likely to lose time when he heard the news that the Rio Kid was roped in—he was likely to make the dust fly in the trail between Frio and the little township of shacks and shanties on the border of the Staked Plain.

Going back to Frio!

Many times, in his strange, roving life on the prairie, since the old days on the Double-Bar Ranch, the Kid had ridden back to the Frio country, where he had been raised and where he had ridden in the round-up with the Double-Bar bunch.

Now he was going under very different conditions—as a bound prisoner, to be handed over to the law he had long eluded and defied.

Going back to Frio under those conditions did not appeal to the Kid. The town would turn out en masse to

see him ride in under escort of Sheriff Watson and his posse; but that was not the sort of ovation that the Rio Kid wanted. In the two days that he had lain a prisoner in the calaboose in the camp of Toro, the Kid's brain had worked actively and always on the thought of escape. But Hank Harker, town marshal of Toro, was taking care of his prisoner. Good fortune had delivered the Rio Kid into his hands, and he knew that the Kid was a slippery customer. The Kid did not give up hope—hope was a part of his nature—but he coolly recognised the fact that these galoots had him where his hair was short. There was no escape from the calaboose in Toro camp, and he knew it.

It was a little wooden building standing in the middle of the plaza, round which the shanties and shacks were built. There were two rooms to it—one occupied by the Rio Kid. The other was generally empty at night, used as an office by the town marshal by day. But it was never empty while the Rio Kid was in the calaboose. Day and night a watchman was there, with a gun ready to his hand. Yet the door of the Kid's cell was bolted and barred, and his food was passed to him through a little wicket in the door not a foot wide. At meal-times the town marshal stood there, gun in hand, while the gaoler handed food to the Kid. Not an inch did the marshal trust his prisoner. The Kid was a heavy responsibility on his hands; and with all his precautions, he still feared that that slippery and elusive Kid might yet slip through his fingers, before Sheriff Watson arrived from Frio to take him away under escort.

There was a tiny window to the Kid's cell, not large enough for an infant to pass, and barred with rusty iron. From that window the Kid sometimes looked out on the plaza of Toro while he waited for the arrival of the escort from Frio. From that window he expected to see Sheriff Watson of Frio ride in with his men from the prairie trail.

No one who had looked at the Kid's cheery, smiling face, would have guessed from his looks that black care lay at his heart. But the hours of waiting in the Toro calaboose passed on leaden wings. Going back to Frio as Sheriff Watson's prisoner was not an attractive prospect. But inaction was irksome to the active Kid; he was tired to death of the long dull hours of waiting. Almost he would have been glad to see the Frio sheriff riding in.

But not quite. Hope had not left him yet, though grounds for hope there seemed none. As if the barred and bolted cell was not strong enough to hold him, a gaoler was posted constantly in the adjoining room, armed and ready to shoot. From the barred cell it was impossible to break; but had he broken out, only death waited for him. Dead or alive, the Rio Kid was booked for Frio. Yet he hoped, because by his very nature he could not do otherwise. Too many tight and desperate corners had the Kid been in, to think of throwing in his hand while life still beat in his veins.

The red sun was sinking westward, towards the sierras of New Mexico. Shadows fell on the little rough township on the border of the Staked Plain. Standing at the tiny window, the Kid looked out thoughtfully upon the plaza. The nearest building across the open space was the frame house belonging to Hank Harker, the town marshal. In front of the marshal's veranda, a crowd of men had gathered and was thickening. The Kid wondered what the excitement was about. It was not a lynch crowd—there was no sign of that. Possibly they had gathered to see

Sheriff Watson ride in with the escort from Frio. Watson was expected in Toro that evening, the Kid knew. The Kid was idly curious; his days were blank in the calaboose, and any trifle sufficed to engage his thoughts.

He turned and crossed to the door of his cell, and rapped on the little wicket, now closed and bolted.

It slid aside, and the face of his gaoler looked in.

The Kid regarded the man thoughtfully.

He had seen him before somewhere, he knew; the features were familiar. Yet he could not place him.

No doubt a chance meeting long ago—a momentary meeting. But it puzzled the Kid.

The gaoler looked at him, keeping back at a little distance from the wicket and holding his drawn gun in his hand. The Kid grinned as he noted it. The gaoler was not trusting himself within reach of a sudden grasp.

"What's goin' on yonder, feller?" asked the Kid pleasantly. "Seems to be some excitement in camp. Not a necktie party?"

The gaoler shook his head.

"Nope."

"Spill it, then."

"I guess it's the auction."

"The auction!" repeated the Kid.

"Sure! I guess it's coming off this evening—hoss and guns," said the gaoler, with a grin.

"Hoss and guns!" repeated the Rio Kid slowly.

"Your'n!" explained the gaoler.

"Mine?"

"Yep!"

For a moment the face of the Rio Kid altered; the blaze in his eyes made the gaoler instinctively grip his gun. But it was only for a moment. Then the Kid was smiling again.

"My mustang—and my guns! I guess your marshal is wanting to be paid the expenses of his trip into the Staked Plain after me."

"You've said it."

"They ain't letting me ride my own cayuse back to Frio, then?" said the Kid, with a touch of bitterness.

"I guess Sheriff Watson will take you on a safe critter, Kid, and not such an ornery cayuse as that mustang of your'n. And I kinder reckon you won't want your guns any more. There's a heap of galoots will be glad to buy them guns—they're known to shoot straight," grinned the gaoler.

"Sure! If I had one in my paw now, feller, I'd sure shoot that snigger off your face," said the Rio Kid. "Where have I seen you before, feller? Was it somewhere down the Rio Pecos? I seem to remember somehow."

"Not so well as I remember you, Kid," said the gaoler. "Quit chewing the rag—here comes the marshal."

The wicket closed.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### The Man who Remembered!

**H**ANK HARKER, town marshal of Toro, slipped back the wicket and stared into the cell. There was a heavy Colt in his hand, a grim expression on his rugged, bearded face.

He looked relieved as the Rio Kid nodded to him pleasantly, and the Kid grinned.

"Did you reckon I'd vamoosed the ranch, marshal?" he queried.

"Nope! But I guess I won't feel safe about you, Kid, till you're handed over to the sheriff," said Harker. "I'll

be glad when he comes to take you. You're rather too tough a handful for me to want."

"I don't remember asking for your hospitality in this shebang," drawled the Kid. "I'd rather ride, if it suits you, marshal."

Harker grinned.

"I'm plumb sorry, Kid. I swear you're not the kind of galoot I want to see hoisted at the end of a riata. But it's you for Frio, as soon as Watson gets here."

"And when will that be, marshal?"

"Some time this hyer evening. I reckon I'll be glad to get you off my hands. Hyer's your grub."

The gaoler passed in the plate through the orifice in the door. The marshal stood by, gun in hand.

"Anything more I can do for you, Kid?" he asked, with a touch of feeling. "Duty's duty; but anything else—"

"Heaps."

"Spill it," said the marshal.

"I guess I'd like to mosey along to that gol-darned auction, and put in a bid for the hoss and guns."

Hank Harker laughed.

"Nothin' else?"

"No."

"Then so-long, Kid, till Sheriff Watson moseys in."

The wooden shutter in the door closed, and the Kid heard the bolt fasten on it.

He sat down to his meal.

The calaboose at Toro had not affected the Kid's healthy appetite in any way. He ate with relish, and cleared the ample plate.

Then he stood at the little window again, staring out into the darkening sunset.

The western sky was a blaze of purple and gold. Beyond the shanties and shacks, the Rio Toro wound down, like a streak of silver, from the great bluffs that marked the edge of the vast tableland of the Staked Plain. Westward

the Kid's eyes turned longingly. The sierras and New Mexico and the golden land of Arizona lay to the west, under the setting sun—the land where the Rio Kid had hoped and planned to begin a new life, when at long last he had fallen into the hands of his enemies. That dream was over now. Eastward lay the way the Kid had to follow—back to Frio—back to the country he knew, and that knew him. And what awaited him there? It was by no fault of his own that the Kid had been driven into outlawry; but it was the fate of the outlaw that waited for him in the country where he had ridden, in happier days, with the Double Bar bunch.

Across the plaza, in front of the marshal's frame house, the crowd was still thickening, as if all the camp was gathering on the spot. The Kid did not heed them; but a pang crossed his handsome face as he saw a grey mustang led out by a half-breed. It was his horse—the horse that had carried him over many a trail; the faithful mustang that had been the constant companion of his roving—now to find a new master. The Kid turned from the window.

It was dark in his cell now. Through the gloom, he became aware that the sliding wicket in the door was open; that the gaoler's face was peering in at him.

"Kid!"

The man whispered hoarsely.

The Kid felt his heart give a bound. Hope, which had never died in his breast, throbbled with renewed life.

"Kid! Quiet."

"What's the game, feller?" The Rio Kid's voice was low and tense.

"I reckon I ain't had a chance to give you the word afore, Kid. Quiet! I guess Harker would drive a ball through my cabeza without giving me time for any prayers if he was to tumble to this," the gaoler muttered huskily. "I should get mine, sure."

The Kid peered at him curiously in the shadows. The man's face was white.

"You figured out that you'd seen me afore, Kid, and you kinder disremember where."

"Sure!"

"It was down the Rio Pecos—in a cattle-camp. Two-gun Casey had pulled on me, and you dropped him afore he could burn powder. You was a stranger to me, Kid, and you saved my life."

The Kid stared at him harder.

He recalled it now. The cattle-camp on the Pecos, long ago, and the tenderfoot who had ridden in from the plains, tired and dusty; Two-gun Casey, the gunman and desperado, laying a false claim to the stranger's horse, and drawing a gun to back up the claim. The Rio Kid remembered. The Kid, as he often told himself with amusement, never could mind his own business. The tenderfoot was nothing to him, a pilgrim he had never seen before and never expected to see again; and Two-gun Casey was a dangerous foe for any man to make. Yet the Kid had not hesitated; he did not stand for seeing a tenderfoot shot down by the desperate gunman, and he had chipped in. Two-gun Casey he had met again, in the Frio country, and that account had been terribly settled. But the tenderfoot he had forgotten; the incident was a trivial one to the Kid. And this was the man!

The Kid remembered him now.

"I never knew it was the Rio Kid who saved my life from that gunman," the gaoler went on. "I reckoned you was some cow-puncher."

"I was then," said the Kid. "I was one of the Double Bar bunch then, and



**HELP AT HAND!** The sliding wicket in the door opened, and the gaoler's face peered in at the Kid. "Kid!" whispered the man. "This is the first chance I've had of speaking to you alone!" (See Chapter 2.)



**SELLING THE KID'S PROPERTY!** "Going for six hundred dollars—the Kid's hoss and guns!" said Marshal Harker, looking round the crowd. "Going—going—" He paused, but no further offer came. "Gone!" He gave a rap with the gun he held in his hand in the place of the auctioneer's hammer. "You can settle with my man, stranger!" he said, addressing the Mexican. (See Chapter 4.)

down the Pecos on business for Old Man Dawney of the Double Bar."

The gaoler nodded.

"When you was brought into Toro by Hank Harker, I knew you agin, Kid; that's why I put in for gaoler here."

"I get you," said the Kid.

His eyes were gleaming now.

"I've fixed it up, Kid," the gaoler went on hoarsely. "I've fixed up a story to tell to save my neck. I got in your reach, and you gripped me and got away my gun and covered me, and made me let you out, Kid. I guess that will go."

"Good enough," said the Kid.

"One good turn deserves another, Kid. You saved my life, and I guess I'm saving yours. Harker will be as mad as a hornet, and I guess Sheriff Watson will feel like filling me with lead; but they can't get over the story I've got to tell. And if you're roped agin, you'll say nothing."

"You can bet your boots on that, feller!"

The Kid's face was bright. He had never given a second thought to that episode on the Rio Pecos; never dreamed that the tenderfoot, whom he had saved from Two-gun Casey, remembered him with gratitude. The Kid had done many a generous action in his time, and never dreamed of reward. But the reward had come when most he needed it.

"You can't beat it across the plaza, Kid," the gaoler went on. "You'd be seen and winged before you could say no sugar in mine—"

"I guess I'll chance it with a gun in my hand."

"You ain't using a gun in Toro Camp, Kid. I don't stand for that. I've got friends here—it's my camp. I've got to let you take my gun to make my story good; but you've got to promise to drop it the minute you're outside the calaboose. I know you're a man of your word—all Texas knows

that. You got to make it as easy as you can for me, Kid."

The Kid nodded.

"It's your say-so," he answered. "I drop the gun as soon as I set foot outside this hyer shebang. That goes."

"It's a cinch, then. I've got it fixed up to see you clear," whispered the gaoler. "I've got in a set of Mexican rags, and a can of walnut-juice, and some other fixings. I guess I sent a man twenty-five miles yesterday to buy them for me for this stunt, at San Miguel. You'll fix yourself up as a Mexican—there's plenty of Greasers in Toro to bear you company—and you'll walk away as easy as you choose. You won't want a gun."

"By gum! You're some feller!" said the Kid admiringly. "I reckon I shan't be proud of walking the street as a Greaser; but it's a safe stunt. I shan't forget this, pard."

"I owe it to you, Kid."

There was a rumble of bolts and the cell door opened.

The Rio Kid, breathing hard and deep, stepped into the outer room. In the darkening sky stars were beginning to twinkle; outside the marshal's frame house a naphtha lamp flared. Five miles from Toro, heading towards the camp, a bunch of dusty, trail-worn men were riding—Sheriff Watson and his posse from Frio. Still five miles from Toro—where, in those very minutes, the Rio Kid was escaping them!

### THE THIRD CHAPTER. The Mexican!

**T**HE Kid looked into the little hand-glass held by the gaoler, by the glimmer of a match in the man's other hand, and grinned.

The glass did not reflect the Rio Kid. Not a sign or a trace remained of the handsome Kid, known from the Pecos to the Rio Grande.

In the glass he saw the reflection of a

Mexican—a dark-skinned, moustached Mexican to the life.

The man whose life he had saved in the Rio Pecos cattle-camp long ago, had had time to lay his plans, and he had laid them well. Once out of the calaboose, the Kid would be in sight of all the camp, and, in his own proper person, the target for a hundred revolvers. With a gun in his hand, the Kid would have taken the chance, and taken it gladly. But every chance would have been against him, and he knew it.

And the man who was saving him did not stand for that. He was paying a debt of gratitude—a life for a life—but he did not stand for his fellow-citizens being shot down by the Kid in a desperate rush to escape. The Kid could scarcely blame him for that. And this device, too, was safer—easier—less to the reckless Kid's taste, perhaps, but none the worse for that.

In the bell trousers and velvet jacket of a Mexican vaquero, with Mexican boots and huge Mexican spurs, his handsome face darkened with walnut-juice, a thick, black moustache fastened to his upper lip, a wide-spreading Spanish sombrero on his head, the Kid looked like a 'breed from over the border—of whom there were many in Toro, who came up from Mexico with the cattle-drives.

He grinned at his reflection, and the gaoler grinned a little, too. The change in the Kid's aspect was startling.

"I guess you'll pass, Kid. I sure don't know you myself now," the gaoler whispered.

"I sure don't know myself," grinned the Kid. "I guess these rags will see me safe out of Toro. It's a dandy stunt."

"You'll drop from the back window, Kid. You'll walk off easy. You'll keep your word about the gun?"

"Sure."

"I can trust you, Kid. I reckon you

wouldn't fire on the men I know—friends of mine—after I've let you loose."

"Not on your life, feller."

"You've got to rope me up, Kid. I guess I've got to make the story good for Hank Harker and Sheriff Watson. There's a trail-rope here, and you needn't worry about the knots—make 'em tight. I guess there'll be a rope round my neck if I don't make my story good."

The Kid took the gaoler's gun, and stuck it in his broad Mexican belt. Then he proceeded to bind the man.

Save for the Kid's rapid movements, all was still and silent in the calaboose. But from a distance came the murmur of a crowd. The Toro men were growing impatient for the auction to begin, at which the best offers were to be taken for the guns and horse of the celebrated Rio Kid. Not a man in Toro was likely to miss the sale, and bidding was likely to go high—if only to secure mementoes of the young outlaw who had ridden his last trail, and whose wild days were at last numbered.

In a few minutes the gaoler lay on the floor, bound hand and foot, and the Kid had not failed to bind him securely. When Harker and the sheriff came, they would find him an obviously helpless prisoner—disarmed, bound, gagged. It was the only way of safety for the man who was helping the Rio Kid to freedom.

"I shan't forget this, feller!" the Kid muttered. "And I guess I'll tell you that when I get clear, I'm done with Texas and riding the trails. I'm hitting the trail for Arizona, and the Rio Kid will be gone just as much as if Sheriff Watson had roped him in for keeps."

"I'm sure glad to hear it, Kid. Now the gag."

And the Rio Kid gagged his unexpected rescuer securely, and left him lying motionless and silent on the floor. Quietly he opened the back window of the gaoler's room.

Outside was deep dusk, with a glimmer of stars. Through the dusk, the Kid could see moving figures in the distance. But none was near enough to observe the quiet, dark form that slipped from the window.

Under the window the Kid laid the gaoler's gun on the ground, as if it had fallen there by accident as he fled. It cost him a pang to part with the weapon; but the Rio Kid, as he had proved many times, was a man of his word. The gun lay there, abandoned, as the Rio Kid moved softly along the wall of the calaboose.

He breathed in deeply the air of freedom.

At the corner of the building he stood for some minutes leaning on the wall of the calaboose, a Mexican cheroot in his mouth. There was a box of matches in the pocket of the velvet jacket. Coolly the Kid struck a match and lighted the cheroot—strolling casually away from the building with the lighted match to the weed in his mouth. More than one glance fell on him—the lighted match showing the dark, black-moustached face. Twice again the Kid struck matches as he strolled carelessly on across the plaza, like a man utterly indifferent to observation.

Carelessly, to all appearance a Mexican strolling round the town in the cool of the evening, the Kid joined in the throng that was setting towards the frame house at the end of the plaza.

He rubbed shoulders with the men of Toro, none of whom gave him a second glance. In the crowd on the plaza there were more than a score of Mexicans,

and one more was not likely to excite any interest or attention.

A Mexican, passing by the Kid as he sauntered, greeted him in his own language, with Spanish courtesy.

"Buenas noches, señor,"

"Buenas noches, amigo," answered the Kid, and sauntered on.

He smiled as he went.

Even his supposed fellow-countryman had no suspicion that it was a "Gringo" whom he had greeted. The Kid's disguise was impenetrable. He was safer walking the plaza of Toro as a Mexican, than he would have been with his horse and guns on the prairie trail.

Outside the marshal's frame house a naphtha-lamp flared. The Kid stopped under a cottonwood-tree a dozen yards from the house. There, as the remarks of the crowd testified, the auction was to be held, and there a swarthy half-breed held the grey mustang by the bridle. The Kid's handsome trappings were on the mustang. He was to be sold as he stood, horse and harness. The Kid felt a throb at his heart as the mustang raised his drooping head and whinnied. What the men of Toro were little likely to guess, was known to the faithful creature. He knew that his master was near him.

The Kid breathed hard.

Some half-formed, wild idea had been in his mind of seizing, by a desperate spring, the mustang, and riding out of the camp on his back. To go on foot was to risk a thousand times, recapture; and to part with his faithful horse was bitter to the Kid. But he shook his head. Round the spot where the half-breed held the horse the crowd was thick, and the attempt was hopeless. Certainly the Kid was not likely to be recognised; but a horse-thief had but a short shrift to expect—a hundred guns would have leaped into the air to shoot him down.

The Kid stood with a dark brow.

Every consideration urged him to go—to flee while there was yet time. At any minute Sheriff Watson might come riding in from the Rio trail. At any moment the cautious and uneasy marshal might look in at the calaboose to make sure that his prisoner was safe, and discover what had happened. Yet the Kid, his face shadowed under the big sombrero, still lingered, as if unable to tear himself away from the spot. That whinny from the grey mustang had gone to his very heart. He could not go. Without his horse he could not!

There was a stirring in the thick crowd as the marshal came out of his veranda.

Hank Harker glanced over the numerous crowd, with a grin. He had expected to see a good crowd for the auction, and now he saw nearly all Toro. In his hand he carried the two notched, walnut-buried guns that were so well known, looped on a cord—the guns of the Rio Kid. Many curious glances were turned on the guns that, in the hands of the Kid, had never been known to miss.

"I guess we're ready for the circus, marshal," said several voices.

"All ready, fellers," said Harker.

"Shove that box this way, Mike."

Mike Cassidy, the marshal's man, pulled a large dry-goods box into the light of the naphtha lamp and Harker mounted on it. The marshal of Toro was the auctioneer at the sale of the fixings he had captured with the Rio Kid. Little did he dream whose were the dark eyes that watched him from under the wide brim of a Spanish sombrero.

"Gents," said Harker "I guess you know what's put up at this auction.

These hyer guns, and that cayuse, belonged to the durndest firebug that ever rode a Texas trail. I reckon many a good man has gone down under these guns—as a good many more might have gone, if the Kid hadn't been roped in on the Staked Plain. That cayuse has shown his heels to every critter that ever got arter him. I don't say he's a good-tempered critter; he ain't. I reckon my peon knows what his teeth are like, and the galoot that buys him will want to look out for his hoofs. I guess he misses his master, and his temper's bad. But he's the fastest mustang in Texas, and the man that can ride him will have a prize-packet."

The mustang looked as if he deserved every word of the description. A handsomer animal had never been seen in Toro, where good horses were many; but his ears were laid back, his eyes gleamed wickedly, his teeth were bared. The peon who held him was openly in fear of him; and among the crowd—good horsemen all—there were many who would never have essayed to mount that handsome mustang. Buck-jumper was written in every line of him. There was one whose softest whisper, whose lightest touch, would have tamed the wild, fierce spirit of the mustang; but he was silent, standing back, his dark-stained face shadowed by the sombrero.

"I guess the best offer takes the critter," went on Harker. "Hoss and guns to the highest bid." He slipped the Kid's guns into the holsters slung to the saddle on the mustang, and stepped back quickly. "Gents, I'm waiting for you."

"Ten dollars," said a voice; and there was a laugh.

"One hundred dollars, señor."

The bid came from a Mexican standing back in the crowd, in a low musical voice, with a Spanish accent. And as he spoke the mustang lifted his head again, the fierce light died out of his eyes, and he whinnied softly.

#### THE FOURTH CHAPTER. A Bid for Freedom!

**H**ANK HARKER glanced carelessly at the Mexican.

"One hundred dollars I'm bid," he said. "I guess the guns are worth that! Gents, I'm waiting for you."

"Two hundred dollars!"

"Three!"

"Four!"

The bidding was brisk at once. There was not a man in Toro who would not have been glad, and proud, to possess the horse and guns of the celebrated Rio Kid.

Harker grinned. He had had a long and weary and dangerous trail, into the arid desert of the Staked Plain, before the Rio Kid had fallen into his hands. Now he looked like being paid for his trouble.

"Four hundred dollars I'm offered," he said. It was not the first auction that Hank Harker had conducted in the plaza of Toro; his business was in real estate, "selling town lots to tender-fee," as some of his friends put it. "What galoot lays over that?"

"Five hundred, señor," came the quiet, soft voice of the dark-skinned vaquero, whose face was shadowed by the big sombrero.

"Five-fifty" came another voice.

"Six hundred!"

Hank Harker looked round.

"Six hundred dollars I am offered!" he called out. "Who says better than six hundred?"

"I guess the greaser gets it, marshal," said the last bidder but one. "He's got me beat."

"Going for six hundred dollars—hoss and guns!" said Harker. "Going—going—going—" He paused but no further offer came. "Gone!"

He gave a rap with the gun he held in his hand in the place of an auctioneer's hammer.

"Gone for six hundred dollars! I guess you can settle with my man, stranger, and the hoss and guns are yours."

"Muchas gracias, senior," said the Mexican.

The sale was over; and it was the only "lot." The crowd began to disperse. From the plain, where the street joined the prairie trail, came a clatter of hoof-strokes. Sheriff Watson and his posse had almost reached the camp.

Mike Cassidy hustled up to the Mexican.

"I guess I'll worry you for six hundred dollars, greaser," he said.

The Mexican nodded. "Justo," he assented. "But I do not carry so much money in my pockets, amigo. Will you honour me by walking to the posada, where my roll is in the keeping of senior the innkeeper?"

"That goes," assented Cassidy. "Bring the cayuse along, Jose."

Hank Harker was looking along the dusky street towards the prairie rail, but he glanced round.

"You don't let that cayuse go without the dust, Cassidy," he called out.

The marshal's man grinned.

"I guess you needn't tell me that, marshal. Come on, greaser; I guess I want to get through. They'll be taking out the Rio Kid soon."

"The Rio Kid?" repeated the Mexican. "Who is that, senior?"

Cassidy sniffed. "Ain't you heered of the Rio Kid? He's the firebug what owned that hoss you've been buying; he's in the calaboose now, and I guess Sheriff Watson is on hand now to take him over."

A bunch of horsemen were riding into the street. The Mexican grinned at them. Sheriff Watson of Frio drew rein outside the marshal's house, where Hank Harker waved a hand in greeting. "You've got him safe, marshal?"

Watson's deep, gruff voice, with an anxious note in it, rang on the dusky street.

"You bet on that, sheriff," answered Harker. "Safe in the calaboose."

"That's good," said Watson. "Ride on, men."

And with the marshal of Toro striding by his side, and his dusty followers riding after him, the sheriff of Frio rode on across the plaza to the calaboose. And a crowd of curious citizens followed on, eager to see the Rio Kid as he was brought out and handed over to the sheriff. The Mexican was staring after them, with a peculiar light in his eyes, when Mike Cassidy jabbed him impatiently in the side.

"You want to get a move on, pronto!" he snapped. "Don't I keep on telling you that I want to see the Kid taken out. Pronto, I tell you, greaser."

"A thousand pardons, senior," said the Mexican.

And he moved on with the impatient Cassidy. Within sight of the frame hotel of Toro he halted suddenly.

"Senior," he said, "a thousand regrets! But there is one slight thing that I have omitted to mention."

Cassidy stared at him.

"What guff are you giving me now?" he growled.

The Mexican smiled under the brim of the sombrero.

"I did not mention that, so far from

having six hundred dollars for you, senior, I have not even six cents," he said.

Cassidy fairly gasped with rage. Never before, in all the auctions he had attended as the marshal's man, in the plaza of Toro, had a buyer fooled him like this. It seemed to Cassidy a childish practical joke on the Mexican's part, but it was a fooling that he was prepared to avenge by breaking nearly every bone in the greaser's body. And without wasting more time in words, the burly Cassidy fairly leaped at the Mexican.

It was then that a fist that seemed like a lump of iron drove into his face. For an instant the marshal's man saw a thousand dancing stars; and then he saw no more, for he crashed down like a log, and lay stunned.

With a bound, the Mexican reached the half-breed who led the mustang. In sheer terror the "breed let go the horse and dodged away. He was not likely

to face the man who had knocked the burly Cassidy senseless with one blow.

The Mexican leaped upon the mustang. There was a joyous whinny from the horse as he felt the well-known hand of his master. The Kid shook out the reins and dashed up the street. He laughed, and his eyes were dancing under the Spanish sombrero as he galloped at a furious pace that caused men to leap out of his way with startled curses. Shouts sounded behind him—shouts of "Horse-thief!"—and two or three shots rang, and the Kid, grinning, bent low in the saddle and rode like the wind. But little attention was given to the Mexican, or to the marshal's man who lay stunned, or the yelling breed; for from the calaboose there broke out a wild uproar that woke every echo in the camp, and brought every man running across the plaza towards the prison.

Hank Harker was standing, staring down at the bound gaoler, like a man in a dream; Sheriff Watson stood in the doorway raving with rage.

"Gone! The Kid's gone!" he yelled. "The Rio Kid—gone! Hunt for him—beat the trails for him—ride—ride—"

The sheriff choked with rage.

Harker, stuttering with rage and amazement, dragged the gag from the

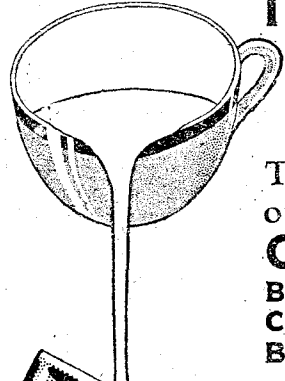
gaoler's mouth. He listened savagely to a story of how the man had spoken to the prisoner at the wicket, had been grabbed, his gun taken—forced to unbar the door under cover of the gun. He cursed furiously as he listened, and rushed after the sheriff into the street.

And that night there was wild mounting and riding in Toro camp, and on all sides, on all trails, horsemen rode furiously, and fired at shadows, and trailed back wearily into camp in the grey light of dawn, unsuccessful! And the same dawning light shone upon the Rio Kid, many a long mile away, his mustang between his knees, the shifting sand of the Staked Plain flying under the flying hoofs, his handsome face laughing under the Spanish sombrero—riding to the west, to a new land and a new life!

THE END.

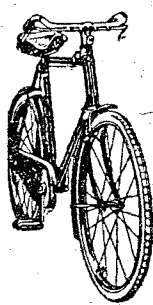
(Look out for another topping yarn of the Rio Kid next week, chums.)

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