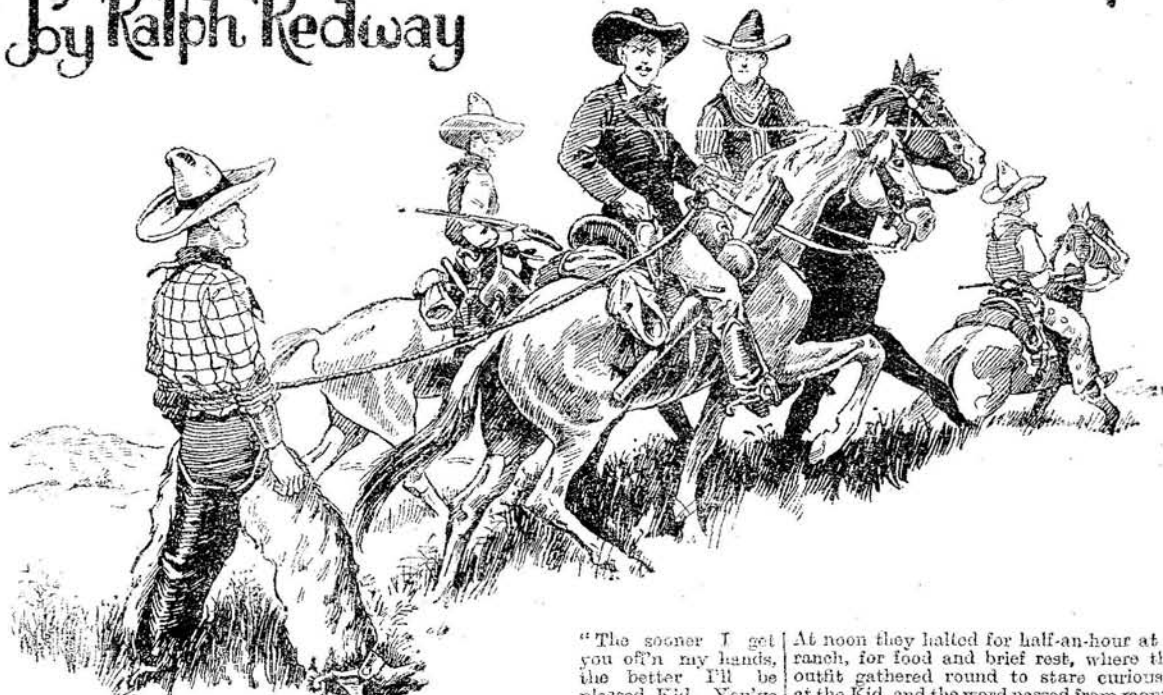


THE KID IS TAKEN AT LAST!

The Rio Kid is in the hands of the law again—captured without a fight! But this dare-devil young outlaw doesn't give up hope of escape—he's been in too many tight corners to accept defeat without a tussle!

The KID WINS THROUGH!

By Ralph Redway



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Taking a Chance!

THE Rio Kid rode out of the town of Nuco, in the sunny morning, with his feet tied under the broncho he rode. Four armed men rode with him; sheriff's deputies of Nuco; and Jas McCoy, their leader, held the end of a riata that was looped round the Kid's waist. They rode northward by a beaten trail across the wide, rolling prairie, heading for the railroad depot that was two days' ride away. The Rio Kid was roped in at last: a prisoner, on his way back to the Frio country. At the top of a rise in the plain, the Kid looked away to the east, the direction of the Sampson ranch. The ranch-house was far out of sight; but the grassy plains that lay under his eyes were the cattle ranges of Old Man Sampson—the ranges that the Kid had ridden with the Sampson bunch. Glad as the Kid would have been to see his friends again, it was a relief to him that the grassy plain was bare of all save cattle—not a single rider in sight as far as the rim of the horizon.

For the Kid knew that any man in the Sampson bunch, who had seen him riding a bound prisoner with the escort, would have pulled a gun and chipped in to help him out. And it was to save his friends from a conflict with the law, that the Kid had surrendered to the sheriff at Nuco.

Unconsciously, as he looked away across the grassy, sunlit plain, the Kid had pulled in the broncho he rode. The jerk of the lasso tied round him reminded him that he was a prisoner.

"Hump it, Kid," said McCoy, gruffly. The Kid looked at him, with a smile, as he rode on.

"You in a powerful hurry to hit the railroad, feller?" he asked.

"You've said it," answered the deputy.

been roped in afore, and got away; but I guess you ain't getting away this time. And them galoots at the Sampson ranch ain't going to help you none. I guess that was what you was looking for."

"Your mistake," drawled the Kid. "I guess I don't want them boys to horn into this funeral. I'll be glad as you, feller, when we're a day's ride from the Sampson ranges."

"Mebbe," said McCoy. "Anyhow, if them galoots showed up, they ain't getting you away. My orders is to put a bullet through your cabeza if there's any danger of you getting lost, Kid." He tapped the rifle in the leather sheath at his saddle. "I sure don't want to spill your juice, but you're a dead galoot afore you get loose."

"Oh, sho!" said the Kid, good-humouredly. His face was cool and unconcerned as he rode on with his escort. It was two days ride to the railroad from Nuco, and in two days many things might happen. The Kid did not expect, or hope for, any help from the Sampson bunch; he hoped that his old friends would stand clear. But he had plenty of reliance upon himself.

He had to admit that it did not look hopeful. His hands were free, to use the reins; but his feet were tied, and the lasso was securely round him, held by McCoy. The four deputies were armed to the teeth, with orders to shoot him dead if he attempted to escape, or if a rescue threatened. The Rio Kid was in a tight corner, and he knew it. But hope was a part of his nature; and tight as the corner was, he looked, and felt, less anxious than the sheriff's deputies who were guarding him.

Through the long sunny day the party rode onward, by grassy trails on the prairie, and shady tracks in the timber.

"The sooner I get you off'n my hands, the better I'll be pleased, Kid. You've

At noon they halted for half-an-hour at a ranch, for food and brief rest, where the outfit gathered round to stare curiously at the Kid, and the word passed from mouth to mouth that the prisoner was the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. The Kid did not like being made a show of, though his face expressed nothing of his thoughts; but he was glad when the party hit the trail again.

The party rode on at a steady trot. The trail ran across a grassy prairie, and in the distance, to the left, was a belt of dark chaparral. It was scarce half a mile away; and the trail ran parallel, and more than once the Kid's glance roved to his left, and dwelt longingly on the chaparral. There was ample cover there, among the post oaks and pecans and twisting llanos. If a galoot could only reach it. But if the Kid was thinking of making a break, he did not allow his looks to give a hint of it. He lolled idly in his saddle as he rode, as if weary of the journey, and his eyes were half-closed and looked sleepy. But sleepy as he looked, never had the Rio Kid been more keenly on the alert.

Quietly, under his half-closed lids, he watched McCoy.

The deputy had the loose end of the riata twisted round his left arm. But after six hours in the saddle, he was not so wary as he had been when the escort rode out of Nuco. The Kid wondered.

It was a poor chance, for he knew that shooting would begin the instant he made a break. But it was as good a chance as was likely to offer, and the Kid was the man to take chances. With quiet coolness he considered the situation, and calculated his chances, and when at last he acted it came suddenly and swiftly.

Suddenly, sharply, the Kid drove his broncho into a gallop, wheeling to the left and racing away towards the belt of dark chaparral.

As he had figured, the sudden jerk on the rope tore it away from McCoy, and as

it tore away from his arm, the pull on it jerked him from the saddle, and McCoy sprang in the grass beside his horse with a yell.

With the loose lasso trailing away behind him, whisking like a snake over the grass, the Rio Kid galloped.

There was a shout from the deputies behind, and they spurred their horses in pursuit, dragging out their rifles. McCoy scrambled up swearing furiously, and leaped upon his horse and followed, spurring savagely.

Crack! crack! crack!

They were firing now.

The Rio Kid did not look back. With hands and voice, he drove on the broncho into a mad gallop for the chaparral.

Crack! crack!

Heedless of the whizzing bullets, he rode for his freedom. Once in the cover of the chaparral, he would get free from the rope that bound his feet. A few minutes now—

A bullet grazed his cheek, drawing a streak of red. He felt the wind of another by his ear. His Stetson hat stirred on his head, as a ball tore through the high crown. The Kid's teeth were shut, his face set grimly. In rapid motion on the rough prairie, it was not easy to hit a rapidly moving object, but the fire of the pursuers was very close.

The broncho, stretching himself to the gallop, tore on to the chaparral. Bullet after bullet whizzed close by the Kid. Without looking round, he knew by the sounds that only three of the deputies were blazing away as they rode. What was the fourth doing?

Jas McCoy, his eyes glittering with rage, had pulled in his horse. The Kid was almost on the edge of the chaparral now, and a few more seconds would see him in cover, fast as his pursuers rode. McCoy lifted his rifle to his shoulder, his horse standing motionless; the Kid, drawing farther and farther away from him as he dwelt on his aim. But he dwelt on it with cool precision, knowing that if the escaping outlaw eluded that shot, the chaparral would swallow him from pursuit.

Crack!

The rifle rang at last.

The Rio Kid had reached the chaparral. The broncho's next leap would have taken him into cover. And in that very instant, McCoy's rifle rang the knell of his hope, and the broncho and his rider plunged heavily to the earth together.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Prisoner!

THE Kid lay dazed.

With a clatter of hoofs, the four deputies of Nuce dashed up and surrounded him as he lay.

With a rope securing his feet under the horse, the Kid had been unable to leap clear as the animal, shot dead by McCoy, plunged down on the grassy earth and lay still.

It was fortunate indeed for the Kid that the broncho lay still where it had fallen; for, tied to the animal as he was, the Kid would have fared ill had it rolled over. But the bullet had killed it instantly as it was leaping into the chaparral, and it hardly stirred after it struck the ground. The Kid lay with one leg under the horse, his head dizzy from the fall. And four horsemen riding round him, with angry oaths, aimed rifles at him as he lay, prepared to riddle him with bullets at the first sign of further resistance.

But the Kid was in no state to resist.

He had made his bid for freedom, and he had failed. Fortune had seemed to smile on him, only to betray him at the finish. He was too dazed by the crash to stir, even had he been free. He lay helpless, blinking dizzily up at the angry faces of the sheriff's men of Nuce.

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"You durned pesky scallawag!" roared Jas McCoy. "You're asking for hot lead through your cabeza, durn your pesky hide!"

The deputy's rage at the attempted escape was only slightly mollified by its failure.

The Kid panted.

"Let drive your hot lead, and be durned to you!" he panted. "I ain't asking you to go easy with me that I know of, dog-gone you!"

McCoy looked as if he were tempted to take the boy outlaw at his word. Instead, he dismounted, putting up his rifle. But the other three deputies covered the Kid, ready to pull the trigger. The Kid strove to drag his leg from under the fallen horse, and failed. Jas McCoy heaped to shift the carcass, cut the rope, and the Kid mullered free. He rose rather painfully to his feet and ran his fingers along the bruised leg.

"Your own funeral, if there's bones broke!" snarled McCoy.

"You've said it," agreed the Kid. "But I guess there ain't any bones broke—only more bruises'n you could count in a month of Sundays. But I ain't howlin' about it, feller. You got me by pluggin' the hoss—I guess the hoss was big enough to hit! You sure are some marksman, and I allow you could hit the side of a house if it wasn't too far away."

"Quit chewing the rag!" snapped McCoy. "You make another break, dog-gone you, and you'll get it! That say-use is sure gone up, and you've got to hood it till we hit Lone Ford—and that won't be this side of sundown. You got yourself to blame."

The Kid shrugged his shoulders.

"I ain't got any kick coming," he answered cheerfully. "You 'uns have got me, and you're sure keeping me if you can. But you ain't got me to Frio yet, and I sure shall light off if I see the chance. I was mighty near it that time, fellers, and maybe I'll be nearer next time."

"Next time you'll be so near Jordan that your friends back at the Sampson ranch can put on mourning for you," retorted McCoy.

He took a turn of the riata round the Kid, fastening his arms to his sides, and knotted it. The Kid made a grimace. He had had his hands free till now, only his feet tied. Now he had to have his feet free to walk, and the deputy was making sure of his hands.

Like every cow-puncher, the Kid hated walking any distance, but he did not grouse. He had brought it upon himself by attempting to escape, and there was no help for it. None of the deputies cared to burden his horse by riding double, and the Kid had to hoof it. And in their alarm and resentment at their narrow escape of losing the prisoner the Nuce deputies were surly and savage and not disposed to make things easy for the outlaw. Jas McCoy remounted, taking the end of the riata and this time fastening it securely to his saddle-horn, so that no sudden jerk could tear it away. Then the horsemen turned away from the chaparral and rode along their former trail, the Kid tramping on behind.

But there was one thing that pleased the Kid, tired as he soon was of tramping.

The deputies rode as fast as was possible with a man on foot to keep pace. They forced the Kid to walk very fast, the rope dragging him savagely when he lagged. Nevertheless, the pace was very slow compared with that of the morning, for at his latest the Kid could not proceed fast enough for the horses to trot, let alone to gallop. And painful as his progress was now, the Kid was glad, for it postponed the arrival at the railroad depot; and the Kid was well aware that, if he



A TENSE MOMENT! Slowly, with infinite caution, the Kid crawled that fastened them. Then he slipped off the lasso that stood there waiting the moment to

was to escape, it would have to be before he reached the railroad. Unless the deputies picked up a new horse for their prisoner, they surely would not hit the railroad by scheduled time.

That night they had intended to camp at Lone Ford, where there was a cow-town and a corrugated iron calaboose in which the Kid would have been locked safely for the night. But with the Kid dragging behind the riders on foot, they were nowhere near Lone Ford when the sun dipped to the hills in the west.

Jas McCoy gave him scowling looks and jerked savagely on the rope as the sun sank lower and lower.

"Hump it, durn you!" he snarled. "Hump it lively! I guess, if you don't hump it smarter, I'll drag you along at the end of the rope, dog-gone you!"

The Kid's eyes gleamed at him, but he did not answer.

He was tramping as fast as he could to avoid being dragged over by the rope, and he could do no more. And McCoy, angry as he was, had to realize that the Kid was doing his best.

He scanned the darkening plain ahead. But there was no sign of the houses and smoke of Lone Ford, and the darkness shut down on the prairie. The Kid, aching now



He sat up. He reached down to his feet and drew loose the wet and soiled him. And now he was free! He rose to his feet and rush the horses! (See Chapter 3.)

with weariness, was stumbling as he walked, and at last he pitched forward and fell. For several yards he was dragged bodily at the end of the rope, till McCoy pulled in his horse and turned back to him. "Git up, durn you!"

The Kid staggered painfully to his feet. From the darkening sky a few heavy drops of rain fell. There was a distant roll of thunder in the hills. Rain was coming with the night, and Jas McCoy, as he stared angrily at the Kid, handled his quirt, as if disposed to lay it about the outlaw who had given him so much trouble.

He looked at the sky and cursed the raindrops, and then stared across the plains in the direction of Lone Ford. But not a twinkle of light broke the darkness of the prairie.

"Thunder!" growled McCoy. "But for that pesky scallawag driving me to plug the horse, we'd have been safe in Lone Ford afore now, under a roof! I guess it's more'n five miles, and it'll be raining coyotes and gophers afore we get there, even if I take that galoot on my hoss. We got to camp."

For a moment the Kid's eyes sparkled. He had gained that much at least; a camp on the solitary plains, five miles from the

cow-town, allowed him still to hope. There would have been little hope for a prisoner locked in the calaboose at Lone Ford.

McCoy caught the look on the Kid's face, and swore.

"Dog-gone you, you ain't beating it, you pesky fire-bug!" he snarled. "I guess I'll make plumb sure of you. You bet your boots on that!"

The Kid did not speak. The deputies moved on again, looking for a suitable spot to camp. The rain was coming down now, and they were anxious to get into cover; both the riders and horses were weary from the long ride. None were so weary as the Kid, however, aching in every limb from the tramping of many long miles across rugged prairie. He stumbled as he moved on after McCoy's horse, but kept his feet, his teeth set.

At a little distance McCoy drew rein on the edge of a small timber-land. Half a dozen big cottonwoods grew in a group by a little spring, with a thicket of post-oaks and mesquite. The weary riders were glad to get into the shelter of the trees, where they dismounted at last and gathered brushwood for a camp fire.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Kid's Chance!

"THAT fixes you, I reckon!"

Jas McCoy spoke with bitter emphasis.

The night was black, a keen wind howled over the prairie, and the rain fell steadily, persistently. There was shelter under the trees of the motte, but the rain soaked in, forming pools in all the hollows of the rugged ground, and every branch was weeping and dripping. The camp fire sputtered and smoked. The Nuce deputies had eaten their supper and handed the Kid a share, loosening one of his hands that he might eat. But when

he had eaten, both his hands were tied behind his back with a rawhide thong, wound round and round and knotted with meticulous care and so tightly that the grip almost arrested the circulation. His feet were bound together in the same way, and, for additional security, the riata was knotted round him and the loose end tied to McCoy's belt. McCoy bent over the Kid, examining the rawhide ropes to make all sure, his face dark and surly.

"You sure won't break out of that in a hurry, durn you!" he commented.

"I guess not!" assented the Kid amiably. "You'uns got a blanket to loan a galoot?"

"Nary blanket," answered McCoy. "Your own funeral, darn you; we'd have been in Lone Ford if that hoss hadn't been plugged. You asked for this, and you ain't got no kick coming now you've got it."

"Sure!" assented the Kid. "I guess you're safe now; but you try to get loose, dog-gone your hide, and you get yours, sudden," said McCoy threateningly.

Evidently, in spite of all his precautions, the Nuce deputy was still uneasy. The weary Kid smiled as he noted it.

"He's sure safe, Jas," said one of the

other deputies with a laugh. "You don't reckon he can bite through that rawhide?"

McCoy grimaced.

"None! But he's sure a slippery cuss. You galoots camp round him, and if you hear him stirring, plug him."

"You bet."

And the tired deputies, wrapped in their blankets, covered by their slickers, lay down to sleep round the smoky fire. In the midst of them lay the Kid sleepless. His limbs ached with fatigue; but that would not have prevented the Kid from making another attempt to escape, had chance offered. But he was bound so fast that he could not move hand or foot, hardly a finger or a toe; cramped by his bonds, helpless as a trussed turkey. McCoy had made sure of him for the night, the Kid had to admit that.

In the darkness, as the fire died down, the four deputies of Nuce were soon asleep round him. But the Kid was too cramped to sleep, and his eyes did not close.

His thoughts were busy as he lay, aching, widely wakeful, with drops of rain falling on his face, and little rivulets of water about him. The Nuce men, rolled in waterproof slickers, were safe from wet; but the Kid had no such covering. But it was, as McCoy had said, his own funeral; they had intended to lodge him in the calaboose at Lone Ford for the night, and it was his own act that had forced them to camp on the plains. The Kid was not grouching, though he was wet and chill and cramped.

He was thinking of the Sampson ranch, and his happy days there—of Old Man Sampson, and Santa Fe Sam, and Jeff Eastow, and the rest of the bunch; the men he had ridden range with, and bunked with; good men he had liked, and who had liked him, and whom he was never to see again, now that his name was known in the San Pedro country. To save those devoted friends from a conflict with the law, the Kid had given himself up; and he did not regret it. And slim as his chances of escape seemed, he was glad that he was now so far from the San Pedro country that there was little likelihood of his friends there attempting pursuit and rescue. Whatever might betide, the Kid was anxious that the bunch should not be drawn into his trouble.

He thought of the black-muzzled mustang, the faithful steed that had carried him by so many dangerous trails. They would care for the mustang at the ranch, for his sake, and that was a comfort to the Kid. But he sighed to think of his horse and guns at the ranch so far away; he had never needed them so sorely as now.

The deputies, weary from their long ride, slept soundly. The Kid, wakeful in the dropping rain, listened to their heavy breathing. The cramping of the rawhide bonds was growing almost intolerable; but the Kid bore the pain of it quietly. He was a reasonable hombre, was the Rio Kid; and he did not blame the deputies for making sure of him.

But in the late night he began to strain at his bonds, with a faint hope of working his hands loose. He strained at them in vain; they were like iron on his limbs.

But presently, to his surprise, the Kid realised that the gripping rawhide rope round his ankles was not gripping so hard as before. He wriggled his feet, and found that they were looser, though not loose enough to pull free, and he wondered. McCoy had examined every knot with sedulous care, and they could not have loosened. Yet the rawhide was no longer gripping him as it had gripped.

The Kid realised at last what had happened. He was wet with the rain, which dripped steadily from the branches overhead. It is in the nature of rawhide to contract as it dries, and to expand when

it is wet. It was the rain that had loosened it, the wet rawhide stretching.

And as that knowledge dawned on the Kid, his eyes sparkling in the darkness with renewed hope.

He had been lying on his side. Now he lay on his back, moving with infinite caution as he changed his position.

He did not hurry. Inch by inch he moved, till he felt beneath him a puddle of rain-water in the rugged ground. And in that he sank down contentedly, his bound arms resting in water. He was chilled to the very bone; but he hardly heeded it. The rawhide round his bound arms was soaking in water, and that was what he wanted.

He waited, with iron patience. But at last he tried his strength on the rope; and his heart beat faster as he felt the rawhide stretching under his efforts.

It gave but a trifle; but the Kid was patient. Scarcely stirring, making no sound, he strained all his strength on the rope, the sweat pouring down his face from his efforts. And at long last he drew one hand from the rope, and the other quickly followed. Wet and chilled, but with beating heart, the Kid lay in the darkness with his hands free.

He listened intently. The deputies slept soundly. They were warm and dry in their blankets and slickers.

Slowly, with infinite caution, the Kid sat up. He reached down to his feet and drew loose the wet rawhide that fastened them. Still slowly, still controlling his impatience, he slipped off the lasso that circled him. And now he was free. Soaked with rain, wet and chill, but free.

Yet he was in no hurry to move. It was inch by inch that he raised himself to his feet. He was standing at last; and he had forgotten the heavy fatigue, the deep weariness, the wet and the chill. The four deputies were sleeping; but only too likely to be awakened as soon as he moved from the spot.

The fire no longer burned; only a dim smoke ascended; and the darkness

was thick. The horses were tethered under the trees at a little distance. If he could reach them—

He moved cautiously. Cautious as he was, his foot touched a sleeper in the blackness, and there was a startled voice—the voice of Jas McCoy.

"Thunder! Who—"
McCoy leaped to his feet, dragging out a revolver. He had awakened full of anxiety for his prisoner. As his shadowy form leaped up, the Kid's clenched fist crashed, and McCoy went sprawling over the smoky fire, half-stunned by the blow.

The Rio Kid leaped away in the darkness.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Fallen Among Friends!

CRACK! crack!
Flashes lit up the darkness under the cottonwoods.

All four of the Nuca deputies
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were on their feet now. McCoy's voice, husky with rage, was shouting.

"He's loose! Plug him! Shoot him down!"

"How the thunder—!" gasped another voice.

"After him! Plug him!" roared McCoy.

His face bruised and bleeding from the Kid's blow, the deputy rushed towards the tethered horses. He knew what the Kid's object would be. Once on a horse the prisoner was lost.

One of the deputies kicked the fire together, and a flame shot up, flickering with dancing lights under the trees. The flickering light showed the four startled horses, and the Rio Kid groping at the trail-ropes. McCoy fired at the first glimpse of him, and the bullet, nasty as it was, grazed the Kid's cheek, and there was a squeal of pain from the horse he was losing, as the ball struck the animal. McCoy rushed on him; and the Kid, knowing that he had no chance of losing a horse now, leaped away in the darkness, only in bare time to escape the spattering of shots.

Crack! crack! crack! crack!
Rifles and revolvers were ringing behind him as he leaped away; and the Kid plunged down on his

face in the wet thicket of mesquite, and let the screaming lead whiz over him. He was not six yards from the deputies,

but the darkness covered him like a cloak. The bullets tore through the mesquite, tearing bough and twig, as the Kid lay motionless. But

the fire stopped at last, and McCoy shouted hoarsely:

"Git on your critters! He can't be fur, darn his hide."

But only three of the Nuca men were able to mount; one of the horses lay wounded in the grass by McCoy's hasty firing.

"This way!" yelled McCoy. "And shoot on sight!"

The Rio Kid had never longed for the grip of a gun in his hand as he did at that moment.

There was little cover in the thicket, as the horsemen rode through and through it firing at every shadow that stirred.

The Kid leaped up and raced for the open prairie, and the crashing of the mesquite as he went drew the fire of the deputies in his direction. Guns cracked and flashed in the darkness.

"This way!" roared McCoy.

Thd Kid left the clump of trees behind. The night was pitchy black: not a star gleamed in the rainy sky. The boy outlaw stumbled over rough prairie through thick, wet grass. He slipped in a hollow, and fell—and remained where he fell. He was a score of yards from the timber invisible in the darkness, undiscoverable unless one of the riders fairly rode upon him as he lay in the grassy hollow. And he had to take his chance of that.

Thud! thud! thud!
Round him, in the darkness, thudded the hoofs of the horses, and the flashes of the

revolvers lit up the night incessantly. The Kid lay silent and still. Shouting to one another, firing at every shadow, the Nuca men rode to and fro, hunting for him. A shadowy horseman passed so close to the Kid, that it seemed that the crashing hoofs must come down on him; but they passed him by a couple of feet, the Kid unseen in the blackness. And he smiled in the darkness as the horseman careered on.

One of the deputies—the man whose horse was injured—remained in the timber island. He was building up the fire; and the light blazed far in the night. The other three rode hither and thither, searching in the baffling darkness for the outlaw who had given them the slip; knowing that all the time he might be only a few yards away, though hidden from their sight. The Kid lay silent. It was

not liberty now that was at stake, but life; for he would have been shot at sight could the deputies have caught a glimpse of him. But

the blackness of the night favoured the Kid, and the hunt went on unsuccessfully.

He heard Jas McCoy's voice at last, calling to his companions. The three horsemen halted within a few yards of the grassy hollow where the Kid lay doggo.

"Dog-gone him!" said McCoy between his teeth. "He's beat it! I guess I saw him safe fixed for the night, but he's beat it."

"He can't be fur away, on foot," said another. "If it wasn't so goldarned dark, we'd cinch him easy enough."

McCoy spat out an oath.

"We'll get him yet! Mebbe he's close enough to hear us chewing the rag this pesky minute." The Kid grinned. "Anyhow, he can't be fur—and as soon as it's light, we'll raise his trail and run him down. It ain't an hour to dawn, and on wet ground we'll raise his trail easy. If you 'uns see hide or hair of him shoot on sight—I guess we ain't taking any more risks with a slippery cuss like that Rio Kid."

"You bet."

The horsemen rode back into the timber. The Kid raising his head cautiously from the wet grass, watched them gathering round the fire, muttering together, the angry murmur of their voices reaching his ears where he lay.

The Kid did not linger now.

He wormed his way through the thick, wet grass, not venturing to rise even to his hands and knees, till he was at a good distance. But the red glow of the fire under the cottonwoods grew dimmer and dimmer behind, and at last the Rio Kid rose to his feet, and tramped actively on his way. He had escaped, but dismounted and unarmed, he knew that he was not out of the wood yet, by a long chalk. At the first streak of dawn, the Nuca deputies would be hunting him—and they would not fail to pick up the sign he left. He was in a country that was strange to him, and the distance he was putting between himself and his foes would count for little when once horsemen were riding on his trail. To find some safe cover where

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he could lie low, in concealment, till somehow he could succeed in rustling a horse, was the Kid's only chance.

In the excitement of the escape, he had forgotten his weariness. But he had to remember it now. That long, long tramp on the rugged prairie had told even on the Kid's iron limbs, and he was aching with fatigue. With grim resolution he pushed on, but in spite of resolution, his steps grew lagging. Miles—several miles, at least—lay between him and the timber island, when at last the Rio Kid stopped, from sheer weariness, and sank down in the wet grass to rest. Far in the east, a pale glimmer through the rain told of coming dawn. At dawn his foes would be on his track, but the Kid lay resting, too weary to struggle further.

Gallop! gallop! gallop!
The Kid started, and raised his weary head. Horsemen were riding down on him in the gloom. He dragged himself to his feet, but it was futile, his tired and aching limbs refused to serve him. The faint twilight of early dawn showed him the shadowy figures of riders, coming from the east. He heard a shout, and knew that he was seen standing there in the dim shadow. He did not stir. His struggle had gone for nothing, and it was useless to run. With a clatter of hoofs the horsemen rode up and surrounded him, with a whoop that made the Kid stare and catch his breath. For they were not the Nuco deputies who were cavorting and whooping joyfully round him. Like one in a dream, the Kid looked on familiar faces, and recognised Santa Fe Sam, and Jeff Barstow, and Long Bill, and others of the Sampson bunch. His luck had turned at last, and he had fallen among friends.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Rio Kid Rides!

"THE KID!"
"Great snakes! It's the Kid!"
Jeff Barstow threw himself from his broncho, and grasped the Kid's hand, and wrung it. Santa Fe Sam slapped him wildly on the back.
The Kid gazed at them dumbfounded.
"You-uns!" he gasped.
"You bot!" chuckled Jeff, "and we've sure found you, Kid! Looks like you got away from them Nuco scallawags."
"It sure does!" chuckled Santa Fe Sam. "I guess we'd have found you, Kid, if we'd had to ride all the way to Frio."

"Well, carry me home to die!" gasped the Kid. "What you galoots doin' here, all this here way from the ranch?"
Jeff grinned.

"You figured that we was letting them galoots tote you away to Frio?" he asked. "Not on your life, Kid! Old man Sampson sent us after you, and I reckon he'd raise Cain if we went back and told him you was still in the grip of them Nuco jaspers. I guess we was going to trail down them rubes and get you away, if we had to wipe every galoot of them off the face of the earth, feiler."

"You sure are a white man, Jeff, and so's the Old Man," said the Kid, gratefully. "But I'm powerful glad you ain't hit on that Nuco bunch—I ain't letting you buck agin the law, nohow. But I'm sure glad to see you—and if one of you will lend me a cayuse, I guess I'll hit the trail so fast that them jaspers will never see my dust."

Santa Fe Sam chuckled.
"Ain't we got your critter along, Kid?" he said, "and your guns, too. We brought them along all ready for you."

"Oh, great gophers," said the Kid, his face lighting up. "You sure are some pard."

His eyes danced as one of the punchers led the big grey mustang to him. Weary as he was, the Kid vaulted into the saddle with the lightness of a bird. The sight of the walnut-butted guns in the

holsters gladdened his heart. If the Nuco deputies hit his trail now, they were not likely to rope in the Rio Kid again.

Over the rainy prairie the sun came up with a watery glimmer. Far in the distance, the tall cottonwoods of the timber island could be seen, topping the prairie, and in that direction, bobbing Stetson hats showed that the Nuco deputies were already in the saddle, and picking up the Rio Kid's trail. The punchers followed the direction of the Kid's gaze and grinned.

"I reckon them jaspers are going to get some surprise," chuckled Jeff.

"They sure are!" said Santa Fe Sam, loosening his revolver in his belt.

"Fellers," said the Kid, earnestly. "You've saved me, you sure have—and I guess I can't tell you how good it is to be sitting in the saddle again, on this old hoss o' mine. But you don't want any gun-play with the sheriff's men—that won't buy you anything. I guess I'm hitting the trail for the west—and you want to ride back to the ranch, pronto."

"Kid, you ride back with us, and we'll stand by you till the cows come home!" exclaimed Santa Fe Sam.

"We sure will!" said Jeff.
The Kid shook his head.

"Why, you durned mossheads, do you reckon you could hold an outlaw, at the ranch, agin all Texas?" he asked, smiling. "I sure don't want to lose you boys—but I got to hit the trail pronto, and I ask you to ride back without burning powder. You've saved me, and that's all you can

do—you ain't drawing a bead on them jaspers from Nuco; you want to remember that they're standing for the law. Shake—and beat it."

And reluctant as the bunch were to lose the Kid, they knew that he was right, and the Kid gripped hands all round, swept off his Stetson in a last salute, and put spurs to the black-muzzled mustang, and rode away to the west. The bunch sat their horses, waving their hats and shouting farewell, till a fold on the prairie hid the Rio Kid from sight, and then they rode slowly away on the home trail.

The Rio Kid rode fast and far that day. Whether the Nuco deputies picked up his trail and followed, he never knew.

The big grey mustang carried him swiftly on the way, and before the sun went down that day, the Rio Kid was far from pursuit.

In his camp in a lonely chaparral that night, rolled in a slicker beside the sleeping mustang, the Kid's thoughts were of the bunch and the Sampson ranch and the Old Man—his many friends whom he had had to leave. Some day, perhaps, he might see that cheery bunch again, and grip the hand of the Old Man—some day. But that day, if ever it came, was far off: the way of the Rio Kid lay by lonely trails.

THE END.

(The Rio Kid's in another stirring adventure next week, chums. Look out for: "THE RIO KID'S HOLD-UP!" a fine tale of the West.)

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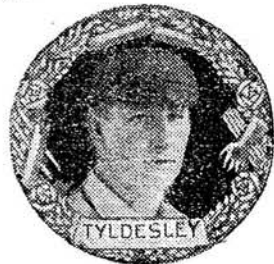
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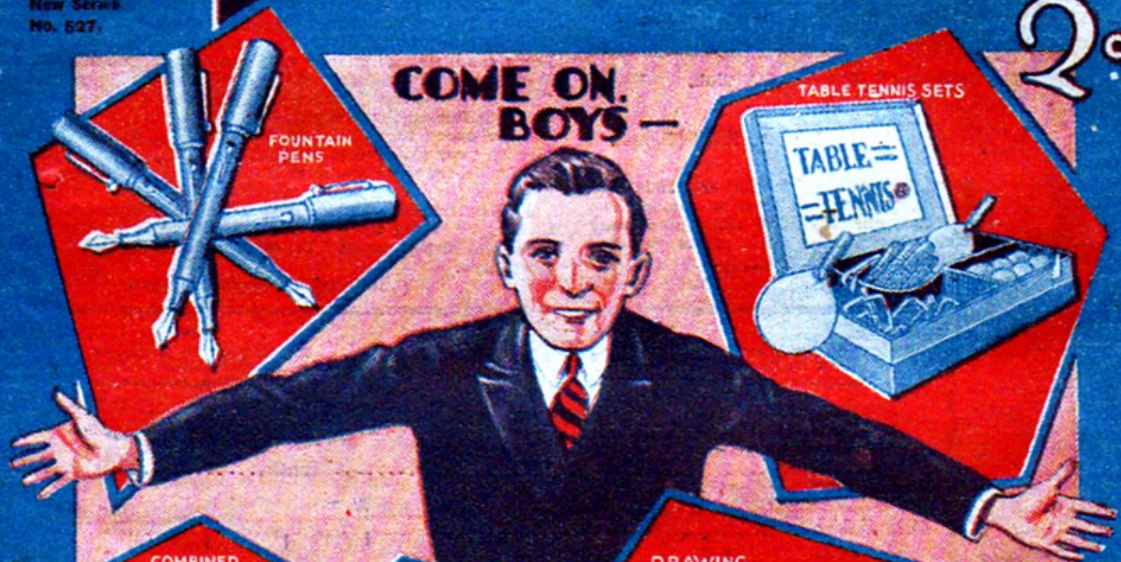
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The Rio Kid's Hold-Up!

By Ralph Redway

OUR GRIPPING LONG COMPLETE WESTERN YARN, STARRING THE RIO KID.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Put Wise!

THE Rio Kid did not realize, for some minutes, that voices were speaking quite close to him. No doubt it was the sound of the voices that had awakened him from slumber; but he lay with half-opened eyes, dreamy, in his bed of leaves, without stirring, or giving any attention.

The Kid had been riding long and hard, late into the night; and he had slept on while the new day dawned and the sun climbed higher and higher in the blue sky over the Rio Grande. Rolled in his blanket, in the thick bed of leaves, there was little to be seen of the Kid, even had a curious eye peered into the tangled mesquite round him. Those who were talking only a few yards from him evidently had no suspicion that the Kid was there. They talked with the careless confidence of men who figured that they were far from all other ears.

As the mists of sleep cleared from the wearied Kid's brain, and he realized that the murmur in his ears was the sound of human voices, he lay as still as before—motionless, silent, on his guard, glad that he had been careful to seek deep cover before he lay down to rest. With a reward of a thousand dollars on his head he could not be too careful.

Only his eyes turned towards the mustang that lay in the mesquite by his side. A movement of the horse would have betrayed his presence.

But the black-muzzled, grey mustang, the constant companion of the Rio Kid's wanderings, was too well trained to give sound or sign. More than once had the boy outlaw's life depended on the sagacity of his steed, and it had never failed him.

Who the men were who were talking by the margin of the creek a few yards away the Kid had no idea; but he knew they were more likely to be foes than friends. In the wide lands of Texas the fate of the Rio Kid was like that of Ishmael of old—his hand against every man, and every man's hand against him. The walnut-butted guns were close; but the Kid did not want to handle them if he could help it. He was content to lie doggo till the strangers were gone. Their talk had no interest for him; and he gave it no attention. But it came to his ears, all the same, and suddenly a sentence struck him, and he had to attend.

"I guess the timber, a mile out of El Cerro, is the place. The hack will be there from Malpais hours before sundown. The driver won't give any trouble—he ain't paid to handle a gun. Don't you go a-shooting, you 'uns. There mayn't be any other passengers, mebber, besides Hank Schulz; and I guess that driver's got to witness that

it's all fair and square—a reg'lar hold-up."

A hoarse chuckle followed. The Rio Kid smiled faintly. He had fancied at first that it might be a bunch of cow-punchers who had stopped in the shade of the chaparral, out of the glare of the sun. Now he knew that he was listening to the talk of trail bandits, planning a hold-up of the hack that ran from Malpais by a lonely prairie route to El Cerro, on the banks of the Rio Grande.

Well, it was no funeral of his. The Rio Kid, hunted far and wide by Texas sheriffs, had no call to horn in and do their work for them.

But what he had heard excited his interest a little; for it was perplexing. He had heard the discussion of a hold-up; but not, it appeared, an ordinary hold-up. He gathered that there would be a passenger in the hack—one Hank Schulz, in league with the outlaws. The Kid gave attention now.

"The widder must sure be loco to

STOPPED ON THE TRAIL! The Kid pulled in his mustang, and like magic one of his guns leaped into his hand. "Halt!" he cried. "Put 'em up!" The driver of the hack jumped. "Waal, I swow!" he ejaculated, and then he dropped the reins, and elevated his hands above his head. From the passenger came a startled exclamation. (See Chapter 2.)

trust a thousand dollars with that gairot Schulz," said another voice.

"I reckon he's been her foreman ever since Old Man Cassidy went over the range," answered the first speaker. "She reckons he's white all right."

The Kid heard a grunt. "I'll say he's a durned coyote to play it low down like this hyer, on a widder woman, Hanson!"

The Kid started a little, ever so little, at the mention of that name. He knew the name of Black Hanson, the outlaw; and he knew now that it was the Hanson gang who were talking in his hearing.

There was a scoffing laugh from Hanson.



"Forget it, Kansas. I guess if you don't want to touch your share you can stand out."

Another grunt. Apparently the man called Kansas did not want to carry his objections to that length.

"I got word from Schulz last night," went on Black Hanson. "The widder's sending him to the bank at El Cerro by the hack to-day, with a thousand dollars in a bag. I guess Mrs. Cassidy has been selling stock. Them durrocks ain't going to see the bank vault at El Cerro, and don't you forget it! But it's got to be a regular hold-up—Schulz is particular about the look of the thing. He ain't finished with the Malpais ranch yet—I allow he makes a good thing out of it—the widder trusts him, and I guess he makes it pay."

"I allow he does," said another voice. "All fair and square," went on Hanson. "The hack will be held up in the timber about a mile out of El Cerro, and we cover Schulz with our guns, and the driver's a witness that he hadn't a chance to resist. He puts up his hands and we go through him and find the dollars. He goes back to Malpais and explains that he was robbed on the trail—witnesses and all complete. Who's to smell a rat? There's been robberies on that trail afore, and will be agin—so long as we're around."

There was a chuckle again. "Schulz takes half, and we divide the rest," went on Black Hanson. "That's the arrangement."

"I guess I don't see letting him mosey on with half!" grumbled Kansas. "I guess—"

Schulz put as on to it, and it with pay to treat him white," said Black Hanson. "This ain't the first time he's put us wise, and it won't be the last time. Dog-gone you, we pick up five hundred dollars for the trouble of an hour's ride!"

"I guess I'd rather let daylight through Schulz and freeze on to the thousand."

Black Hanson laughed. "Suit me fine," he answered, "only I got a lot more use for Schulz yet. He gives us all the news of the Malpais country, and I guess we find it good. Don't you go a-shooting, Kansas, or you'll sure get yours so sudden you won't know what hit you!"

There was a growling threat in Black Hanson's voice, and the man Kansas did not answer.

The scent of tobacco came to the Kid, on the wind in the mesquite. Black Hanson had lighted a Mexican charoot.

"When we hitting the trail?" asked Kansas, after a silence.

"Plenty time yet. We want to be in the timber soon arter midday, to make sure. I guess we can rest byer a spell."

The Rio Kid lay very still. The talk of the outlaws went on, in a desultory way, as they rested in the shade, their horses cropping the grass by the creek.

The Rio Kid figured that this belt of

chaparral was the rendezvous of the gang; the three ruffians had doubtless met there, coming from different directions. The Kid had been too sound asleep to hear their arrival. Now that he knew who they were, and what they intended, the Kid's mind was in a state of doubt.

What did it matter to him if the El Cerro hack was held up in the timber, and the faithless foreman of the Malpais ranch handed over to these thieves the money he was entrusted to take to the town?

Nothing! But—

The Kid grinned ruefully.

His besetting weakness was finding him out again. He told himself that this was not his funeral; but he knew that he was going to horn in.

It was the mention of the "widow-woman" that had done it. The Kid was not going to loaf idly by, while a woman was robbed, especially by a man whom she trusted.

Without moving, or making a sound, the Rio Kid lay in his bed of leaves and considered the matter.

Had it been needed, he would not have hesitated to show himself, and back his walnut-butted guns against the fire of the three ruffians a few paces from him.

But the Kid was not anxious to do that. Black Hanson and his gang were gunmen of the first water; and though the Kid was insensible to fear, he was not looking for a chance to back his gun against three at close quarters—three of the most deadly in Texas.

Certainly, had it been the only way, he would have taken the chance, relying on his swiftness and skill; he had taken such chances before, and lived to tell the tale. But it was not the only way.

The Kid had plenty of time to think the matter over, as the outlaws smoked and yawned under the trees by the creek.

A smile broke over his face. His mind was made up; and he only waited for the Hanson gang to vamoose before he proceeded to action. If the plan that had formed in the Rio Kid's active mind was a success, the widow of Malpais would not be robbed of her dollars. And the Kid reckoned that it would be a success.

THE SECOND CHAPTER. The Hold-Up!

"I GUESS it's time we hit the trail, old hoss," yawned the Kid.

He rose and stretched himself. The outlaws were gone.

Looking from the cover of the chaparral, the Kid could see three Stetson hats bobbing over the grass in the distance towards the west.

Black Hanson and his two companions were riding for the El Cerro timber, where they were to lie in wait for the hack a mile out of the town for which it was bound.

The Rio Kid knew that country, and he knew that the spot for the hold-up was well-chosen. The hack travelled twenty miles from Malpais before it struck the timber, by an open prairie trail, where there was little cover for hiding men. But where the trail ran through the timber, was ample cover; and the Hanson gang would remain unseen until the hack was fairly in their hands. Black Hanson knew his business.

But the Rio Kid knew his business, too.

There was a smile on his sunburnt face as he watched the three Stetson hats disappear in the grass in the far distance.



At the Kid's voice, the black-muzzled mustang rose from its grassy couch. The Kid smoothed the glossy neck with an affectionate hand.

"I guess, old boss, that that durned coyote Schulz is going to meet up with a surprise," drawled the Kid. "He sure is going to have the surprise of his life, old boss."

The Kid chuckled.

"Them fire-bugs will be waiting for the hack at the timber a mile from El Cerro, old boss," he went on. "But jest figure if that hack is stopped a dozen miles out of El Cerro, on the prairie, by a galoot about my size, and the dollars grabbed? What about it, old boss?"

The Rio Kid sometimes talked to his horse as if it were a human comrade.

"I guess," drawled the Kid, "that them dollars will never get so far as the timber where Black Hanson will be waiting for them, critter. I sure allow they never will. I guess them dollars is getting to the bank by safer hands than Mr. Schulz's. I ain't never seen that widdler woman, old boss, and I don't figure to; but she's sure going to owe it to this Kid that she don't lose a thousand dollars."

And the Kid laughed.

Another glance across the sunlit, grassy prairie showed him that the Stetson hats had vanished. Black Hanson and his gang were out of sight.

That was all the Kid was waiting for. He drew his mustang from the mesquite, tightened the cinch, and mounted and rode away in another direction.

Black Hanson aimed to strike the stage-trail a mile out of El Cerro, miles south-west of the creek where the Rio Kid had camped in the mesquite. The Kid aimed to strike it a dozen miles out of El Cerro, and his way lay to north-west.

Black Hanson and his comrades had disappeared, and the Kid was not likely to see them again. He had no business with them. His business was with the man who was carrying the bag of dollars on the hack.

There was a cheery smile on the Kid's face as he rode at an easy gallop through the high grass.

Since he had left the Sampson ranch, down at San Pedro, and his comrades there, to wander once more by lonely trails, the Kid had lacked his usual high spirits. But only action was needed to restore him to his accustomed care-free mood.

There was something very entertaining to the Kid in the thought of the Hanson gang lying in wait for the plunder that would never come their way, and of Mr. Schulz meeting up with a real, instead of a pretended robbery on the stage-trail. The expression of the Malpais foreman's face would be worth watching when he found himself held up by the wrong party.

The Kid struck the stage-trail at last: a track that was marked across the prairie by the trampling of hoofs and the ruts of wheels. Once on the trail between Malpais and El Cerro, the Kid looked round for what cover might be found. Holding up the hack on the open prairie was rather a delicate matter, with the risk of some bunch of cowpunchers seeing what was going on, and butting in with their guns—which was not what the Kid wanted at all.

But there was little cover; the trail ran over open grassy plains all the way from Malpais to within a mile of El Cerro, where lay the belt of timber chosen by Black Hanson for his ambush.

That timber was a good ten miles

from the spot where the Kid had struck the stage-trail.

Save for a few post-oaks, and some bunches of mesquite, there was no cover for the Kid; but he was used to making the best of any situation in which he found himself. The black-muzzled mustang lay down in high grass, and the Kid stood among three or four post-oaks to watch the trail. The hack, he knew, was not due to pass yet; but it seldom ran on time, and might easily be an hour early, or an hour late. He settled down to watch; and in half an hour, the sound of hoof-beats on the trail warned him of newcomers.

But it was not the hack. Four punchers came cantering along the trail, going easy; and the Kid sank out of sight among the post-oaks, lying in the grass till they were past.

They rode on towards the distant town, and their hats vanished in the sea of grass. Then the Kid rose again and once more watched the trail.

A distant rumble came to his ears. It was the sound of a wheeled vehicle bumping over a rough track. The going was hard on the prairie trail.

The Kid watched patiently.

The hack, with two horses trotting, driven by a man in a grey shirt, came into sight on the trail, round a fold of the prairie.

The Kid watched it keenly as it came. His eyes, keen as an eagle's, discerned that there was only one passenger in the hack while it was still at a distance. That, undoubtedly, was Mr. Hank Schulz, foreman of the widow's ranch at Malpais. The Kid smiled.

He gave a long, keen glance round at the sunny prairie. It was solitary, save for himself and the approaching hack. Far in the distance was a moving object, which might have been a bunch of cows or horsemen, too far off for even the Kid's keen eye to pick it out clearly. Too far off, at all events, to worry the Kid, whatever it was.

He called to his mustang, and mounted and rode out into the trail. The driver of the hack gave him a quick glance, the passenger put out his head to look at him. Both of them saw a handsome young cowpuncher; and the passenger sat back, and the driver, reassured, waved a hand and drove on. The Kid grinned, pulled in his mustang, and like magic one of the walnut-butted guns leaped into his hand.

"Halt!"

The driver jumped.

"Waal, I sswow!" he ejaculated.

"Put 'em up!" said the Rio Kid.

The hack driver gazed at him for a moment, and then, dropping the reins, elevated his hands above his head.

From the passenger came a startled exclamation.

"Keep 'em up, feller," drawled the Kid. "I ain't honing to spill your juice, but if you let them paws down, sreec, this hyer hack will sure want a new driver."

"This hyer is a hold-up?" asked the driver, staring at the Kid.

"Guessed it in once."

"I sure ain't hornin' in," said the driver placidly. "I guess I'll come along to see you when you're strung up, feller."

"You'll sure be welcome!" said the Kid politely.

While he was speaking to the driver, the Kid had a keen eye on the man in the hack.

The passenger was eyeing him with a strange mixture of alarm and uncertainty and questioning. Hank Schulz, certainly, was expecting to be held up on that trail, and robbed of the widow's dollars. But this was not how he had

expected it to happen. This boy puncher was a stranger to him, and he reckoned he knew all Hanson's gang. This might be a new member of the gang whom he had not yet seen; but he was troubled and uneasy. If, by some unlooked-for chance, a real hold-up preceded the pretended one, it meant disaster to Mr. Schulz's little schemes.

"Light down, feller!" called out the Kid.

The passenger stared at him uncertainly.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

The Kid laughed.

"I guess I'm the galoot that's holding the gun," he answered, "and the gun sure will talk, if you don't do as you're told, like a good little man. Light down. I'm telling you."

And the passenger, breathing hard, stepped from the hack into the trail.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Kid Takes the Dollars.

HANK SCHULZ eyed the Kid searchingly, savagely.

If this was the hold-up he had been looking for, it was happening in the most unexpected way. It should have been carried out by a gang, which would have made it clear, with the driver to witness, that Schulz had no chance of resistance. And it should not have happened on the open prairie, where interruption might come at any moment.

"Look here—" muttered the foreman of Malpais uneasily.

"I guess you're Hank Schulz?" drawled the Kid. "Foreman of the Widow Cassidy's ranch at Malpais, what?"

"Sure!" muttered Schulz.

"Then you're my mutton, with the wool on," declared the Kid. "I guess I'm saving you the trouble of taking them dollars all the way to the bank at El Cerro, hombre. Hand them over!"

"How'd you know I'd got dollars for the bank?" demanded Schulz, bending his brows at the Kid.

"I guess these hyer things get out, feller," drawled the Kid. "Black Hanson has his own way of getting wise to them."

Schulz drew a breath of relief.

If this unknown rider came from Black Hanson, all was well; and the mention of the name seemed to imply as much.

In the presence of the stage-driver, Schulz dared not ask questions; neither did he care to draw the outlaw beyond hearing. It was necessary for him to keep up appearances, and the driver was watching the scene curiously, as he sat with his hands clasped on his hat.

"You belong to Hanson's gang?" asked Schulz.

"You sure want to know a lot!" drawled the Kid. "I ain't here to spill chin music, feller. I'm hyer for them dollars."

Schulz's eyes glittered at him.

The mention of Black Hanson's name had reassured him, but he wanted to be quite sure before he parted with the bag of dollars.

The Kid understood his uncertainty of mind, but he was not in the least disposed to relieve him.

"You want to get a move on, hombre," he said; "I'm sure getting tired of holding this gun."

Schulz turned back to the hack, and lifted out a little buckskin bag. He came closer to the Kid with the bag in his hand.

"I guess I want to see them dollars," said the Kid. "Open that lectle grip, feller, and let a galoot look."

Schulz opened the string at the neck of the bag, and the Kid satisfied himself as to the contents. The faintest of whispers dropped from Schulz's lips at the same moment.

"Where's Hanson?"

"Ten miles away," answered the Kid, in the same tone.

"He put you wise to this?"

"He sure did," grinned the Kid.

"Why didn't he come?"

"I guess he's somewhere else," said the Kid. "Say, that driver will get plumb curious if he spots you whispering, feller."

"The fool!" breathed Schulz. "There should have been three of them at least—what will it look like, me being held up by a single man, and handing over the dollars? The fool!"

"I guess one man is sure able to hold up a galoot of your heft," said the Kid, with a contempt that brought a flush of rage into the Malpais foreman's dark face. "If you want to put up a rookus, I'm sure your mutton, and I'll give you a chance to get out your gun." "You fool!" hissed Schulz. "Are you mad?"

"I guess not!" grinned the Kid. "Only anxious to oblige, if you figure that you're able to stop this hyer hold-up."

Schulz gritted his teeth.

He was sure now that the road-agent came from Black Hanson, and that was what he wanted to be sure of. But he was deeply enraged by the Kid's tone and words, and by the unexpected way the hold-up was taking place. The driver was a witness to the robbery, as intended; but he was also a witness to the fact that Schulz handed over the bag of dollars tamely to a single adversary—a mere lad; which the rascally foreman of Malpais had not intended at all.

"Look here," he breathed, in too low a tone for the driver to hear, "you better let up on this. It sure looks too bad for me. Get back to Hanson, and tell him it won't do—you get me? I'll pull a gun, and you'll hit the trail like you was scared—that will do for the driver. Shoot one of the hosses as you go—that'll delay the hack, and give Hanson time to horn in with his gang. You get me?"

"I get you!" assented the Kid, grinning cheerily, "and I warn you that if you touch a gun, you'll get yours, Mr. Schulz."

"What?" hissed the Malpais foreman.

"Hand over them dollars!"

"I tell you—"

"I guess you've spilled enough," said the Kid. "Put that grip in my hand, and quit chewing the rag."

His revolver looked the Malpais foreman full in the face, with his cool eyes glinting over it.

"Pronto!" he snapped.

"I tell you—" snarled Schulz.

Bang!

The Colt roared, and the Malpais foreman started, with a yell, as a bullet clipped by his ear.

"That's a warning!" grinned the Kid. "The next one will sure give you your last sickness, if you don't hand over that grip."

Schulz stood trembling with rage and doubt. With the tail of his eye, the Kid noticed that the driver was staring away across the plain, with an interested expression on his face. The Kid guessed the meaning of that. The moving object he had seen in the distance was nearer, and he figured that it was a bunch of cowpunchers, and that the driver was hopefully looking for an interruption to the hold-up.

"Pronto!" he snapped; and Schulz, and then, after a momentary halt, came galloping after the Kid.

"Now drop your gun!"

The Malpais foreman drew the gun from his belt. That he was thinking of chancing a pot-shot, was evident from the savage glitter in his eyes, and the Kid's face hardened.

"Don't!" he said quietly.

And the Malpais foreman did not. He dropped the gun to the earth, and the Kid motioned him back to the hack.

Then the Rio Kid glanced round in the direction in which the driver was staring.

Two horsemen were coming towards the spot, as fast as their bronchos could fly under the urging of whip and spur.

Two punchers, who had spotted the hold-up from a far distance and were riding hard to horn in. The Kid had guessed as much from the expression on the stage-driver's face.



Many a time the life of this daring young outlaw, the Rio Kid, has been saved by his wonderful grey mustang. Always the Kid's first thought is for his big, four-legged pal, in and out of danger. And this horse has shown the same faithfulness to his master. Through storm and sunshine these two ride, carefree and happy. Meet 'em every week!

He laughed lightly.

"Them galoots are sure honing to get in touch with me," he said. "You want to tell them where to find me when they get here, driver?"

"You put me wise, and I sure will!" grinned the driver.

"Sure! I'm going to bank this money at El Cerro," drawled the Kid. "It sure ain't safe toting it around on the prairie, with so many bull-dozers and bad men around!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the driver.

The Kid chuckled.

"I'm sure giving you straight goods," he declared.

And he rode away at a gallop, leaving the stage-driver laughing and the passenger scowling blackly. That the hold-up man intended to ride into El Cerro and bank the dollars he had taken from the passenger appealed to the stage-driver as a good joke.

The Kid looked back from the saddle of the galloping mustang.

The punchers reached the halted hack,

and then, after a momentary halt, came galloping after the Kid.

The Rio Kid waved his hand at them, and urged on his mustang. There was no broncho between the Rio Grande and the Cimarron that could equal the mustang the Kid rode. Shots spattered out behind him, falling far short; and for an hour or more the punchers hung desperately on his trail, anxious to get hold of the daring hold-up man. But the black-muzzled mustang showed them his heels, and at last the Kid dropped them behind on the prairie. And once out of sight of his pursuers, the Kid changed his course and rode for the town of El Cerro. Little as the stage-driver had believed him, the Kid had stated his exact intention—he was heading for El Cerro to bank the dollars he had taken on the trail.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

When Rogues Fall Out!

"HALT!" "Jumping gophers!" ejaculated the stage-driver.

Hold-ups had happened on the Malpais trail before, but two hold-ups in one day was a record.

But there was no doubt about it. The hack, rolling on to El Cerro, had reached the belt of timber a mile out of the town. Suddenly from the timber three horsemen emerged, and levelled revolvers surrounded the hack.

The driver pulled in his horses. From the interior of the hack, Hank Schulz glared at the outlaws. He was more astonished than the driver.

For this gang was Hanson's gang. He knew that. Their faces were masked with cotton handkerchiefs, but he knew his associates. But what the hold-up meant he could not begin to guess.

"Hands up, driver!" rapped out Black Hanson.

"Up they goes!" grinned the driver, elevating them above his head. "I'm sure getting a piece tired of putting them up, feller, and I hope you're the last lot to-day. I reckon it's raining road-agents on this here trail."

Black Hanson stared at him, and then rode to the side of the hack.

"Light down!" he snapped.

Schulz stepped out.

Black Hanson flourished a revolver.

"I guess you're Hank Schulz," he remarked. "Put your hands up, feller! Hver, Kansas, you go through the galoot!"

Kansas dropped from his horse and "went through" the foreman of Malpais. The expression on Schulz's face puzzled Black Hanson. All was going according to programme, so far as he knew, and he could not understand the rage and astonishment in the Malpais foreman's looks.

"I guess there ain't nothing in his duds!" said Kansas.

"Look in the hack—I reckon he's got suthin'! He ain't going to El Cerro for nothing," said Black Hanson.

Kansas began to search the hack.

"Nothin' hver," he announced.

"I guess you galoots are too late," said the stage-driver. "This hver hoarse has been held up way back on the trail, and the hold-up man sure waltzed off with the goods."

"Can it!" snarled Fanson.

"It's true!" breathed Schulz. "I thought it was one of your gang. He got the bag of dollars—"

"Guess again!" said Black Hanson, in a tone of menace. He made Schulz a sign to back into the timber, out of hearing of the driver, who looked on with a grin.

"Now, what's the game?" asked

Black Hanson savagely. "We're here according to schedule, and I guess we want that bag of dollars, Hank Schulz. If you've double-crossed me, you darned coyote, same as you have the Widder Cassidy, you won't ever tell the world how you done it! Spill it, pronto!"

Schulz snarled with rage. "The hack was held up ten miles back," he choked. "The galoot allowed he came from you, and I thought—"

Hanson's eyes glittered through the holes in his mask. "That won't do for me!" he sneered. "If a galoot held up the hack, how'd he know there was any dollars along? I reckon you didn't sing out to all Malpais that you was taking dollars to the bank at El Cerro."

"Ho said you put him wise!" hissed Schulz. "I figured that he was a new man in the gang. Anyhow, he allowed he came from you."

"Forget it!" said Black Hanson. "I ain't said a word to any galoot, 'ceptin' Kansas and Mohave byer. Not a darned syllable. You pesky coyote, you've fixed this up to get the whole caboodle, and leave us out in the cold!"

Schulz's eyes blazed. The two rascals glared at one another. Each was firm in the belief that the other was seeking to double-cross him.

"You lying coyote!" snarled Black Hanson. "No man of mine held up the hack! You fixed it—"

"I tell you—" hissed Schulz. The outlaw's revolver was aimed.

"Hand over them dollars, you double-crossing thief! Pronto!" His eyes glared over the revolver.

"I tell you, that galoot got them!"

howled Schulz. "And it was one of your gang—"

Crash!
Black Hanson had fired!

The Rio Kid hitched his horse to the post outside the bank at El Cerro, and strolled into the building.

He glanced round him and sauntered up to the long desk, where the cashier sat with books and papers before him and a six-shooter close to his right hand. Bank hold-ups were not infrequent at El Cerro, and in that lively town a bank clerk required to be able to handle a gun as easily as a pen. And the man behind the counter had an alert look in his eyes at the sight of a two-gun man coming in.

The Kid gave him a reassuring nod and a grin.

"I reckon you got the Widder Cassidy's dust in this here shebang, feller," he remarked—"Widder Cassidy, of Malpais?"

"Mrs. Cassidy, of Malpais, has an account here, certainly," answered the cashier.

"I reckoned so," assented the Kid. "And the widder's sure sent a thousand dollars to herd with the rest, feller."

And the Kid slammed down the bag of dollars.

"You a new hand on the Malpais Ranch?" asked the cashier, as he counted over the contents of the bag. "I haven't seen you before."

The Kid smiled.

"Nope! I reckon I jest took this job on for once," he drawled. "Mr. Schulz started with them dollars, but I figured that they wasn't safe on the trail, so I

jest humped in with them. I guess the widder'll be pleased to know they got here safe. You want to hand out a bit of paper, I reckon?"

The cashier smiled. "There's the receipt," he said. "Received one thousand dollars to credit of Mrs. Cassidy, of Malpais." "I guess that's square," said the Kid. "So-long, feller!" And with a cheery nod he strolled out of the bank, and ten minutes later the receipt was posted to Mrs. Cassidy, at Malpais, in El Cerro Post Office.

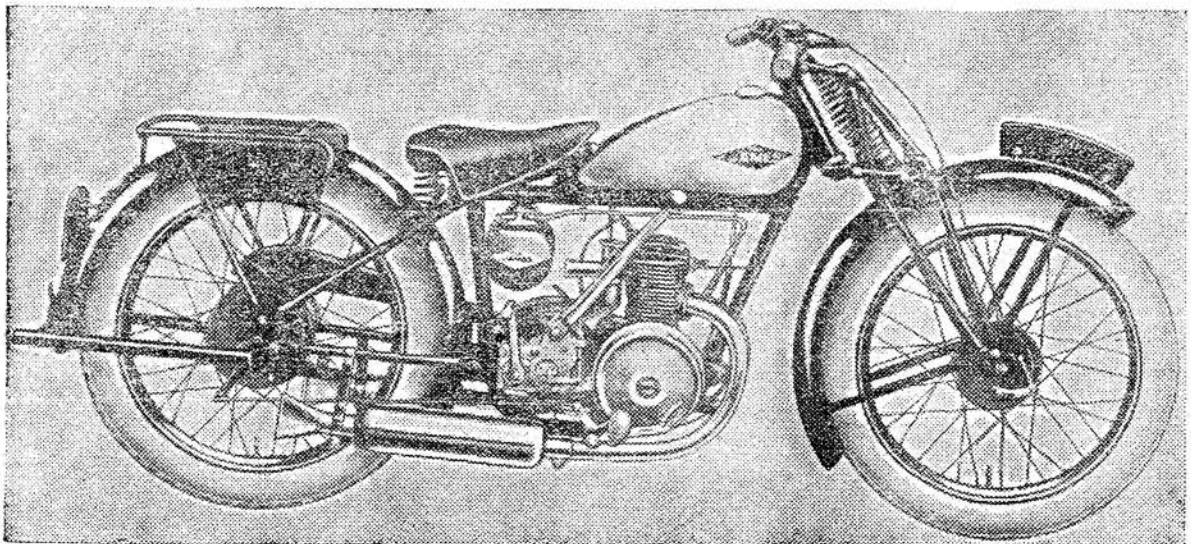
The Rio Kid had remounted the grey mustang and ridden out of the town long before the hack from Malpais rolled in with startling news.

It was a nine days' wonder at El Cerro. The stage-driver told of what had happened. How the hack had been held up by a road-agent who looked like a kid-puncher, who had taken the bag of dollars; held up a second time by Black Hanson and his gang, who had shot Hank Schulz in their rage and disappointment at getting nothing. And much sympathy was felt for the Widder Cassidy till it was learned that the bag of dollars had arrived safely at the bank, with not a dollar missing. It was a strange story, and it got all the Texan town guessing. And a search was made for the kid-puncher who had held up the hack and brought the money on to the bank. But he was not found. By that time the grey mustang had travelled far, and many a long mile lay between El Cerro and the Rio Kid.

THE END.

(Another roaring complete Western yarn of the Rio Kid next week, chums!)

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