

OUR ROARING WESTERN YARN!

The Rio Kid gets the shock of his life when he rides to Gunsight. For all the cow-town is up in arms against him for a long chain of offences with which he is supposed to be connected!



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Strange News for the Kid!

"HALT!"

The Rio Kid pulled in his mustang.

That sharp command rang unpleasantly enough in his ears; but the Kid was not the man to argue with a levelled Winchester.

He halted; a faint smile on his sunburnt face.

The Kid had to admit that he was caught napping for once. Certainly he had not been thinking of danger just then. The grassy path through the chaparral, on the bank of the Rio Claro, had looked deserted in the dusk as the sun set in the west.

The Kid had been thinking—though not of danger. His reins had fallen idly on the glossy neck of his mustang, and the horse followed the dusky path unguided. The trail led down the little stream of the Rio Claro towards its junction with the mighty Rio Grande—the border-line between Texas and Mexico. And the Kid was thinking that, on breaking camp the next morning, he would cross the border into Mexico, and try his luck in a new land.

The Kid had no hunch to live among greasers; and there was no land under the sun, in his estimation, like his own land of Texas. But he was tiring, as he had tired before, of the outlaw's hunted life on lonely trails. He had found rest, for a time, at the Sampson ranch down at San Pedro, only to be driven to the trails again at last; it seemed that in his own land there was no rest for the boy outlaw. Over in Mexico the long arm of the law would not be stretched out to seize him.

And then his meditations were suddenly interrupted, by the order to halt, uttered by the man who stepped out of the cover of the post-oaks, a levelled rifle at his shoulder.

The rifle bore full on the Rio Kid. A pair of keen eyes, set in a cow-puncher's bronzed face, looked along the barrel.

"Put 'em up!"

The UNKNOWN RAIDER!

by RALPH REDWAY

The order came tersely.

For a second, the Kid paused. The rifle-muzzle bore on him at a distance of six or seven feet; but the Kid was lightning on the draw, and the surest shot between the Rio Grande and the plains of Kansas. But his hands went up. It was no rustler or chaparral bandit who was holding him up; and the one-time puncher of the Double-Bar Ranch had no hunch to pull trigger on a cowman. He put his hands above his head, regarding the man with the rifle with a faintly smiling face.

"Up they goes, feller!" drawled the Kid. "Anything more a galoot can do to oblige?"

"Keep 'em up!" said the cowman. "Sure!" assented the Kid.

The man came a little closer, his eyes fixed on the Kid's handsome, boyish sunburnt face. He had lowered the rifle now, but held it ready for instant use. He peered at the Kid's features in the failing light.

"You'll sure know mo agin, feller," the Kid remarked pleasantly.

He was wondering what it all meant, anyhow. The man was evidently no robber; and it was equally clear that he did not know the Kid by sight. So his reason for holding up the boy-puncher was hard to guess.

"I guess you ain't that all-fired pesky fire-bug," the cowman remarked, after a long stare in the Kid's handsome face.

"I sure guess I ain't a pesky fire-bug,

nohow," the Kid agreed amiably. "You hunting for one?"

"Sure!"

"Then I reckon you're wasting your time on me, feller," said the Kid.

"You keep them paws up," answered the cowman grimly. "I sure want to know. I'm watching this hyer trail for the Rio Kid, and I ain't taking no chances."

The Kid started, ever so little.

"The Rio Kid!" he repeated.

"You've said it."

"I guess I've heard of that galoot," the Kid remarked casually. "Up in the Frio country, I reckon."

"I guess he belonged to the Frio country," assented the cowman. "But he's been cavorting a piece round hyer, and I guess every galoot in Gunsight is sure humming to draw a bead on him."

The Kid's eyes widened.

Gunsight, he knew, was a cow-town on the Rio Claro. But it was a new country to the Kid; it was the first time he had ridden the trails by the waters of the Claro. He had picked the Claro country for his ride to Mexico, simply because he was unknown there, and he did not want to horn into trouble on his way. There were many places in Texas where the Kid was well known, and where the sight of him would have caused guns to leap from their holsters. But Gunsight was not one of them. So far as the Kid knew, he had never

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before ridden within thirty miles of Gunsight.

So it was a surprise to hear his name on the cowman's lips, and above all, to hear that he was supposed to have been "cavorting around."

"What have the folks at Gunsight got agin the Kid?" he asked.

"A whole heap, I reckon," answered the cowman. "Shootings and hold-ups; and since he shot the marshal of Gunsight, I reckon the whole county is up to hunt for him."

"He shot the marshal of Gunsight?" asked the Kid blankly.

"He sure did—drilled him clean an' thorough. I guess we're going to string him up to a cottonwood when we get a holt of him."

"Snakes!" said the Kid.

"I guess you look square," said the cowman. "But we're sure looking arter all strangers in this section jest now, feller, and we ain't taking chances. What you call yourself?"

"I guess if you put me down as Johnny Jones, you'll get as near as you want!" drawled the Kid.

"Waal, Mister Johnny Jones, where are you from?"

"Pulled out of Post Oak this morning," said the Kid cheerfully. "Hitting the trail for Mexico."

"You don't aim to stop along at Gunsight?"

"Noppe!"

"Well, I reckon you'll stop along a piece, all the same," declared the cowman. "Boss' orders is to make strangers give an account of themselves, seeing as that durned Kid is cavorting around in the section."

"Who's the boss?"

"Mr. Poindexter."

"I'm sure a stranger in these parts," drawled the Kid. "Who may Mr. Poindexter be, feller, when he's at home?"

"You ain't never heard of Poker Poindexter?"

"Nix."

"Boss of Poindexter's ranch on the Rio Claro. He's took the matter up since the marshal was plugged. I guess I'm his foreman—Tex Clew, if you want to know. Light down from that cayuse, feller."

The kid smiled.

It was an odd situation, and it appealed to his sense of humour.

Some fire-bug, it was clear, had been rustling and shooting in the Gunsight country, and had borrowed the name of the Rio Kid. Many a shooting and hold-up of which he had never heard, had been put down to the Kid, in many parts of Texas. But this was the first time he had heard of a rustler actually riding under his name. And the Kid made a mental resolve, on the spot, that before he crossed the Rio Grande into Mexico, he would trail down that rustler, and put him wise that it was not safe to add his desperate deeds to the Rio Kid's already shadowed reputation.

All Gunsight, it appeared, was hoping to get hold of the Rio Kid—who had never been near the country before. And Tex Clew, foreman of the Poindexter Ranch, was going to run him into Gunsight on suspicion of being—himself.

The Kid could not help grinning.

"Hold on a piece, feller," he said easily. "You don't want to waste your time making mistakes. What's this pesky Kid like to look at?"

"That ain't easy to say, as he's only been seen with a black rag across his face," answered Tex. "But I reckon he's a galoot about your heft, from all descriptions."

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"Anybody in Gunsight know him by sight?"

"Sure." There's Frio men there, and they'll sure know him."

The Kid's eyes glinted. He was not going to be taken into Gunsight, to be recognised there by men who knew the Rio Kid. He had no mind to be strung up for the shooting of the marshal of Gunsight, of whom he had never even heard till a few minutes ago.

"But if the galoot cavorts around masked, how'd you know he's the Rio Kid at all?" he asked.

"I guess he don't make no secret of it," answered Tex Clew. "He ain't afraid to shout out his name."

The Kid could understand that. If some rustler was hiding his own identity behind the name and fame of the Rio Kid he would be ready enough to let it be known that he was the Kid.

"Sides, he cavorts around with a band of silver nuggets around his Stetson," said Tex. "That was always a trick of the Kid's."

"I've sure heard of it," said the Kid, glad that he had dropped that distinctive headgear of late.

"Light down!" rapped out Tex. "I ain't saying you're anything but a square cow-puncher, same as you look, stranger, but we ain't taking chances. The Kid's known to be in hiding in this chaparral somewhere and we're after him. Any stranger who's seen around is going to be run into Gunsight for questions to be asked. You ain't got no kick coming if you're fair and square. I guess every white man wants that durned rustler roped in. Light down off'n that cayuse, and I'll sure take care of your hardware."

"It's your say-so!" assented the Kid. He slipped from the saddle and stood beside the mustang, his hands over his head. His manner was one of careless submission, as of a fellow who had nothing to fear. His smiling face did not betray the thoughts in his mind. But it was not a smiling matter, and he knew it, for there was no shadow of a doubt that if the Poindexter foreman toted him into Gunsight he would be lynched to the branch of a cottonwood before he was an hour older. A crowd of enraged cattlemen would not be likely to heed his assertion that he was a stranger to the section, and that his name had been taken by some unknown rustler.

Tex Clew stepped towards him, the rifle under his arm, his left hand outstretched to remove the two guns that were slung in the Kid's holsters. The Kid made no resistance. With a careless manner and a smiling face he was watching out for a chance, like a cat.

The cowman jerked out the guns and tossed them into the grass. Then he gave a whistle, and a broncho appeared from the thickets. The cowman turned towards the horse, and for a second his eyes were off the Kid.

With the spring of a tiger he was on Tex Clew, and the foreman of the Poindexter ranch went crashing to the earth, his rifle falling into the grass. The next moment the Rio Kid and the powerful cowman were rolling over and over in the grass, fighting furiously.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Hands Up!

"YOU pesky coyote!" panted the cowman breathlessly.

The Kid did not speak.

He needed all his strength for a desperate struggle.

The Kid was hard as steel, thoroughly fit in every limb and muscle, active as a cat, sinuous as a puma. But the Poindexter

foreman was a powerful man, almost a giant in strength. It was seldom that the Kid met his match in a rough-and-tumble, but he had his hands full now.

Over and over they rolled, the advantage now with one, now with the other. Tex struggled to get a gun from his belt, and he got it out at last; but the Kid gripped his wrist and wrenched it till the gun dropped. They rolled over the Colt, fighting fiercely.

But luck was with the boy outlaw.

The fierce struggle had lasted long minutes when the Kid's hand came in contact with one of his own walnut-butted guns, which the cowman had thrown into the grass.

In an instant it was in his grip.

The muzzle was jammed into the face of the cowman, the steel rim grinding into the skin.

"Let up!" panted the Kid.

"You durned rustler—"

"Let up, you moss-head!" snapped the Kid. "I ain't honing to spill your juice, but if you don't let up pronto it's you for the long jump."

Slowly the cowman's grasp relaxed.

There was death in the muzzle that ground into his face. The Kid's finger was on the trigger, his eyes blazing over the revolver.

Tex shut his teeth hard.

"You got me beat!" he muttered savagely. "I guess I was plumb loco now to drop you in your tracks. Shoot, you durned cow-thief!"

"I ain't burning powder any, if you don't beg for it, feller," answered the Kid. "I ain't come to the Gunsight country a-shooting. I'm telling you that you've roped in the wrong cayuse."

"I guess you're the Rio Kid!" snarled the cowman.

The Kid rose to his feet. He was breathless from the struggle, but the hand that held the gun was firm as a rock.

He motioned to the cowman to rise, and Tex dragged himself breathlessly up. At a sign he put his hands over his head. His bronzed face was crimson with rage.

"You're the Rio Kid!" he repeated. "You're sure the Kid! There's a rope waiting for you at Gunsight, you durned cow-thief!"

"Forget it!" said the Kid. "I own up that I'm the Kid. But I never was a cow-thief; and you don't want to shoot off your mouth so much. Keep them paws over your cabeza! I'd sure be sorry to spill your vinegar, but if you try any tricks you get yours, Tex Clew."

"It's your say-so!" granted the cowman.

The Rio Kid bent his head to listen. He could guess easily enough that the Poindexter foreman was not the only man watching the lonely trails in the Rio Claro chaparral. And the Kid wanted to know whether the struggle had been heard by others.

But there was no sound from the darkening thickets save the sigh of the wind in the post-oaks and festoons of Spaniard's beard.

"Now, I reckon I've got to pow-wow with you, feller," said the Kid. "When I'm through you can beat it and tell the boys at Gunsight that they're a set of loosed mossheads. If you want to know what the Kid looks like take another squint at me. But I'm telling you that this is the first time I've ridden a trail in the Rio Claro country."

"Can it!" answered Tex.

"I'll tell a man," said the Kid. "There's some rustler riding the trails and borrowing my name. Got that?"

"I guess a yarn like that won't save your neck when Gunsight gets a holt on you," retorted the cowman derisively.

"Likely not," assented the Kid. "But it's the frozen truth, all the same, feller. Now you sit up and answer. How long since this galoot you take for me came into the country?"

"I reckon he's been cavorting around a few months."

"Calling himself the Rio Kid?"

"Sure!"

"And sporting a band of silver nuggets round his hat to tell the world he's the Kid. He's sure no slouch. He knows how to fool a bunch of locoed mossheads. Does he work alone, or in a gang?"

"I guess he's always on his lonesome," answered Tex, staring at the boy outlaw, "and you're him, sure! It's

make it less healthy for the galoot that's been borrowing his name."

"Oh, can it!"

"You ain't taking that in?"

"Not a word! You're the Kid, and you're the man we want. I'll lend a hand stringing you up when we get you."

"You sure tempt a galoot to spill your juice all over the chaparral," growled the Kid. "But I ain't wasting good lead on a mosshead. Hyer, put a laig over that bronc, and beat it afore I get mad with you."

Tex glanced towards his gun, that lay in the grass. The Kid stamped his heel on it, hard.

"You don't want a gun," he snapped. "A durned geek like you is safer with-

For long miles by the banks of the Rio Claro, the thick chaparral extended, penetrated by few trails; a hiding-place than which the boy outlaw could have asked no better.

The Kid was an adept at blanketing his trail. Where he moved he left no sign.

Armed men hunted him in the chaparral. Many times the Kid had had glimpses of horsemen; more than once he had heard the voices of the men who hunted him for his life.

But the Kid was an old hand at this game.

It was as easy to seek a needle in a haystack as to seek the elusive Rio Kid in a country of almost impenetrable chaparral.

At any hour, had he chosen, he could have ridden to safety out of the Gunsight country. In the saddle on his swift mustang he would have laughed at pursuit. But the Kid had no intention of hitting the trail out of Gunsight.



A ROUGH-AND-TUMBLE! Over and over the Kid and cowpuncher rolled. Tex struggled to get a gun from his belt, and he got it out at last—but the Kid gripped his wrist and wrenched it till the gun dropped. (See Chapter 2.)

out a gun, feller. Get on that cayuse and hit the trail. I'm through with you!"

Slowly the burly cowman climbed on the broncho.

"Now beat it back to your friends," jeered the Kid. "Tell them that the Rio Kid is sure in this chaparral, and they're welcome to raise his scalp, if they know how. Vamoose, you gink!"

The cowman galloped away down the trail.

The Rio Kid turned to his mustang. There was a dark frown on his handsome face.

"We ain't hitting for Mexico yet a-piece, old hoss," he said to his mustang. "We're sure going to look for that galoot that calls himself the Rio Kid. I guess we ain't lighting out of this country, old hoss, till we've got that durned galoot by the short hairs!"

And the Rio Kid mounted, and, leaving the trail, rode away into the darkening chaparral, and night and silence swallowed him.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Kid Gets Busy!

"SHUCKS!" murmured the Rio Kid.

His eyes gleamed under the shade of his Stetson hat.

For many days after that encounter with the Poindexter foreman the Rio Kid had lain very low,

Not till he had brought to account the unknown desperado who had used his name, and robbed and slain under that name. There was little bitterness in the Kid's nature, but in this matter he was hard as steel, bitter as death.

The Kid had thought a good deal over the strange matter in his days and nights in the lonely chaparral. It was, he figured, no ordinary bandit who had adopted the name and distinctive appearance of the Rio Kid. In the case of some bandit like Black Hanson, or Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith, such a ruse would have served no purpose. It was some very different sort of galoot, the Kid reckoned—some pilgrim who was not always a bandit, and who made himself safe from suspicion by allowing the whole section to attribute his deeds to the Kid. Some reckless rancher, perhaps—some gambler who had found the luck against him at cards—possibly some puncher of the Gunsight ranches. Some galoot who, perhaps, lived right in Gunsight itself, and very likely took a part in hunting for the Kid!

That was how the Kid worked it out. Only a man who had appearances to keep up would borrow the name of a well-known outlaw when he haunted the trails.

That seemed a sure thing to the Kid. But, having come to that conclusion, he

well known that the Rio Kid has never worked in a gang. He allers plays a lone hand."

"And he's shot up some pilgrims?" asked the Kid.

"He sure has. And he shoots to kill," said the Poindexter foreman.

"Look here, what guff you giving me?"

"I ain't giving you any guff, you locoed cayuse," growled the Kid. "I'm telling you that I never heard of the galoot before; but I guess I'm going to know something about him. I'll sure lay him out for using my name. I got enough to my account without his heap thrown in. You allow that he's hiding in this chaparral?"

"He took to the chaparral with a bunch of punchers arter him, this morning," growled Tex. "You've downed me, durn you, but I reckon you'll get yours afore you're out of the wood. This country ain't healthy for you."

"It sure ain't," agreed the Kid; "and I've a hunch that I'm going to

realised how difficult was the task he had set himself.

The man he sought was, likely enough, some citizen of Gunsight—possibly a prominent citizen. He led an ordinary life in the sight of the cow-town; and when he went on the trail of robbery, what was easier than to put a band of silver nuggets round his hat, a mask on his face, and to use the name of the Rio Kid? And after a robbery, to discard that guise, and ride into Gunsight unsuspected? But to pick out the man who was playing such a part was a problem.

After a few days the hunt for the Rio Kid slackened. Doubtless the Gunsight men opined that he had hit the horizon by that time. While the hunt was up the Kid lay low, very low indeed. He did not want to get to shooting with the Gunsight galoots. His sympathy was with them, though they were after him with a noosed rope. There was only one man in the Rio Claro country with whom the Kid wanted to get shooting, and as yet he did not know who the man was. But he aimed to know.

On the edge of the chaparral, where wide, grassy plains stretched towards the cow-town on the Rio Claro, the Kid was lying along a thick branch of a cottonwood-tree, twenty feet above the trail that ran through the chaparral, and was continued by a track across the prairie in the direction of Gunsight.

Gunsight was several miles distant, and on the sunlit prairie no life stirred, save a bunch of grazing cattle.

It was the sound of a horseman in the thickets that had made the Kid clamber into the cottonwood. He had left his mustang in his hiding-place deep in the chaparral, while he scouted for signs of pursuit. The Kid was satisfied that the hunt was over, and that the Gunsight men had gone back to their ranches; but he was not the man to leave anything to chance. He took cover in the thick branches of the cottonwood on the edge of the chaparral, as he heard the horseman pushing through the tangled thickets, and watched. If it was some puncher still seeking for him, the Kid was anxious to avoid an encounter. Only to save his life would he have pulled trigger on a cowman.

The rustling of the thickets, the swaying of the masses of Spanish moss, showed that the unseen horseman was pushing through into the open trail. In a few minutes he would emerge into the Kid's view from above.

He emerged at last.

From the high branch of the cottonwood the Kid watched him. He saw a powerful horse, with a black marking on the shoulder, push out into the trail. It was a grey horse, and oddly the marking was black. And its likeness to his own grey mustang struck the Kid at once.

His eyes gleamed down at the horseman.

Of this latter he could see nothing but the broad Stetson hat, which covered the man from view from above.

Clear of the tangled brush, the horseman moved on under the big cottonwood.

The Kid watched in silence. A horse so like his own mustang might exist in the Rio Claro country, but the Kid did not figure so. Paint, he guessed, had put those distinctive black marks on the horse below him. The man who had borrowed the name of the Rio Kid to hide his own might very well disguise his horse to resemble the Kid's famous steed. The Kid's heart beat a little faster. He was very keen to get a look at the rider's face.

That the man was in the chaparral

for some unusual reason he did not need telling. He had come out of the heart of the brush, where horsemen seldom or never rode. Now he was sitting his halted horse, looking out beyond the chaparral towards Gunsight, faintly seen on the river-bank in the distance. He was not bound for the cow-town, that was clear. Where he was he had come to stop.

The Kid smiled faintly. It looked to him as if he had struck the man he wanted. But the Kid intended to be sure. He made no sign.

The horseman watched the open plains for several long minutes, and then, seeming satisfied, wheeled the horse. Now he stared back along the trail that wound through the chaparral, as if in expectation. Again he was motionless for several minutes.

He moved again, this time leaving the trail, and backing the horse into the cover of a mass of mesquite close at hand.

He disappeared from the Kid's sight. But he was not gone. Only a few yards from the trampled trail he was sitting his horse in cover, watching the trail, and never dreaming that he was watched himself by keen eyes above.

"Sho!" murmured the Kid silently. If the horseman was not a trail robber, watching for an expected traveller, the Kid had lost his judgment.

Still the Kid made no sign. Of the horseman he had seen nothing but the top of a big Stetson hat and a glimpse of his chaparejos. The chaps showed that he was dressed as a puncher—the usual garb of the Rio Kid.

If it was the unknown trail-robber who had adopted the Kid's name and style, he was watching for a victim on the chaparral trail. But the Kid was not taking chances. It was possible that the man was only a cowpuncher waiting for some friend to come along, and that the resemblance of his horse to the Kid's mustang was a matter of chance. It was not likely, but it was possible. And the Kid waited silently to see what was to follow.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Man in the Mask I

THE chaparral was silent. Save for the croak of some bull-frog in a hidden pool, a faint sigh of the wind in the thickets, there was no sound.

But for what he had seen, the Rio Kid would have believed that he was alone there—that no other human being was within hail of him.

But he knew that the horseman was there, hidden in the mesquite beside the trodden trail, waiting and watching. Long minutes passed—minutes that seemed very long to the Rio Kid. But he waited patiently, stretched on the high branch over the trail, hidden by foliage. The Kid could be as patient as an Apache on an occasion like this.

The silence was broken at last. Hoof-beats sounded from the distance.

The Kid's eyes glittered.

A rider was coming along by the trail, evidently bound for Gunsight, for the trail led nowhere else. That trail ran through the wild chaparral, from the town of Truce to the plains round Gunsight. The man who was approaching came from Truce and was heading for the cow-town; that was a certainty.

The Kid's doubts, if he had had any, were resolved now. The hidden horseman was watching for that coming rider. Still the Kid waited to see.

The hoof-beats drew nearer, but the trail was winding, and it was not till the newcomer was quite close at hand

that he came within the view of the boy puncher on the cottonwood branch above.

The Kid looked down at him keenly. He was a fat, rather flabby man, dressed in "storo" clothes, with a Derby hat in the place of the Stetson usual to the cow country. He rode an "American" horse, and he rode it clumsily enough, like a man more used to the office stool than to the saddle. The Kid could see that he was a man who rode because there was no other mode of transit in the cow country save walking. He was a man who would have preferred a seat in an auto or a train.

There was a sudden rustling in the thickets, and the hidden horseman pushed out of the mesquite into the trail. Still the Kid could see little of him but his Stetson hat, but he saw the revolver that was levelled at the newcomer.

The latter jerked in his horse so suddenly that he almost fell from the saddle.

"Hands up, Lawyer Dunk!"

It was a sharp voice that rapped out. The man from Truce gave a gasp of alarm. Sitting uneasily in the saddle, he put his hands over his head, and the Kid could see that his fat face was white as chalk.

"What?" he panted. "What—who—what—"

"I guess you've struck the Rio Kid, hombre," came the horseman's voice. "I reckon you're my mutton, Lawyer Dunk!"

"The Rio Kid!" repeated the lawyer from Truce, and the hands he held over his Derby hat trembled.

The Kid's face set like iron. This was the galoot who had borrowed his name and who was robbing and killing in the Gunsight country as the Rio Kid.

The Kid had caught him fairly in the act. The face, hidden from the Kid by the big Stetson hat, was hidden from Lawyer Dunk by a black mask. But the Kid was going to see that face.

"Git off that cayuse!" went on the man who called himself the Rio Kid. "Pronto!"

The man from Truce rolled clumsily from his horse. There was a jeering chuckle from the masked man. The obvious fear of the lawyer from Truce aroused his contempt and derision. Standing in the trail beside his horse, the lawyer held his trembling hands over his head, his eyes fixed in fear upon the masked face of the outlaw.

"Scared stiff, ain't you?" jeered the latter. "I guess I ain't shooting, Lawyer Dunk, if you behave. I'm sure honing for your wad."

"I—I've nothing," stammered the man from Truce. "Only a few dollars."

"Guess again!" jeered the outlaw.

"I—I swear it!" panted Dunk. "I am going to Gunsight to see Mr. Poindexter at his ranch. I'm not plumb foolish enough to carry money riding in this chaparral. I swear I have no more than ten dollars about me. If you'd stopped me on my way home—"

He broke off.

"You aim to collect dollars from Poker Poindexter, feller?" asked the outlaw, with a curious note in his voice.

"Yes," gasped the lawyer. "The interest on the mortgage is due. I am going to Gunsight to collect it, I swear."

"I guess I'm sorry for you, Mr. Dunk, if you ain't fixed to pay me for my trouble," said the masked man grimly. "You're the richest man in the Rio Claro country, and I guess you ought to be well fixed. You want to cough up a good wad, Mr. Dunk, you sure do, or you won't ride into Gunsight to-day—or any day."

The fat lawyer's knees knuckled together.

"You can go through me," he stammered. "You can search me from head to foot. I swear—"

"I guess swearing won't buy you anything," said the outlaw savagely. "If you've got a thousand dollars in your rags, you can pony up, and I do on. If you ain't, say your prayers, you haven't much time left."

The man John Truce gazed at him, and read his fate in the eyes that glared from the holes in the mask. In utter terror, he fell on his knees in the grass of the trail.

"Give me a chance," he stammered. "Give me a chance! I aim to collect fifty hundred dollars at Poindexter's ranch—the money's over-due, and I'm giving him no more time—he's expecting me to-day—the money will be ready—give me a chance—you shall have every dollar—"

A savage laugh interrupted him. "I guess I'd as soon trust a lobo wolf as you, Lawyer Dunk. If you've got a roll, hand it over and save your life—I give you one minute."

A groan of fear was the lawyer's answer. It was clear that he carried no 'roll' with him in that unsettled country, a precaution that saved his money, but was likely now to cost him his life.

There was no mercy in the glittering eyes that looked from the holes in the mask. The revolver in the outlaw's hand bore full upon the shrinking man from Truce. The life of the lawyer might have been counted in seconds, but for the presence of the Kid.

Crack!
There was a startled yell from the masked horseman, as the Colt was was struck from his hand by a crashing bullet.

Lawyer Dunk gave a shriek. In his terror, he fancied that it was the masked man who had fired. But he

realized that he was not hit, and he stared in amazement at the horseman, his hand weaponless now, the revolver in the grass. With a swiftness that only the extremity of fear could have lent the fat, clumsy man, Lawyer Dunk hurried himself on his horse, and drove the animal to a frantic gallop, tearing madly past the masked man, and racing out of the chaparral to the open plain beyond.

The masked man, taken utterly by surprise, was staring about him, like a man dazed. That sudden ringing shot from the boughs of the cotton-wood over the trail, had come like a thunderclap to him.

There was a sound of scrambling and slithering in the branches. The Kid dropped lightly into the trail.

It was only a matter of seconds, but in those seconds Lawyer Dunk had vanished from the scene, and was riding—frantically towards Gunsight, and the masked man, recovering himself, turned his horse to the thickets and drove his spurs cruelly into the flanks. "Halt!" yelled the Kid.

He lifted his revolver, and fired as the masked man plunged into the mesquite.

But the swift leap of the spurred horse saved the man who called himself by the Rio Kid's name. The bullet tore a hole through his Stetson hat as he went.

Crack! crack! crack!
Thrice the enraged Kid fired, at the crashing sound of the horseman in the thick mesquite, running in pursuit as he pulled trigger. But the tangled thickets had swallowed the leaping horseman, and the continued crashing and rustling, the thunder of hurried hoofs, showed that the masked man had not been hit, and that he was still in wild flight through the chaparral.

Crack! Crack!
The bullets tore through the leaves and branches.

"Dog-gone the luck!" hissed the Kid. The horseman was gone. Had the Kid's mustang been at hand, he knew that he could have run the fugitive down. But the mustang was not at hand. The Kid ran a hundred yards in fierce pursuit, on the torn and trampled trail left by the fleeing horse-man, and then he halted, setting his teeth. The crashing in the chaparral was dying away in the distance, and pursuit on foot was hopeless.

"Dog-gone it!" growled the Kid.

He tramped back angrily to the trail. Looking out over the plain, he had a glimpse of Lawyer Dunk, vanishing in the distance towards Gunsight. The grass swallowed the terrified lawyer, even as the Kid looked.

"Dog-gone it!" repeated the Kid savagely.

The lawyer had escaped to Gunsight, with a new tale to tell of the desperate devil of the Rio Kid, and the man who had used the Kid's name, had escaped into the chaparral, escaped recognition and vengeance and was gone. The Kid gritted his teeth. He half-regretted that he had not shot the man dead from the branches of the cotton-wood. But the killing of an enemy from ambush was not the way of the Kid.

"The dog-goned skunk!" growled the Kid, though angry as he was, he had admired the swift promptness with which the desperado had extricated himself from what looked like certain capture or death. "The all-fired coyote! I guess I'll be sudden on the shoot, next time I meet up with that pesky gink. Dog-gone him."

The crashing of the horseman had died away in the far distance, the chaparral was silent again. The Rio Kid's task remained yet to be done.

THE END

(Another roaring Western yarn next week. Look out for it!)

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NOW TURN TO PAGE 2.

*Another Great
Western Yarn inside!*

**MAKE YOUR CHOICE
FROM THIS LIST, BOYS!**

There's someone riding the trails, in the name of the Rio Kid, looting, holding-up, shooting, and generally making the Gunsight district an unhealthy place in which to ride. Who this unknown raider is the real Rio Kid sets out to discover!

The KID on the TRAIL! by RALPH REDWAY



A ROUSING LONG COMPLETE TALE OF THE WILD WEST, STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

At the Poindexter Ranch!

"**S**HO! I guess that hombre sure is raising the dust!"

Tex Clew, foreman of the Poindexter ranch at Gunsight, stood at the door of the bunkhouse and stared across the plain, shading his eyes with his hand.

A horseman was coming towards the ranch, spurring on at frantic speed.

He was not one of the ranch outfit, for he was dressed in "storo" clothes, and he rode clumsily, like a man unused to the saddle, sitting his horse like a sack of alfalfa, as Tex said to himself.

He was evidently in a hurry. With whip and spur he urged on the big-boned "American" horse he rode. Once he almost tumbled from the saddle in an effort to look back over his shoulder, like a man in fear of pursuit.

The foreman stared at him, puzzled. He could see the sun-scorched plain for a great distance beyond the rider, and there was no sign of any pursuer—nothing moving on the prairie save a bunch or two of grazing cattle.

The horseman rode bareheaded, his hat having apparently fallen off in his wild haste. Perspiration streamed down his fat face.

A puncher lounged along from the corral and joined Tex, staring at the newcomer.

"That's Lawyer Dunk, of Truce," he remarked. "I guess he's raising the dust some."

"Asking for sunstroke, I reckon," said the foreman, with a grunt. "I opine it wouldn't be a gold-darned loss to the Rio Claro country if he got it, too! I reckon I know what he's hitting

this ranch for, though why he's in such a pesky hurry beats me."

And the foreman scowled at the new arrival. All the Poindexter outfit—and all Gunsight, for that matter—knew that every foot of land, and every long-horn on the ranch was mortgaged to Lawyer Dunk, of Truce. The common opinion in the cow-town was that ere long the ranch would be taken over by Mr. Dunk; and Tex Clew did not look forward to that prospect with any pleasure.

With a clatter of hoofs and a cloud of dust Mr. Dunk came to a halt before the bunkhouse. He almost fell from the saddle.

The horse stood trembling, lathered with foam. The lawyer mopped his streaming brow and stared back the way he had come.

"Some galoot arter you, Mr. Dunk?" inquired Tex.

The lawyer gasped.

"The Rio Kid!"

"Shucks! Is that firebug cavorting around here agin?" exclaimed the foreman.

Dunk reeled against the bunkhouse. He leaned on the wooden wall, spluttering for breath.

"He's not in sight!" he panted. "You can't see him?"

Tex grinned.

"I guess even that all-fired fire-eater wouldn't foller you up to the ranch, Mr. Dunk. There's too many galoots around Gunsight to draw a bead on him. He ain't in sight."

"I was held up—on the trail through the chaparral, coming here from Truce!" gasped Mr. Dunk. "I've had a narrow

escape. I—I thought perhaps he was after me—"

"You sure didn't stop to make sartin!" remarked the Poindexter foreman sarcastically.

The lawyer from Truce did not heed the sarcasm, if he noticed it at all. He stared back across the sunlit plains, as if he feared that every tuft of grass might hide the Rio Kid. Far in the distance the line of the rolling prairie was broken by a dark belt of chaparral. Lawyer Dunk was satisfied at last that the outlaw had not left the chaparral to follow him across the plain. He had ridden those hot and perspiring miles unpursued.

"I'll say you was lucky to get clear if the Rio Kid held you up," said Tex, "I guess he cleaned you out first, sure?"

Dunk shook his head.

"Some galoot fired on him in the chaparral, and that gave me a chance to vamoose," he said.

"Sho! Who was it?" asked Tex, with keen interest.

"Search me!" grunted the lawyer. "Do you fancy that I stopped to see who it was?"

"You sure wouldn't!" said the ranch foreman. "You sure would light out and leave him to it, Mr. Dunk. How long ago was it?"

"As long as it's taken me to ride here as fast as my horse could jump," growled Dunk.

"I sure might have guessed that, too," assented Tex. "I reckon I'd like to know what galoot it was that's tried to round up the Rio Kid. Might be on time yet."

And Tex, leaving the lawyer where he stood, strode into the corral, and in less than a minute was mounted on a broncho and riding away towards the chaparral as fast as Lawyer Dunk had ridden away from it.

He vanished in a cloud of dust, while the lawyer from Truce still leaned on the bunkhouse wall and panted for breath.

Mr. Dunk recovered his breath at last, and some of his nerve, and detached himself from the bunkhouse. The horse-wrangler had already taken his steed away to give it attention, and one or two punchers who were hanging about were regarding the fat man with curious, and by no means friendly looks. They were quite aware that Mr. Dunk had called for over-due interest on the mortgage, and equally well aware that he was not likely to be paid. Dunk called to one of them.

"Mr. Poindexter's at home, I suppose, Mohave?"

The lawyer was a little surprised that the rancher had not come out to greet him. In the circumstances of the case it behoved the young master of Poindexter ranch to be civil to his creditor.

"He sure ain't," answered Mohave.

"Not at home?" exclaimed Dunk.

"Nix."

Dunk compressed his lips.

"He must have been expecting me this afternoon!" he exclaimed. "Did he leave word when he would be back?"

"He sure left word he'd be to home by the time you called, Mr. Dunk," said Mohave. "If he wasn't, you was to wait."

Dunk opened his lips for an angry answer—and closed them again. He walked away towards the ranch-house.

There he was admitted by a half-breed peon, who showed him into the living-room of the ranch-house.

Mr. Dunk sat down to wait, and wiped his perspiring forehead again. His fat face showed deep annoyance. He had not expected "Poker" Poindexter to have eight hundred dollars ready for him, but he had expected the rancher to be there full of apologies and excuses. And the rancher was not there. He was absent; possibly making some desperate effort at the eleventh hour to raise or borrow the money that was required. The lawyer from Truce waited with growing impatience, more and more irritated with every passing minute, as the rancher did not come.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Face to Face!

"HANDS up!"

The Rio Kid's revolver gleamed to a level as he rapped out the words.

He was just in time.

The horseman, upon whom he had come suddenly, in the shadowy trail of the chaparral, was reaching for a gun at the sight of him. But his hand stopped short of the butt as the Kid's revolver looked him in the eye.

On the open prairie it was still sunny, but in the deep chaparral the shadows were darkening.

The rider did not touch his gun, but he hesitated to lift his hands at the Kid's order; and the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande repeated it sharply.

"Put 'em up, feller! Pronto!"

Slowly the horseman's hands went over his head, his dark eyes gleaming at the Kid as he raised them. The horse halted in its tracks; the Kid, standing his horse directly in the way, covering the rider with his gun.

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The Rio Kid scanned the horseman curiously.

He saw a young man, with a boyish frame, a handsome sun-tanned face—though its good looks were considerably marred by the signs of dissipation. The Kid figured at a glance that this hombre was accustomed to sitting up late of nights watching the run of the cards. But for the lines that late hours and dissipation had brought into the face, the rider looked but little older than the boy outlaw himself.

His lip curved in an angry sneer as he put his hands over his head.

"I guess you've held up the wrong man, hombre," he said bitterly. "I'm sure down to bedrock. And if you're aiming to steal my cayuse, I'll tell you you won't get him out of this Rio Claro country easily, he's known to every galoot for a score of miles."

The Kid frowned.

"You don't want to shoot off your mouth so much, feller!" he said. "I reckon this hyer gun may go off if you call me a hoss-thief."

The young horseman shrugged his shoulders.

"You're holding me up!" he said. "I guess you ain't doing it because you want to chew the rag with me."

"Sure not!" assented the Kid. "I'm looking for a man in this chaparral—and if you're that man you're my mutton, with the wool on! You get me?"

"Who the thunder are you?"

"I guess they call me the Rio Kid when I'm to home in the Frio country."

The horseman started violently.

"The Rio Kid!" he exclaimed.

"Yep!"

The Kid smiled.

"Keep 'em up!" he said. "I sure don't want to spill your juice, but I ain't taking chances. I reckon I wasn't too sudden getting this gun out. You seem fairly quick on the draw yourself, feller. I want to know who you are."

"Every man in this country knows Jim Poindexter!" snapped the horseman.

"Sho! The rancher they call Poker Poindexter?" exclaimed the Kid, gazing at the young man with keenest interest.

"They call me that," grunted Poindexter. "If you're the Rio Kid you're the fire-bug my foreman dropped on a week ago, and that he let get away, the pesky mosshead!"

"You don't want to call him names for that," smiled the Kid. "You've sure dropped on me yourself, Poindexter; and I guess you're going to let me get away. Ain't you?"

"Quit chewing the rag!" snapped Poindexter. "You've stopped me. What do you want, if this ain't a hold-up?"

"Just a little pow-wow with you," said the Kid. "I'm hunting for a man in this chaparral. I reckon I'd have cinched him easy if I'd had my cayuse with me; but I'd left him to home. The galoot I want is about your heft, Mr. Poindexter, and he calls himself the Rio Kid. I shot the gun out of his hand; but he got away, being well-mounted and no afoot. I've been beating the chaparral for him, and I've found you."

"I guess you might find anybody on this trail," said Poindexter. "Plenty galoots ride this way."

"Sure!" agreed the Kid. "I ain't saying you're the man I want; I'm only asking a few questions. There's a galoot riding the trails in the Rio Claro country calling himself the Rio Kid, and that's the galoot I want; and I'm going to have him, if I have to trail him all over Texas. He sports a black mask on his face, and paints a black muzzle on his boss to look like mine. He calls

himself by my name to keep his own dark, I reckon."

"That's the yarn you spun my foreman, Tex Clew. He told me," said Poindexter, with a sneer.

"I ain't asking you to believe me, any more'n he did," said the Kid, unmoved. "But it's the frozen truth. And I'm sure death on that fire-bug who's raising Cain in the Gunsight country, and hiding himself behind my name. I ain't looking for a chance of being strung up on account of a pesky bulldozer who's borrowed my name to skulk behind. No, sir!"

"Well, I know nothing of him, if you're giving me the straight goods—which I don't believe!" snapped Poindexter. "I guess I've no time for chewing the rag, either; there's a man waiting to see me at my ranch."

"Lawyer Dunk, I reckon," grinned the Kid.

The rancher started again, more violently than before.

"How do you know?"

"I guess I saw him held up by the galoot that calls himself by my name," answered the Kid. "He's lit out like he was sent for; and I'm beating the chaparral for that fire-bug. That's a sure handsome cayuse you're riding, Mr. Poindexter."

The Kid eyed the grey mustang keenly. It was very like his own horse, save that it was all grey; and the Kid's mustang was distinguished by a black mark on its left shoulder.

There was suspicion in the Kid's look.

The rancher's eyes glittered at him.

"You ain't stopped me to admire my cayuse, I reckon," he said. "And if you're aiming to steal it, I reckon I'll try my chance of pulling a gun, though you've got the drop on me."

"Forget it!" said the Kid, the revolver steady as a rock in his hand. "If you ain't the man I want I ain't honing for trouble with you; but if you touch a gun, feller, you gets yours mighty sudden!"

"What do you mean—the man you want?" demanded the rancher. "Any galoot in this country can tell you that I'm the owner of the Poindexter ranch. According to your say-so, you're looking for a trail bandit. What do you mean?"

"I guess I'll make it clear," said the Kid quietly. "The ornery thief I'm looking for uses my name to hide behind; and I reckon that that means that he's got another name when he's to home and goes around among folks who don't savvy that he robs and shoots on the trails at times. He rides a grey hoss, with the muzzle painted black to look like my cayuse—that's known all over Texas. I guess he's got some lay-out hidden in this chaparral where he disguises his hoss and fixes himself up with a mask when he's going on the trails; and I guess he leaves those fixings behind him when he rides home. He may be any man in the Gunsight country—and you as likely as another, Mr. Poindexter."

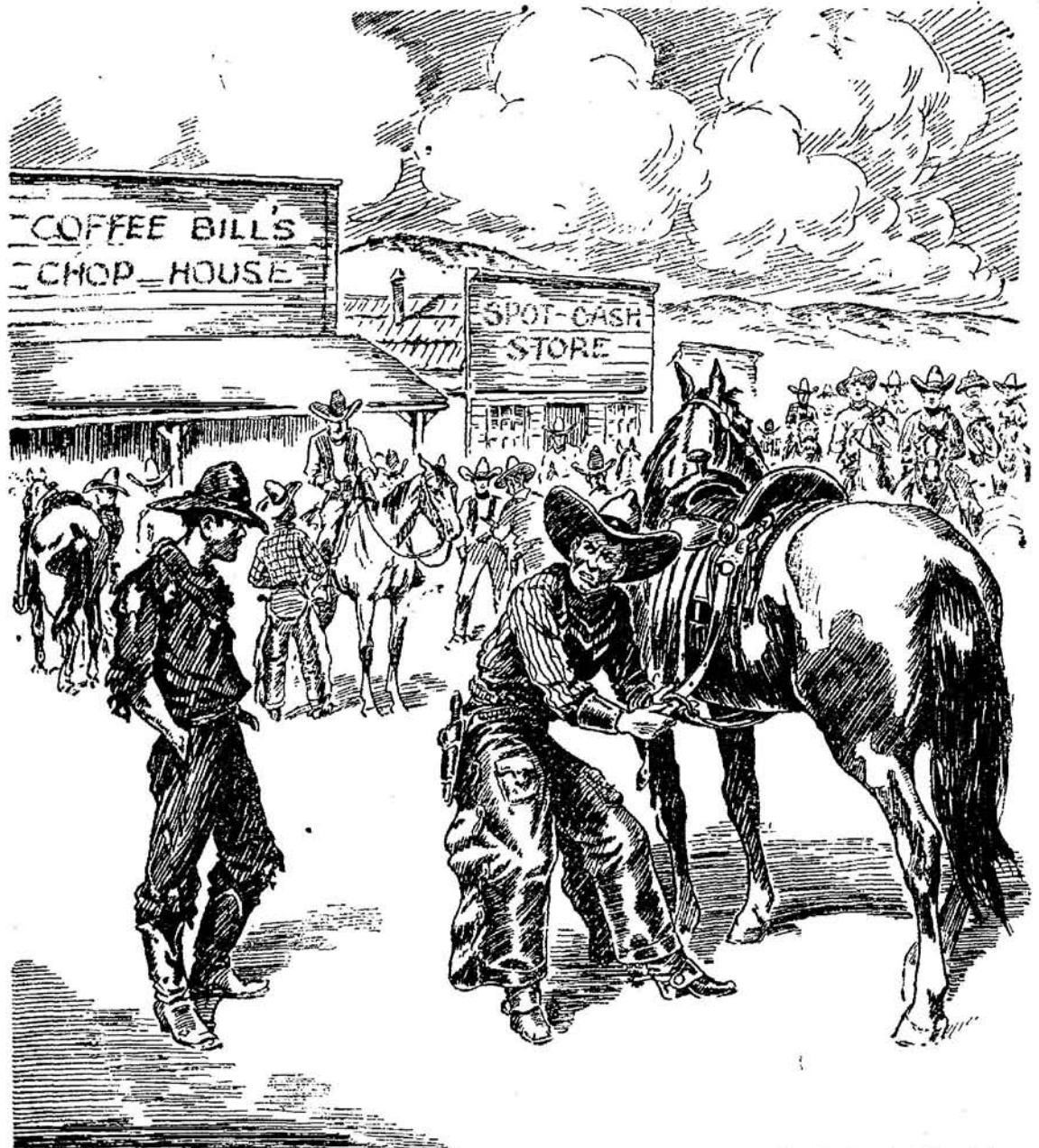
The rancher laughed.

"You're asking me if I'm in this chaparral, hitting for home after holding up Lawyer Dunk?" he said.

"Jest that!" said the Kid, watching him keenly. "You're about the build of the galoot, and I've found you in the chaparral hunting for him. You ride a grey mustang—easy enough to fix up with a black muzzle. I ain't saying you're the galoot, but I'll tell the world that I'm going to make sure."

"And if you can't take my word, how are you going to make sure?" sneered the rancher.

"Where's your gun?" snapped the Kid,



SEEKING NEWS! Tex Clew was bending by his broncho tightening his cinch, when the Rio Kid, in his tattered disguise, stopped beside him and spoke. "Say, feller, there's sure some rookus in this hyer burg this morning," he said. "Put a galoot wise," Tex glanced around. "We're out after that cuss, the Rio Kid!" he growled. (See Chapter 4.)

"In my holster! Can't you see?"

"You wear two holsters; you're a two gun man," said the Kid. "I guess I can see only one gun. Where's the other?"

Poindexter shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess I wouldn't answer you if you hadn't a gun in your hand," he said. "I left one gun to home this afternoon—forgot it."

"A two gun man don't often forget his shooting iron," said the Kid, shaking his head. "And I sure shot a gun out of the hand of that galoot who held up Lawyer Dunk, and he lit out so sudden he never thought of picking it up. Keep them paws in the air!"

The Kid moved closer and with his left hand jerked away the single gun from the belt of the rancher. He tossed

it into the thickets of pecans and mesquite by the dim trail.

Poindexter's eyes glittered, but he made no movement.

With his left hand the Kid took the horse's bridle and drew the animal towards him. He was cauning the grey hair for a sign of paint; but in the failing light it was not easy to discover the traces he sought, if they were there.

Poindexter breathed hard.

Whether it was fear that the Rio Kid would make the discovery he was seeking, or whether his long-suppressed anger broke out of his control, he suddenly dashed his long Mexican spurs into the horse's flanks.

The mustang reared and trampled wildly, and the Kid swung his mustang back barely in time to avoid being struck by the lashing hoofs.

Bang!

The Kid's revolver roared.

But Poindexter, with the activity of an Apache, swung down the horse's side, only his leg over the saddle—an old Indian trick, which saved him from the shot.

At the same moment the horse dashed away down the tangled trail at a frantic gallop, and disappeared from sight. The sound of hoofs died away. It had all happened so quickly that the Kid had been taken wholly off his guard. It was useless to chase after the quarry in this light, anyway.

"Dog-gone the galoot!" exclaimed the Kid, exasperated. "I guess I'm sure plumb loco to let a god-darned cow-man beat me to it that-a-way. That galoot sure is mighty spry—and so was

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the galoot in the mask that held up the lawyer pilgrim, I reckon. But whether it's the same galoot—

The Kid growled his discontent.

He suspected the rancher, but he could not be sure.

But the Kid meant to be sure. If Poker Poindexter was the man in the Gunsight country who had been borrowing his name, the Kid meant to know—and to call him to account. But his mood was angry and disappointed, as he rode away through the tangled chaparral towards the hidden dug-out where he had lain in hiding.

THE THIRD CHAPTER. Up Against It!

"HALLO, boss!"
Tex Clew shouted and waved his Stetson, as a galloping horseman loomed up in the falling twilight.

The rider drew in his horse.

"Hallo, Tex! What are you doing off the ranch?" asked Poindexter.

"I figured it was you. I reckoned I knowed that cayuse," said the foreman. "Lawyer Dunk's at the ranch, boss. He allowed that that pesky fire-bug, the Rio Kid, had held him up in the chaparral, and I was aiming to look for sign of the galoot. I've sure got a grouch agin him for the way he handled me a week ago; and if he's in the chaparral, I'm the man that wants to see him!"

"He's in the chaparral. He held me up, and got my gun away!" growled Poindexter. "I ran into the scoundrel coming back from Post Oak. You don't want to go trailing him on your lone-some, Tex. I guess he's too mighty quick with his gun. Ride into Gunsight and tell the boys he's around, and get a dozen galoots to back you!"

"Sure!" assented the foreman. And he rode away towards the cow-town, leaving Poker Poindexter to ride on to the ranch.

Poindexter galloped on, his brow dark and moody under his Stetson hat.

The interview that awaited him at the ranch was not inviting. But he was not thinking wholly of the coming interview with the legal pilgrim from Truce. His thoughts dwelt on the happenings in the chaparral, and several times he looked back, with a gleam of rage and hatred in his eyes.

"The Rio Kid!" he muttered. "The Rio Kid! What ill-fortunes brought him into this country? By the great horned toad, I'll raise all the ranches round Gunsight, and hunt him down! I'll hunt him out of that chaparral like a coyote!"

And the rancher gritted his teeth savagely.

He rode up to the ranch at last, threw his reins to a peon, and strode into the house. In the light of the swinging lamp in the living-room, Lawyer Dunk rose to his feet, and eyed Poindexter unpleasantly, as he came in with clinking spurs.

"Not my fault, Mr. Dunk," said Poindexter, before the lawyer could speak. "I've been over to Post Oaks, and was held up on the trail back, by that fire-bug who's haunting the country."

"The Rio Kid?" exclaimed Dunk.

"That's what he calls himself."

The man from Truce gave a snarl.

"It's time that rustler was rounded up!" he snapped. "What is the sheriff doing? I've had the narrowest escape in my life. The outlaw held me up in the chaparral, and was going to plug

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me for keeps, only someone fired from a cottonwood, and I got clear."

"You sure had luck," said Poindexter, flinging himself into a chair, and his eyes gleamed at the lawyer as he spoke.

"Well, to come to business," said Mr. Dunk acidly. "I've waited for you, Jim Poindexter, and you know why I'm here."

"I guess so," said the rancher moodily.

"I'm here to collect eight hundred dollars," said Dunk, eyeing him.

"I reckon you'll have to give me time."

The lawyer's face hardened.

"I've heard that before," he said. "The money's over-due, and your message said that if I waited till to-day, you'd get it sure."

"I reckoned it was a cinch," said Poindexter. "But it's failed. I was counting on it as a certainty."

"A game of poker," asked the lawyer sarcastically, "and you came out at the little end of the horn? Is that it?"

"I've raised the money every time, so far," said the rancher sullenly.

Dunk nodded.

"Sure," he agreed, "and how you've done it beats me, Poindexter. Your ranch is run the worst of any in the Gunsight country. You let your outfit do as they choose. You spend all your time playing poker at the ranches, or gambling at the Four Aces in Gunsight. Any man in Rio Claro county could tell that your ranch has been run at a loss for a year past. You don't win the money at poker—you're the unluckiest gambler in Texas. I guess I've often wondered how you met the interest on the mortgage, even late."

"No business of yours, so long as I do meet it!" growled the rancher.

"Sure. But this time you're not meeting it," said Dunk unpleasantly. "The man I'm acting for can't wait any longer; and if you don't pony up to-day, the mortgage forecloses."

"You riding back to Truce this evening?" asked Poindexter.

Dunk shivered.

"Not likely, after what's happened this afternoon. I shall stop over the night at Gunsight, and go by the hack to Claro in the morning. I'm not riding the chaparral trail again, till the Rio Kid is roped in and strung up."

"Stay here to-night, then?" said Poindexter. "I guess I'm seeing a friend in Gunsight to-night, who'll lend me eight hundred dollars. I missed him at Post Oaks to-day. You'll leave the ranch to-morrow morning with the dollars in your grip-sack."

Dunk eyed him suspiciously.

"I guess that goes," he agreed. "That's O.K., if you're on the square."

"Square as a die," said Poindexter, rising from his chair. "I tell you it's a cinch!"

"Leave it at that, then," said the lawyer from Truce.

Late that night, when the man from Truce was in bed and asleep, Poker Poindexter was pacing the room below, his brows knitted and dark, his teeth set on an unlighted Mexican cheroot.

It was past midnight when Poindexter let himself silently out of the ranch-house.

There was no light in the bunkhouse. The outfit were asleep, save for the men out on the plains with the cattle.

Softly the rancher led a grey mustang from the corral.

He led the horse out of the gateway and for some distance along the trail before he mounted.

When he mounted at last, and dashed

away into the gloom, he did not take the direction of Gunsight. Whatever business it was that had called the rancher abroad at night, it did not lead him to the cow-town on the Rio Claro.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

In the Enemy's Camp!

THE desert rat who limped into Gunsight in the sunny morning found that little cow-town in a state of unusual excitement.

Gunsight, a central point in the cow country along the Rio Claro, generally had a few punchers lounging in its dusty street, along the plank side-walk, and a bunch of cow-ponies tied up outside the Four Aces Saloon and the Gunsight Hotel.

But on this particular morning the cow-town swarmed with them. Men from all the ranches within a dozen miles of the town crowded Gunsight, and there was an incessant clattering of hoofs and buzzing of excited voices.

The desert rat who came in from the prairie trail attracted no attention. "Desert rats" were not uncommon in the Rio Claro country. If this specimen differed from the usual run, it was in looking a little more ragged and dusty and dilapidated. His age it would have been hard to tell, so thickly was his face grimed with the desert dust; but that he was in bad luck was clear at a glance.

A rag of a Stetson was on his touselled head, his old red shirt was a tatter, his moleskin trousers split and rent, his boots would have disgraced any of the numerous dust-heaps round Gunsight.

Nobody heeded him: but had anybody heeded him, no one would have dreamed of recognising the handsome Rio Kid in that diapidated guise.

The desert rat did not even pack a gun, so far as could be seen, though probably there was a gun hidden somewhere in his rags. Even in that impenetrable disguise the Kid was not likely to venture among a swarm of enemies without one.

Men of the Poindexter ranch were among the others, and the desert rat recognised Tex Clew in the crowd outside the Gunsight Hotel. He drifted among the buzzing throng, listening to the excited utterances of the punchers, catching continually the one name constantly repeated—the Rio Kid!

Under his dust and grime the desert rat smiled grimly. He had horned into Gunsight in time to hear fresh news of the doings of the unknown who had borrowed the Kid's name.

Tex was bending by his broncho, tightening his cinch, when the desert rat stopped beside him, and spoke.

"Say feller, there's sure some rookus in this hyer burg this morning," he said. "Put a galoot wise."

Tex glanced round at him, and grunted. Desert rats were not popular with the ranchmen. Horses were only too likely to be missing after a desert rat had been around.

"Is it a necktie party, pard?" asked the desert rat, as the Poindexter foreman did not answer.

"It sure will be if we get holt of the Rio Kid!" said Tex savagely.

"I've sure heard a heap about that pesky fire-bug," said the desert rat amiably. "What's he done now?"

"What ain't he done?" growled Tex. "Last week he shot up the marshal of this here cow-town; and last night he shot up the boss of Blue Grass ranch."

"You don't tell!" ejaculated the stranger.

"We'll get him, sure, this time!" said the Poindexter foreman. "I guess that

Kid will 'arn that Gunsight don't stand for it. He shot up a rancher, I'm telling you, last night, in his own ranch-house, right under his own roof, and hit the trail with a thousand dollars in greenbacks. That's what I'm telling you!"

"Oh, sho!" said the desert rat.

He moved away from the impatient foreman, loafing among the excited punchers who were gathering to take the trail of the Rio Kid.

From the incessant, excited talk, it was easy for a listener to piece together what had happened the night before at the Blue Grass ranch.

The boss of Blue Grass had sold a bunch of cattle to a Claro dealer the day before, which was known to other ranchers about Gunsight; though how it became known to the outlaw was a mystery to the cow-town. But this was not the first time that the outlaw had shown an uncanny knowledge of local affairs.

That he must have known was clear, for the money that was locked up in Rancher Topham's safe, at the Blue Grass ranch, would have been sent to the bank in the morning; and the outlaw had horned in during the night and cinched it.

The rancher had been called out of bed at midnight by a horseman who gave the alarm of fire on the range; and immediately he opened his door he was covered by a gun in the hand of a masked man. The rancher had pulled a gun; and had been shot down in his tracks by the outlaw. Now he lay badly wounded at his ranch, and the thousand dollars he had packed in his safe were gone.

The outlaw knew the money was there, knew where to look for the safe; and he was mounted and gone before any of the Blue Grass outfit arrived on the scene.

The desert rat, as he pieced together that story, did not wonder that Gunsight was enraged, and that word had been sent round to all the ranches to gather men for a hot pursuit.

More than a hundred men were gathered in the dusty street, waiting, apparently, for their leader to arrive.

A horseman dashed in from the prairie, and there was a shout. This was the leader for whom they waited; and the desert rat smiled grimly under his dust as he saw that it was Poker Poindexter.

Leaning against a post outside the Four Aces he watched the crowd gather, mounted and armed, round the young rancher.

Poindexter spoke a few words before he gave the signal to ride. To judge by appearance, he shared the feelings of the men around him. The desert rat wondered.

"Boys, this has got to come to a finish!" exclaimed Poindexter. "We've got to show that fire-bug from Rio that he can't cavort around the Rio Claro country this-a-way. Yesterday he he'd up Lawyer Dunk in the chaparral, last night he shot up Rancher Topham—and he's got clear with the goods. I guess he's hiding in the chaparral; and we're going to root him out and boost him up to a branch!"

There was a roar.

"The galoot cavorts around with a mask on his face," went on Poindexter. "But there's men here who know him by sight, and I'm one of them—Tex hyer is another. You that don't know him get busy with a gun if you find a stranger in the chaparral; rope in any man you light on, and drop him in his tracks if he raises trouble. We ain't

taking chances on letting that fire-bug get away with the goods!"

There was another roar, and, with a clatter of hoofs and a cracking of revolvers fired in the air, the crowd of horsemen rode out of Gunsight—to hunt the chaparral for the Rio Kid.

"I'll tell the world!" murmured the desert rat, as he leaned idly on the post and watched them go. "I sure reckon they won't cinch the Rio Kid in the chaparral, and they won't cinch the galoot that's borrowed his name, so long as Poker Poindexter's riding with them, now! I sure do suspect that hombre a whole heap!"

The horsemen were gone, the dust settled down behind them, and the desert rat still lounged idly. It was an hour later that the hack came round to the front of the Gunsight Hotel, to start on the daily trip to Claro. From the direction of the Poindexter ranch a fat man rode into the cow-town—Lawyer Dunk, of Truce, in his store clothes and a borrowed Stetson.

The desert rat eyed him curiously.

The lawyer left his horse at the lumber hotel, and took a seat in the hack. It was a roundabout way back to Truce, by Claro; but Dunk evidently did not intend to ride back the direct way through the chaparral. One meeting with the outlaw was enough for him; he did not want another, especially as Lawyer Dunk now had the sum of eight hundred dollars in his "grip." For that morning Poindexter had paid him the amount of his claim, in fulfillment of his promise; and the Truce lawyer could only wonder who had lent the rancher the money.

The hack rolled away on the road to Claro, the desert rat's eyes following it till it was out of sight.

During that day the desert rat loafed about Gunsight. He staked himself a meal of frijoles at a cheap Mexican posada, where he talked with the greasy proprietor in his own language, picking up the local news of Gunsight.

He was dozing in the shade of a cotton-wood, with the lazy look of the true desert rat, when a bunch of horsemen came riding in, weary and dusty, at sundown.

A Story of Endless Thrills

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The hunters were returning; and their looks showed that the hunt had been unsuccessful. They had beaten the chaparral far and wide for the Rio Kid, finding no trace of that elusive galoot. Many of the men had dispersed to their ranches; but a score or more rode back into the cow-town, among them Poker Poindexter.

The desert rat's half-closed eyes watched Poindexter, as he hitched his horse to the rail outside the Four Aces and strode into the saloon.

When the desert rat loafed across the street and looked in at the door of the Four Aces, Poindexter was seated at a game of poker with two or three other ranchers.

Several men were standing round watching the game. Poindexter was the most desperate and reckless gambler in the section; his play was always high, and generally unlucky; and men in Gunsight wondered how long his ranch would stand the strain. It was already mortgaged up to the hilt; and it was a mystery to his friends how he met the heavy interest on the mortgage.

So much, and more, the desert rat had learned from the Mexican at the posada. And the desert rat wondered whether he knew the answer to the question.

Having looked into the saloon, the desert rat lounged to the hitching-rail, where Poindexter's horse was tied with a half-dozen others. He had a way with horses; the grey mustang yielded to his touch meekly as he stroked the glossy muzzle. And while he stroked it he scanned it keenly, searchingly, in the flare of the naphtha lamp that blazed outside the Four Aces.

There was a step beside him, and a rough hand pushed him back from the horse.

The desert rat glanced round. Poindexter had come out of the saloon with a black, frowning brow. He did not look like a winner at the game of poker.

"Let that cayuse alone, confound you, you loafer!" snapped the rancher savagely.

"A rip-snorter of a cayuse, sir!" said the desert rat mildly. "You've sure got a good critter, sir."

"No business of yours!" snapped Poindexter, unhitching the horse. He was not in a pleasant mood.

"Sure it ain't, sir," said the desert rat. "But I reckon you want to tell your wrangler to keep an eye on that cayuse, sir. He's been getting his nose rubbing up against some paint, I guess."

Poindexter swung on him with a startled oath.

"What? What do you mean, you boozy loafer?"

"No offence, sir!" said the tattered desert rat. "I jest reckoned I'd tell you, sir, seeing as he's a good hoss. I reckon if you'll look you'll sure see that there's been paint on his shoulder, sir—black paint. Looks as if it's been washed off, too—but you'll find a trace of it—and I reckon you want to tell your wrangler about it."

With a curse Poindexter swung the horse out into the street, mounted, and dashed away with a clatter of hoofs.

The desert rat looked after him grimly. What the Rio Kid had suspected before, he knew now: the suspicion had become a certainty.

THE END.

(Will the Rio Kid succeed in running down Poindexter in the very act of holding up the trail? See next week's roaring Western yarn!)

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WESTERN YARN
STARRING THE RIO
KID, BOY OUTLAW!



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

A Bird's-eye View of a Hold-Up!

"O H, shucks!" snapped the Rio Kid. His eyes gleamed with anger.

The Kid lay on the grassy summit of a high bluff, overlooking the wide waters of the Rio Claro. In a hollow near by him his mustang was contentedly cropping the grass. Neither the Kid nor his horse was to be seen on the skyline by any puncher who might have been riding the prairie trails. In the neighbourhood of the cow-town of Gunsight the Kid had the best of reasons for keeping himself out of view.

Lying in the grass on the top of the bluff, the Kid was staring across the wide river that rolled before him. A mile lower down the Rio Claro was a ford, where the water shallowed over sandy reaches. But below the bluff where the boy outlaw lay, it was wide and deep, and flowed between high, clayey banks. On the other side ran the stage trail from Claro to Gunsight. For some time the Kid had been idly watching the two-horse hack coming from the direction of Claro, at first a speck in the distance, but now almost opposite the bluff.

The hack had suddenly halted.

The Kid saw the reason. From a clump of cottonwoods on the other side of the stage trail a horseman had pushed out—a horseman whose face was masked, and whose hand held a levelled revolver. It was a hold-up, taking place in full view of the Rio Kid, though at

such a distance that the actors in it were like toy figures to his eyes.

"O! all the dog-goned pesky luck!" said the Kid, in utter disgust.

For, small as was the figure of the masked horseman in the distance across the river, the Kid knew it only too well. He knew the grey mustang with the left shoulder painted black to imitate his own steed. He knew that he was looking at the trail bandit who had borrowed his name, and who had made himself the terror of the Gunsight country under the name of the Rio Kid. And the Kid knew—what no other man in Texas knew—that the outlaw's mask hid the face of a rancher well known at Gunsight—Poker Poindexter, of the Poindexter Ranch.

It was intensely exasperating to the Kid.

For weeks he had haunted the prairie

trails, watching for a chance at the man who was using his name. It was not an easy task the Kid had set himself. All Gunsight was thirsting for the blood of the boy outlaw—and he remained in the country at the risk of his life. Every cowman in the country believed that the desperate trail-robber was the Rio Kid, and the Kid would have been given short shrift had he fallen into the hands of the ranchers. But he was resolved not to hit the trail till he had brought his enemy to book. Hold-ups and shootings were laid to the Kid's account. He was credited with all the desperate deeds of the man who used his name. The Kid aimed to rope in the secret bandit, and prove to all Gunsight that the man was not himself. Sooner or later, he figured, he would get the galoot, catching him in the act of some desperate deed, and proving

beyond doubt that the masked outlaw was not the Rio Kid. And now he had spotted the trail bandit at work—with a broad river flowing between, which made it impossible to get at him.

The Kid gritted his teeth.

The hold-up across the river was out of pistol-shot from the bluff where the Kid lay. The Kid's hand had gone by instinct to a gun; but he relinquished it. He lay and watched, with a frowning brow and gloaming eyes.

From the distance across the river not a sound came to his ears, not even the tramping of the horses as the stage-driver pulled them in. There were four or five passengers in the hack, but there was no sign of resistance being offered to the masked man. That he would shoot, and shoot to kill at the first sign of it, they knew only too well, and they descended from the hack, lined up by the trail, and held up their hands like lambs. The masked man was getting away with it as easy as rolling off a log. The passengers from Claro were not likely to start anything with the man who had shot the marshal of Gunsight and three or four other pilgrims since he had commenced operations in the valley of the Rio Claro.

The Kid made a movement. His rifle was in its leather case on the mustang in the hollow behind him. The rifle would carry the distance.

But he shook his head, and settled down to watch. The hack and its horses, the driver, and the bunch of passengers with their hands up, were between him and the masked rider, and the distance was great even for a crack shot like the Kid. He did not want to spill the juice of one of the passengers from Claro by a mischance, or knock the driver from his perch. And other thoughts were already working in the Kid's mind. He controlled his impatience, and watched quietly from the top of the bluff.

Under the masked man's revolver the passengers from Claro were ponying up their money with terrified haste. The driver sat motionless in his seat, chewing tobacco while he waited for the outlaw to get through. He looked cheerfully indifferent to what was going on. But the passengers were in a state of terrified flutter, obvious to the Kid's keen eyes, even at the distance that made them like dolls to the view. They seemed more than eager to satisfy the trail bandit.

"That galoot sure has got that crowd where he wants them," the Kid muttered, with a curl of the lip. "They sure ain't honing for trouble with the guy they figure is the Rio Kid. Shucks!"

The passengers were getting back into the hack.

The Kid had only a partial view of the masked horseman, half-hidden from sight by the hack. But he made out that the trail bandit was stowing away his plunder in a grip that was buckled to his belt. From his motions the Kid reckoned that he had made a good haul. He had not troubled to go through the victims, which implied that they had handed out enough to satisfy him. It was not likely that any man in the crowd would have kept anything back, at the risk of the outlaw's revolver.

The horseman made a sign, the driver cracked his whip, and the hack rolled on down the river, towards the ford which it had to cross to reach Gunsight.

For a moment the masked horseman remained in the trail, looking after the departing vehicle, full in view of the Kid.

But it was only for a moment.

He turned instantly to the belt of

cottonwoods at the side of the trail; pushed into the trees, and vanished.

Far away down the Rio Claro the hack disappeared, going at a gallop for the ford.

The stage-trail was deserted again; no sign of life met the watching eyes from the bluff on the south side of the river. The Kid might almost have fancied that the scene he had watched had been a vision of the imagination.

"Oh, sho!" growled the Kid. "I been trailing that galoot high and low, and now he sure holds up a durned hearse under my eyes, and gets away with it. But I guess he ain't riding home safe with that loot. No, sir! I reckon them jaspers figure that he's hitting for the chaparral, or the Mexican border as fast as his cayuse can raise the dust. They sure don't figure that he's hitting for the Poindexter Ranch, and that they'll see him cavorting around Gunsight this evening, with his mask off, dog-gone him. But he ain't getting away this time, I guess."

The Kid had been thinking it out while he watched. He knew, if no other galoot knew, that the masked outlaw was Poker Poindexter. He knew that the trail robber would not be hitting for a hiding-place in the chaparral or across the border in Mexico; but that when he had washed the paint from his disguised horse and concealed the black mask, he would ride back to the Poindexter Ranch unsuspected. A few weeks ago the Kid had been a stranger in the Gunsight country; but since then he had learned his way about. For many miles either way the Rio Claro could not be crossed, excepting at the ford where the trail ran to Gunsight. The ford was a mile away; Gunsight lay five miles farther on down the river. After the hack was safely gone the Kid figured that it was likely that the trail bandit would ride across the river at the ford. If he was hitting for his ranch there was no other way for him.

The Kid left the grassy top of the bluff and called to his mustang. He rode down the bluffs and followed the direction of the river.

If Poker Poindexter rode across at the ford he would find the Kid waiting for him there.

He would have discarded his mask, washed the disguising paint from his horse; but he would have the plunder of the hack stacked in his grip—and that would be enough to cook his goose, the Kid figured.

In a clump of mesquite, in sight of the ford, the Kid took cover and waited.

He waited with his eyes on the ford. The hack had passed and disappeared towards Gunsight. The Kid had long to wait. He knew that he might be waiting in vain; that the secret outlaw might not come. But it was the Kid's first chance of catching the desperado in the very act—the chance he had hitherto sought in vain—and he was patient—as patient as an Apache watching the trail for an enemy. He sat his horse, with his riata ready in his hand.

And his patience was rewarded at last. There was a splashing of horse's hoofs in the shallow water of the ford.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Roped In!

POKER POINDEXTER rode down to the ford of the Rio Claro.

If he was the man who had held up the Claro hack a mile back on the trail there was nothing in his appearance to betray him.

His mustang, a handsome and powerful animal, was grey from nose to tail,

with no speck of black on him; and the outlaw's horse had had a black muzzle—in imitation of the Rio Kid's well-known steed. The outlaw had worn goatskin chaps, as the Kid always did; but Poindexter wore no chaparejos over his well-cut riding-breeches. And there was no mask now on the handsome, dissipated face.

Any Gunsight galoot who had met Jim Poindexter on the trail would have exchanged greetings with him, never dreaming of suspecting how he had lately been occupied.

His raids were put down to the Rio Kid; and they had made the Kid the best-hated man in the section. Nobody was surprised that the Kid, hunted out of the Frio country, had located in the Gunsight section; and nobody dreamed that the masked outlaw was in reality, not the Kid at all, but a Gunsight rancher. The device of adopting the name and appearance of a well-known outlaw saved Poker Poindexter from the slightest danger of suspicion.

More than once, closely pursued on his lawless raids, he had shot down his pursuers; and the blood he had shed had been put to the Kid's account, and the Kid was hunted far and wide—Poindexter, with cool effrontery, leading his own ranch outfit to join in the hunt.

Only one difficulty had cropped up—the unexpected appearance of the Rio Kid himself in the Gunsight country. Poindexter had not looked for that, and it had disconcerted him.

That the Kid's feelings towards the man who had borrowed and blackened his name would be bitter he was well aware. But, after all, the Kid could not know his real identity; and, in any case, the Kid could not show up in any cow-town without being lynched for his double's deeds.

Poindexter was thinking of that as he rode across the ford; and he was thinking that if the Rio Kid had any boss-sense he would hit the trail out of the Gunsight country—indeed, had probably already done so. He did not suspect how near the Kid was to him in those moments.

He rode up the bank of the Rio Claro and out on the trail from the river towards the Gunsight ranches.

Whiz!

He was passing a clump of mesquite when he heard the well-known sound of a whizzing lasso.

Before he could even glance round him the noose descended over his shoulders.

There was a twang as the rope tautened.

Crash!

With his arms pinned to his sides by the gripping loop, Poindexter was plucked from his mustang's back.

He rolled in the grass behind the startled horse.

A fierce oath broke from his lips.

But he was not greatly alarmed for the moment. He had been roped in, but he could only think that it was a freak of some drunken cowboy.

He scrambled to his feet; but a jerk on the rope sent him reeling again, and he fell. He was not given a chance to loosen the loop that held him a prisoner.

The Rio Kid rode towards him, coiling up the lasso as he came.

While he coiled it, he kept it steadily taut, the noose as tight round the rancher as a band of steel.

Poindexter sprang up again, and again rolled over under a jerk of the rope.

He sat in the grass and glared at the rider who bore down on him.

His face paled as he recognised the Kid.

The Rio Kid dropped from his mustang, and, without a word, took another turn of the rope round the rancher and secured it.

Then Poindexter was allowed to get on his feet.

He stood staring at the Kid, his face black with rage.

"You god-darned fire-bug!" he panted. "What's this game?"

The Kid smiled.

"I guess I've cinched you, Jim Poindexter," he remarked. "I sure had a hunch to pull a gun on you, you durned coyote! But I reckon what you want is a rope and a branch!"

"You don't mean—" gasped Poindexter.

"Forget it!" said the Kid. "If I wanted to make it last sickness for you, I guess I'd have pulled a gun. No, sir! I ain't stringing you up on this riata! I'm taking you where you belong! The Gunsight galoots are going to string you up."

"Are you mad?" hissed Poindexter. "You dare not ride into Gunsight!"

"I guess I'm putting you on your cayuse and taking you into town," answered the Kid coolly. "The Gunsight galoots won't have any hunch to get mad with me when I hand over to them the outlaw who's been raising Cain in this section and shot up their town marshal."

"You think—"

"I guess I know!" chuckled the Kid. "After I found that your grey mustang had had his shoulder painted black I reckon I was put wise. You're the fire-bug that borrowed my name, Poker Poindexter—and before sundown all Gunsight will know it!"

Poindexter stared at him.

"You reckon you'll get away with a yarn like that?" he panted. "I'm known in Gunsight; I've a crowd of friends there. You ride into the town and you'll be shot at sight!"

"I guess I'm taking the risk."

"You're mad!" hissed Poindexter. "You figure that any man in Gunsight will believe a word of it?"

"Sure!" grinned the Kid. "The hack's at Gunsight now; and I reckon the passengers will be able to pick out the drockets they handed over to you way back on the trail when they get a look into that grip of yours!"

Poindexter became pale as death.

"You see, hombre, I was around," grinned the Kid. "I saw the whole game, though I was too far away to chip in. I've been waiting for you to come back across the ford."

The rancher could not speak.

He knew now that it was not suspicion on the Kid's part. The puncher from Rio knew!

In the bag buckled to the rancher's belt were more than a thousand dollars he had taken from the passengers of the Claro hack. Some of the bills, at least, could be identified by the owners if inspected before they were placed in circulation.

Every man who had travelled in the hack was now in Gunsight, telling the story of the robbery on the trail. Every one of them could be called on to identify his property.

Poindexter's brain was in a whirl. With reckless hardihood he had faced the dangers of a trail bandit, relying on the speed of his horse and his skill with his gun to save him while he was on a raid, and on the borrowed name

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of the Kid to protect him from suspicion. But he had never dreamed of a danger like this. For the moment the desperate rascal was unnerved.

He found his voice at last.

"You durned geek!" he muttered hoarsely. "You won't have time to tell that yarn in Gunsight. You'll be shot up before you can get it loose."

The Kid nodded.

"I allow there's a big risk" he assented. "The galoots are apt to be sudden on the shoot, after the way you've raised Cain in my name, you coyote. But I guess I'm taking the risk. I ain't letting this section believe that the Rio Kid has been robbing and shooting around here."

"You're mad!" panted Poindexter. "Look here, what is it to you, anyhow? You're an outlaw."

"Right, in once," agreed the Kid.

"I guess I'll share with you," muttered Poindexter. "I guess you can take the boodle, if you want. That's enough for you."

"It sure ain't enough," said the Kid.

"I ain't touching stolen money, Jim Poindexter."

"And you an outlaw, wanted by all the sheriffs in Texas!" sneered the rancher.

"Right again," said the Kid cheerfully. "But I reckon I never wanted to be an outlaw hombre, and it was jest my durned luck. You've given me a bad name in this section, and I guess you're going to set it right."

"Dog-gone you—"

"I guess I ain't roped you in jest to chew the rag with you, feller," said the Kid. "You want to get on that hoss and hit the trail for Gunsight along with me."

He swung the rancher to the back of the grey mustang. A length of trail-rope secured Poindexter to the saddle.

With the riata in his grasp, the Rio Kid mounted his own horse and headed for Gunsight, leading his prisoner.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Fallen Among Foes!

THE Rio Kid's face was thoughtful as he rode across the prairie at an easy gallop, in the direction of the cow-town on the Rio Claro.

He was well aware of the risk he was running.

There were a heap of galoots in the cow-town who knew the Rio Kid by sight, and it was likely enough that guns would be drawn at the first glimpse of him. Poindexter, unsuspected in the cow-town, had friends there—plenty of them. It was quite on the cards that the Kid might be fighting for his life before he had a chance to tell the Gunsight men what he had come to tell them.

But it was the only way to clear his name of the black stain that the secret bandit had brought upon it. To deliver up the bandit, with the goods on him, was the only way, and the Kid had to take the risk.

He reckoned, too, that his act of riding into the cow-town and placing himself at the mercy of the citizens would be likely to get him a chance of speaking out before the trouble began. Once he was able to put the Gunsight crowd wise, all was well. He had only to make it clear that he was not the man who had been robbing and shooting on the trails, and to reveal the guilt of Poker Poindexter. Once Gunsight was convinced of the truth he would have friends there, instead of foes.

But there was plenty of danger in the enterprise, and the Kid knew it, though he did not shrink from it.

Poindexter's face was white as chalk as he rode, a bound prisoner, at the end of the lasso.

His adoption of the Kid's name had saved him from the faintest breath of suspicion, but it had been his undoing at the finish by bringing the Kid himself into the game. That was a danger of which he had never dreamed.

If the Kid had time to speak out he had no hope of escape. The stolen money was on him, and other evidence of the truth, as the Kid guessed easily enough. The materials with which he disguised his horse were hidden in his saddle-bags there was a black mask in an inside pocket. No hope—if the Kid had time to speak out. He could only hope that some hot-headed hombre would fire on the Kid before the toy outlaw had time to speak. And that hope was a frail reed to lean upon.

But in the depths of despair a sudden flash of hope came to the desperate rancher.

Ahead, on the grassy prairie, three Stetson hats bobbed over the high grass.

Three cow-punchers had emerged into sight from behind a timber island, and were riding directly towards them. One of them, a burly puncher, Poindexter recognised instantly as Tex Clew, the foreman of his own ranch, and the others were members of his outfit.

"Oh, shucks!" ejaculated the Kid.

He recognised the punchers at the same moment.

They had sighted the pair of riders and were galloping down on them, each man with a gun in his hand.

The Kid gritted his teeth.

He looped the riata to his saddle-bow and jerked the walnut-butted guns from his holsters. The crack of a revolver rang from the distance, and a bullet whizzed overhead. Tex Clew, and Mo-have, and Sandy Jones had seen their boss, a bound prisoner, and Tex had recognised the Kid. The three punchers were galloping to the rescue, and they fired as they came.

Three to one, as the foes were, the Kid would have had little fear of a combat. But he did not want to fire on cow-punchers—men with whom all his own sympathies lay. The Kid was in an awkward corner.

He dropped from his horse, and stood behind the halted horse of the rancher. The oncoming cowboys ceased to fire. They could not hit the Kid without sending their bullets through their boss.

The three riders separated, to circle round the Kid and his prisoner.

The Kid waved his hand.

"Hold on, you-uns!" he shouted.

They were within hearing of his voice now.

"You pesky fire-bug!" roared Tex. "I guess we've got you dead to rights now. Come out from behind Mr. Poindexter, you white-livered skunk!"

"You durned mosshad!" retorted the Kid. "I guess I could drop you like a ten-pin, if I wanted. Pull in your horses and talk, or I'll sure let you have yours."

And the Kid fired and the Stetson hat went spinning from Tex's head. It was a warning.

"The next goes through your cabeza, you durned bonehead!" shouted the Kid. "Hold in your hosses, I tell you!"

The three punchers reined in. There was no doubt that the Kid held the trump card for the moment. He was under cover of the rancher, and the punchers were full in his view and under his fire, and they knew the unerring aim of the Rio Kid.

"You let the boss loose, you pesky cow-thief!" roared Tex. "What you doing, roping in our boss?"

"You quit chowing the rag a spell and I'll sure put you wise," answered the Kid coolly.

"Ride him down!" yelled Poindexter furiously. "Shoot—shoot, you ginks! Never mind me—shoot him down!"

The Kid's hand struck the rancher across the mouth.

"Quiet, you!" he snapped. "By the great horned toad, you spill any more and I'll quiet you for keeps with the butt of a gun."

The three punchers, reining in their prancing bronchos at a short distance, eyed the Kid wolfishly. Only the danger of their boss kept them from a reckless rush at the boy outlaw.

"I guess I want to pow-wow with you-uns," said the Kid. "Heap time for shooting, if you want, later. You savvy?"

trail bandit. "Me. Help me! I order you—"

The butt of the Kid's revolver struck the rancher on the head, and he swayed in the saddle, half-stunned, and effectually silenced.

But at the same moment the punchers obeyed the rancher's orders. They came on at a reckless rush, spurring their bronchos, and firing. The chance of explanation was gone—and the Rio Kid had to fight for his life.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Gun-Play!

"DOG-GONE it!" breathed the Kid.

It was bitter luck.

Had the punchers heeded him for a minute more the game would have been in his hands. Not a man on

A bullet grazed the rancher, and missed the Kid by an inch.

The Kid's shot in return did not miss. Sandy Jones went headlong from his saddle into the grass.

"Dog gone it!" muttered the Kid.

Over the high grass in the distance five or six Stetson hats were bobbing in sight. The firing had been heard far across the plain, and other punchers were galloping to the scene.

The Kid, with a black brow, cast loose the lasso from the half-stunned rancher, who swayed helpless in his saddle. He mounted the black-muzzled mustang again.

The game was up and the Kid knew it. There was no chance of taking his prisoner into Gunsight now, and telling his tale. Nothing but a desperate fight against odds remained for the Kid, unless he hit the trail at his best speed.

CLOSE QUARTERS! The Kid dropped to the ground and stood behind the halted horse of the rancher. "Pull in your hosses!" he shouted to the oncoming cowpunchers. "Pull in, or I'll sure let you have yours!" And the Kid fired, sending the Stetson hat spinning off Tex's head as a warning. (See Chapter 3.)



"What you got to say, you geck?" snarled Tex.

"I got this to say: This here Poindexter rigged himself out to look like me and held up the Claro hack, across the river," said the Kid. "He's got the goods on him now."

The punchers stared at him blankly.

"You loco?" gasped Ted.

"Sure not!" answered the Kid cheerfully. "What you reckon I was doing with the galoot? I ain't roped him in jest for his company. I was taking him into Gunsight."

"Search me!" said the amazed foreman.

"I guess I'm ready to ride on, with you galoots in company" said the Kid. "Ain't that fair? You fellers ride with me into town, and I'll prove what I say to all Gunsight."

Tex burst into a laugh.

"You want to tell us that our boss is the fire-bug that's been holding up and shooting around this section for six months past?" he demanded.

"Jest that!" said the Kid.

"Waa, carry me home to die! I reckon you're plumb loco, if you mean it," said the foreman.

"Shoot him down!" screamed Poindexter. "I tell you to shoot him down! Are you afraid of one man?"

"Ain't told you not to spill any more!" snapped the Kid, as the punchers made a movement. "Another word—"

"Help!" yelled Poindexter, reckless of anything at the Kid's hands, in his eagerness to seize the last chance of avoiding discovery, and the fate of the

Poindexter's ranch suspected his secret, and had they known it, they would have seized him and lynched him as willingly as any other galoots in the section. And the evidence was there—more than enough to convince the most doubtful, had they listened to the Kid.

But to the ears of the punchers the accusation seemed utterly wild, and all they heeded was their boss' yell for help.

They came on furiously, firing, at the risk of hitting the swaying figure that screened the Kid.

Crack, crack, crack crack!

The Kid had to shoot now. He had to shoot or be shot down, and the walnut-butted gun came into swift action.

Tex Clew reeled in his saddle, and went plunging to the earth, and disappeared in the high grass.

The next moment Mohave plunged over, as his horse fell dead under a shot.

The Kid changed his position a little, to keep Poindexter between him and Sandy Jones, who was close to him now.

He wheeled his horse, and rode away to the west, spurring his mustang to a fierce gallop.

Mohave was on his feet again now, and firing. Bullets whistled dangerously close to the Kid as he galloped.

But in a few moments a fold of the prairie hid him from the puncher, and he rode on with set teeth.

Behind him came the thunder of hoofs.

Half a dozen punchers had ridden on the scene, and a shout from Mohave told them what was toward. Without drawing rein, they galloped on in pursuit of the Rio Kid.

Twice they sighted him, at a distance, on the grassy prairie, and shouted and loosed off bullets, riding furiously in chase. The Rio Kid hit teeth set, his brow black, rode his hardest, with the bunch of punchers in hot pursuit.

"They'll sure get him!" panted Mohave, staring after the chase till it disappeared in the distance over the rolling prairie.

"Get me loose, Mohave!" panted Poindexter.

"Sure, boss!"

The puncher ran to him and loosed the trail rope that bound him to his saddle.

Poindexter, with dizzy head, stared after the chase. It was vanishing into the distance to the west.

"They'll get him, boss!" said Mohave. Poindexter did not feel so sure of that.

But the Rio Kid was gone, whether he escaped or not, and the secret bandit was safe. The dreaded accusation, with proof to back it up, would never be made in the plaza of Gunsight.

Mohave eyed his boss curiously. "The galoot surc was loco," he remarked. "He's sure got suthin' agin you, boss, to spin a yarn like that!"

Poindexter gritted his teeth. "I'll make him pay for it!" he said savagely.

"You reckon he was toting you into Gunsight, like he allowed?" asked the puncher.

"Of course not!" snapped Poindexter. "He was heading for the chaparral, taking me a prisoner. I guess he was going to hold me to ransom."

"This here ain't th' trail to the chaparral, boss. I guess he was riding straight for Gunsight when we raised him on the prairie."

"Don't chew the rag, Mohave!" snarled Poindexter. It seemed to him that the puncher's eyes lingered on him, not with suspicion, but with a strange curiosity.

For, when the puncher had time to think of it, there was no doubt that the Kid, with his prisoner, had been heading direct to Gunsight. His way could have led him nowhere else.

That, at least, was a circumstance that was likely to be discussed in the bunkhouse, with curious surmises.

Poindexter would not have been sorry had the Kid's bullet killed Mohave instead of his broncho. Only too well he knew that all Gunsight wondered how he met his heavy gaming losses, and how he met the interest on the mortgage on the Poindexter ranch. Once suspicion was started—

"I guess the galoot's made it last sickness for Tex and Sandy Jones," said Mohave, and he turned away to look at the fallen men. "Gee-whiz! You, Tex, ain't you got yours?"

Tex Clew was staggering from the grass, passing his hand over his forehead, with a dazed look.

"Thunder!" he said. "I guess I've had a close*call! I reckoned I'd got mine, sure!"

He felt his thick hair. "Jest creased!" he said—"creased like an ornery steer!" They say that the Rio Kid never misses, but he sure missed me!"

The bullet had passed close enough to stun the ranch foreman. Tex rubbed his head thoughtfully.

"They say he never misses," he repeated. "Dog-gone my cats! I sure reckon he jest creased me, and never wanted to lay me out!"

"He's killed Sandy!" said Poindexter bitterly!

"He sure ain't," said Mohave, raising Sandy Jones from the grass. "He's jest creased him, same as Tex!"

"Thunder!" said the foreman. Sandy Jones opened his eyes, and started. He passed a hand over his head.

"That Kid is sure some hombre with a gun!" said Mohave admiringly. "I guess he can put his lead jest where he wants."

"He shot to kill, you geek!" snarled Poindexter.

Mohave shook his head. "I guess not, boss! I reckon the Rio

Kid wouldn't have missed three times now. He shot my critter, and he creased Tex and Sandy. He never wanted to kill."

"That's a cinch," said Tex. "And we was riding him down and burning powder at him! I guess this sure gets my goat!"

The punchers were puzzled. The masked outlaw who rode in the name of the Rio Kid had never hesitated to shoot to kill. Six Gunsight men had fallen to his bullets since he had ridden the trails of the Gunsight country. Yet the Rio Kid, with the punchers riding him down and firing on him, had deliberately spared their lives. They knew it—as well as Poindexter knew it.

"Thunder!" said Tex slowly. "That Kid allowed that some other hombre had been riding in his name, when I met up with him in the chaparral. I guess it looks as if he was spilling the truth."

"They say in Frio that the Kid never would pull trigger if he could help it," said Mohave. "Sho! If some ornery fire-bug has been using his name, he's sure made a fool of all Gunsight."

"Nonsense!" rapped out Poindexter. Tex looked at him.

"It ain't nonsense, boss," he said slowly. "We was shooting to kill, and the Kid let us off. He never wanted to spill our juice. That sure looks as if he ain't the fire-bug that's been riding the trails and shooting up galoots all over the section."

"It sure does!" said Mohave.

Poindexter breathed hard. From that belief, to belief in the accusation the Kid had made was only a step. It seemed to him that the eyes of the punchers lingered on the "grip" that was buckled to his belt—the bag that held the loot of the Claro hack. The Kid had said that he was the trail robber, and that he had the goods on him.

"Boss," said Tex slowly, "that kid outlaw was sure shooting off his mouth wild when he allowed that you was the fire-bug that's been raising Cain around Gunsight. No hombre on the ranch is going to believe that. It's sure pesky fooling. He said that you'd held up the Claro hack, and had the goods on you. There ain't a galoot in the cow country will take stock in that, and I guess you can make it clear, too. You can show up here and now that you ain't got nothing on you that ain't your own, and we can tell all Gunsight so, seeing with our own eyes, if that yarn should get round the town."

Poindexter felt a chill at his heart. There was evidence on him that would have made his own outfit string him up to a tree, if their eyes could have seen it.

He wheeled his horse. "I guess you're forgetting your place, Tex Clew," he said. "You want to remember you're talking to your boss!"

"I guess—"

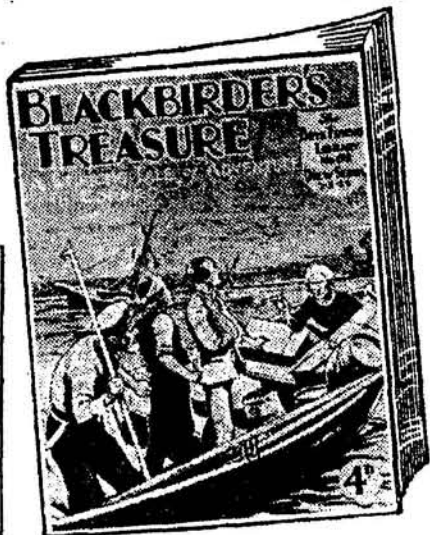
"That's enough!" Poindexter put spurs to the grey mustang, and rode away towards his ranch at a gallop. Tex stared after him, and then looked at his comrades. Their startled eyes met his.

"Gee!" said Tex, with a deep breath. The Rio Kid had failed; but he had not wholly failed. Poindexter, as he rode away, knew that he was under suspicion in his own outfit.

THE END.

(So far the Rio Kid has succeeded in his task of bringing the masked raider to book. But there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and lip, and the Kid has not yet finished his task. Don't miss next week's roaring Western yarn.)

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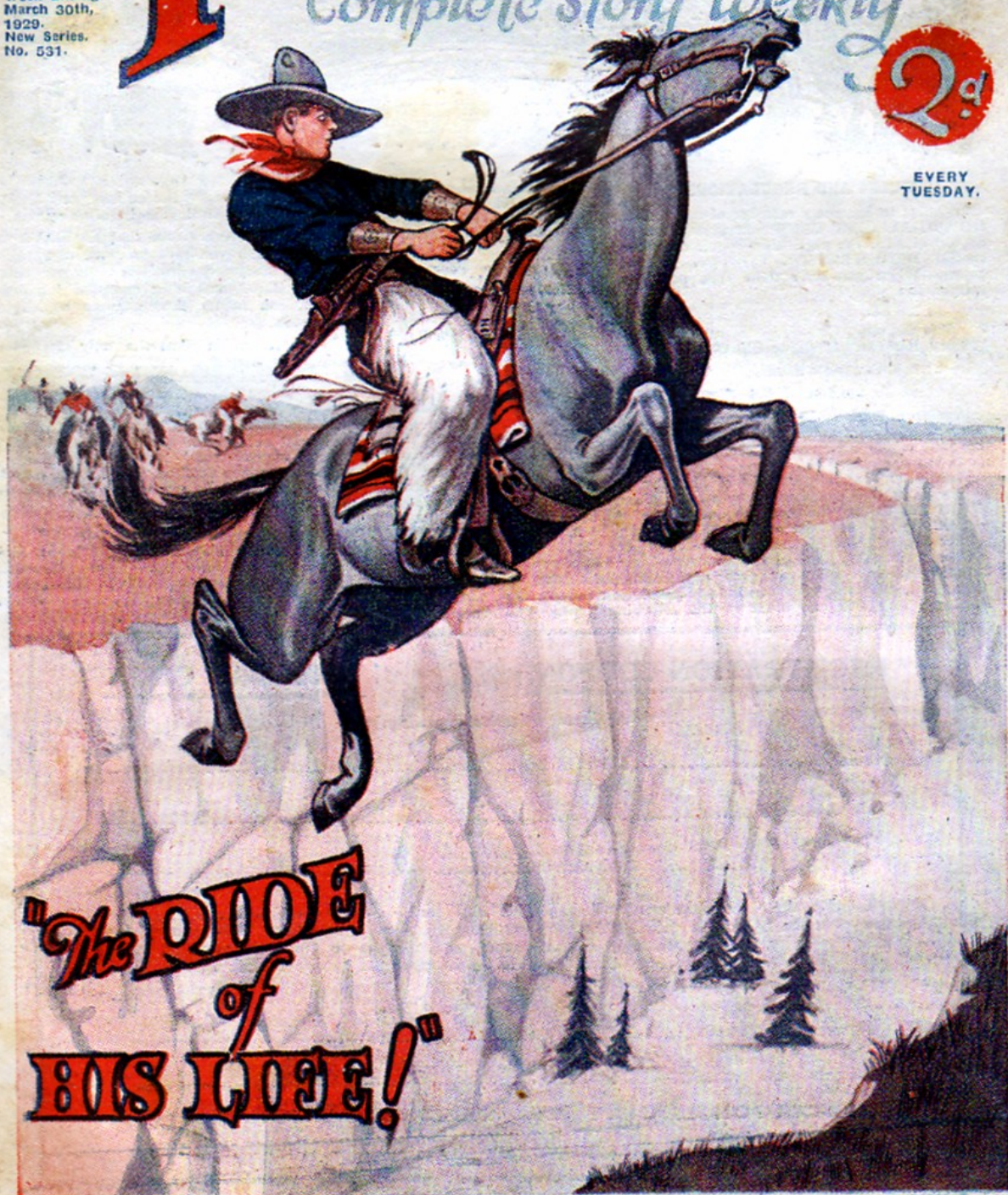
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Jud Blake, marshal of Gunsight, thought he had a simple task in tracking down the Rio Kid. But that was before he had met this dare-devil young outlaw!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The marshal of Gunsight eyed him grimly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"This hyer gun won't hurt you any, if you behave," said the Kid cheerily.

"I guess I been watching for a chance to talk to you, marshal. I heard that the Gunsight galoots had elected you marshal in the place of the pilgrim who was shot up, and so you're the feller I want to meet up with." The Kid grinned. "You been hunting me, and I reckon I've been watching you do it and waiting for you to put yourself where I wanted you—and that's here, under my gun."

Jud scowled.

For a week Jud Blake had been marshal of Gunsight, and that week he had spent hunting the boy outlaw.

Somewhere in the belt of chaparral that lay between Gunsight and Frio he was sure that the Kid had his hiding-place, and Jud aimed to root him out and take him into the cow-town to a necktie party. At this very moment, while the Kid held him up on the dusky trail, a dozen of his men were beating the chaparral for the Kid, some of them within sound of his voice if he shouted.

But he did not feel disposed to shout, with the Colt looking him in the eye

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

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

"You," said the marshal.

The Kid shook his head.

"Not by long chalks," he said. "You know Poker Poindexter, of the Poindexter ranch?"

"Sure!" said Jud with a stare.

"That's the galoot."

"Forget it," said the marshal.

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

"Sho!" said Jud.

He stared blankly at the Kid.

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

"You allow that it was me shot up the last marshal?" went on the Kid.

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

"Sho!" repeated Jud.

"Why, you gink," exclaimed the Kid



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

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

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

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

There was a rustle in the thickets near at hand.

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

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

Jud Blake stared after him.

"Shucks!" he muttered.

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

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

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

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

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

"You've seen him?" exclaimed Poindexter.

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"Sure! This way."

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

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Neck or Nothing!

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

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

His face was set and grim.

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

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

Danger and the Kid were old acquaintances.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Crack!

A bullet whizzed by the Kid's head.

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

The Kid gave his mustang a touch of the spur.

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

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

Crack, crack!

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

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

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

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

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

The Kid looked back.

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

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

The Kid's face set hard.

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

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

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

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

The grassy plain flew under the galloping hoofs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Poindexter laughed grimly.

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

"Thunder!" said Jud.

The Kid looked back again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Across the Barranca!

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

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

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

The forefeet crashed on the opposite bank.

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

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

But one second was enough for the Kid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Poindexter spat out a curse.

"Beaten to it!" he muttered.

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

A spattering of shots answered him.

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

Jud looked at him.

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

The rancher gritted his teeth.

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

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

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

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

He leaped up and rushed for safer cover.

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

The Kid laughed.

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

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

"Marshal!" shouted the Kid.

"Say!" called back Jud.

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

Crack!

The marshal gave a yell.

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

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

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

The Kid's voice rang out again.

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

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

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

"You, Tex!" called out Poindexter.

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

"Keep your rifle ready! That firebug will be breaking cover."

Tex granted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Trailing Back!

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

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

More than one curious glance was

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

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

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

And several of the punchers nodded assent.

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

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

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

The marshal looked at him steadily.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Shucks!" exclaimed Tex, suddenly

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They sure are!" said Pointexter.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The foreman was right.

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

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

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

THE END.

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

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of Schoolboys' Peril in the Desert!*

THRILLS GALORE!

With everyone against him, and ready to shoot on sight, the Rio Kid risks his all in an attempt to prove to the men of Gunsight that he is not the Unknown Raider for whom they are looking!



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Hands Up!

DON FELIPE SANTANDER dropped the black Mexican cheroot from his lips, slid his dusky hand under the folds of his serape, and grasped a revolver. His swarthy face set, and his black eyes glittered at the horseman who had pushed out of the timber into the trail ahead of him. Don Felipe had come into Texas to buy cattle, and was heading for Gunsight, but he was ten miles from the cow-town, and his way lay across a wide prairie dotted with timber islands. In the Mexican buyer's saddle-bags was a sum that might well have tempted the raider, who for months past, had haunted the trails within a wide radius of Gunsight. And in the horseman who suddenly appeared ahead of him the man from Mexico had no doubt that he recognised the raider. He slackened speed and rode his pinto on at a walk, the revolver gripped in his hand under the ample folds of the serape.

The Rio Kid glanced at him and pulled in his mustang.

The Kid was not hoping to meet up with strangers on the trails. It was better for his health to keep out of sight while he was riding the Gunsight country. But the timber had hidden the Mexican, and the Kid was almost upon him before he saw him. But there was nothing to alarm the boy outlaw in the sight of a Mexican cattleman, and he drew in his horse beside the trail and saluted the stranger civilly as he came up. The Kid did not think much of "Greasers," as a rule, but his manners were always polite.

Don Felipe halted within a few paces of the Kid. Over his pinto's head his revolver suddenly leaped into view, aimed at the surprised face of the Rio Kid.

"Thunder!" said the Kid.

"Not this time, señor bandit!"

grinned Santander, over his levelled gun. "Put up your hands, ladrone."

The Kid's handsome face flushed at the word.

But the Mexican's finger was on the trigger, and the gun looked him full in the face. Slowly, with a glint in his eyes, the Kid elevated his hands over his Stetson hat. For once the Kid had been taken off his guard. He had not looked for danger from a fat, swarthy Mexican cattleman.

"Say, feller, what's this game?" drawled the Kid. "You sure don't look like a hold-up man."

Don Felipe laughed, showing his white teeth through his black beard.

"You know me?" he asked.

"Not from Adam," answered the Kid, "and I'm sure honing to know why you're pulling a gun on me."

"But you were watching this trail for me?"

"Guess again," said the Kid.

"Todos los Santos!" said Don Felipe. "You cannot deceive me, señorito. You are the Rio Kid."

"Right in once," agreed the Kid cheerfully. "You figure on earning the thousand dollars they're offering for me at Rio?"

"No, señor. I figure on saving the dollars in my saddle-bags," answered the Mexican. "I have heard of you—they talk of nobody else at Gunsight. To-day you are riding without a mask on your face, but I know your horse, and I have been warned to watch out for you. Your description is well known, amigo."

The Kid knitted his brows. He understood now.

Once more he was being called to account for the desperate reputation of the secret bandit who was riding the Gunsight trails under his name.

"Keep your hands up, señor," said Don Felipe. "I am giving you time to say your prayers before I fire."

"Shucks!" said the Kid. "You

FRIEND OR FOE?

OUR ROARING LONG COMPLETE
YARN OF THE WILD WEST,
STARRING THE RIO KID,
BOY OUTLAW!

reckon you're going to shoot me up, you durned greaser?"

"Si, señor," answered the cattleman with perfect coolness. "I am not riding on to be shot in the back after I leave you. I know your ways, amigo. You have shot six men in this country in the last few months; but—por los Santos—you will not add another notch to your gun on my account."

The Kid breathed hard.

The revolver was steady; the Mexican's eyes glittered over it. He was ready to pull trigger at the first movement of the Kid to reach for a gun. The Rio Kid had been in many a tight corner, but he realised now that he was in one of the tightest corners of his life. But he was quite cool as he watched the cattleman's swarthy, determined face over the levelled gun.

"Say, feller," drawled the Kid, "you've sure got the drop on me, and it's your say-so. But I guess you want to let me put you wise before you begin burning powder. I'm telling you that I ain't the galoot that's been shooting-up the guys around Gunsight. That galoot is a rancher, who's borrowed my name to ride under. That's sure why he covers his face with a mask."

Don Felipe shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm giving you the straight goods, dog-gone you!" said the Kid. "That hombre paints his horse to look like mine, and sports goatskin chaps, and calls himself the Rio Kid; but if you saw him with his mask off you wouldn't see me."

Another shrug from the cattleman.

"You ain't taking that in?" asked the Kid.

"No, señor," grinned the Mexican.

"Dog-gone you," said the Kid angrily, "if I was here to hold you up, do you figure that I'd have a way to get the drop on me like that-a-way?"

The Mexican looked perplexed for a moment. It was not like the desperate rider who had been raising Cain in the Gunsight country to ride into a trap as the Kid had done.

But Don Felipe shook his head.

He was not taking risks. He had ten thousand dollars in his saddle-bags and only one life to lose. And the masked man who robbed on the Gunsight trails was ruthless, and few men in the section doubted that if he was seen without his mask it was the face of the Rio Kid that would be revealed. If the Mexican was dealing with the desperate bandit there was only one thing that could save him and his dollars, and that was to shoot while he held the drop. And that was what Don Felipe

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fully intended to do. If there was a doubt, he could not afford to give the Kid the benefit of it.

Neither could he afford to make an attempt to take the outlaw prisoner. The Rio Kid was known to be lightning on the draw, and half a chance would be enough for him.

"I am sorry, señor," said the Mexican with ironical politeness. "If, as you say, another ladrone has been riding under your name, you will suffer for his sins. I cannot take chances. I have but one life, and, carambo, it is dear to me! If you have a prayer to say, lose no time."

The Kid's eyes gleamed. The man meant to shoot, and the levelled gun was only six feet from the Kid. To reach for a gun was futile; there was no time, even for the lightning-like Kid. The Kid did not reach for a gun.

"I guess it's your say-so," he drawled. "You've sure got the goods on me, greaser. Shoot, and be darned to you!"

Crack!

But even as the Mexican was pulling the trigger the Kid flung himself backwards over his horse's tail and went with a crash to the earth, and the bullet that had been intended to crash through his brain tore a lock of hair from his head and spun his hat across the trail. It grazed the skin, and a trickle of blood ran down the Kid's face.

"Carambo!"

A swift leap saved the Kid from a second bullet that crashed into the sun-baked earth an inch from him as he leaped.

The Mexican had no time to fire again; for the Kid's fist crashed into his ribs like a lump of iron, and hurled him from the saddle with a stunning crash to the earth.

The pinto flung up its head and dashed away down the trail with empty stirrups swinging.

The dazed Mexican raised himself on his elbow, his right hand still gripping his revolver. But the Kid's gun was in his hand now, aimed at the furious, swarthy face.

"Drop it!"

And Don Felipe Santander let his revolver fall into the grass.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Not a Hold Up!

"CARAMBO!"

"Aw, cut it out!" snapped the Kid. "Swearing won't buy you anything, you dog-goned greaser. Thunder, I guess I've a hunch to spill your juice. Get on your feet and, if you touch a gun, you sure get yours so sudden you'll never know what hit you."



Here's one of the FREE GIFTS—a drawing set—offered to members of the Birthday Club, THE POPULAR.—No. 532.

Don Felipe scrambled up. "Put up your paws, feller." The Mexican shrugged, and lifted his hands above his head. He was at the Kid's mercy now, and still dazed by the sudden turn of Fortune's wheel. The Kid dabbed at the trickle of crimson on his face. His eyes gleamed at the man from Mexico.

"You dog-goned greaser!" he growled. "I guess there ain't a Mexican born yet that could put it over on me. But it's sure was a close call. And now, why shouldn't I fill you full of holes, you gold-darned geek?"

"Señor—" faltered the Mexican, his swarthy face growing white.

"Aw, forget it!" growled the Kid. "I ain't shooting, you darned locoed mosshead! Now, you figure that I'm that fire-bug that rides this section with a rag over his face, and calls himself by my name?"

The cattleman nodded. "Well, I guess I'll prove up that I ain't, clear enough even for a bonehead like you," said the Kid, his good humour returning. "You was hitting for Gunsight?"

"Si, señor."

"To buy cattle, I guess?"

"Si, señor."

"And you got a good-sized roll in your rags?"

Santander nodded.

"Well, you gold-darned gink, you can ride on to Gunsight, and take your roll with you," growled the Kid. "Pick up your gun, and get to your cayuse, and hit the trail."

The Mexican stared at him blankly. "Señor—" he faltered.

The Kid picked up the cattle-buyer's revolver by the butt, and shoved it back into the holster under Santander's scrape.

"I guess you'll want that, if you meet up with the galoot that's been riding under my name," he said.

The Mexican could only gasp.

"And I'll put you wise to this," added the Kid. "If Poker Poindexter, of Gunsight, knows that you're riding this trail with a big roll, you'll meet up with that fire-bug sure enough. I'm telling you that Poker Poindexter, of the Poindexter ranch, is the galoot who hides in a mask. You get me?"

Don Felipe stared. "It is to the Poindexter ranch that I go, señor, to buy cattle," he said.

The Kid laughed grimly. "Poindexter's expecting you to-day?" he demanded.

"Si, señor."

"Then you want to watch out, between here and Gunsight," warned the Kid. "I guess if Poindexter's wise to it that you're riding the trail to-day with a fat roll, you'll want all your luck to get that roll safe into town." The Mexican could only stare.

"But, señor—" he stuttered.

"Oh, quit chewing the rag, and beat it," interrupted the Kid. "I'm through with you."

The astonishment in the cattle-buyer's face was almost ludicrous. He could not doubt that his life and his roll were to be spared, as the Kid waved him away; but he did not understand. Poindexter he knew as a rancher who had sold him cattle more than once, and the Kid's accusation seemed wild to him. And though the Kid spared him,



and spared his dollars, he did not believe that the outlaw of Frio was not the masked rider of the Rio Claro. He did not know what to think; and he could only stare at the Kid blankly.

The Kid made an impatient gesture. "Beat it," he repeated. "There's your cayuse—beat it—and you can sure tell them jaspers in Gunsight that the Kid ain't the all-fired fire-bug they think he is."

"Si, señor," gasped the Mexican.

His pinto had stopped at a distance on the plain, and was cropping the grass. The Mexican started towards the horse, but with more than one backward glance.

Plainly the fear was in his mind that the outlaw was somehow fooling him, and he more than half-expected a shot to ring out.

The Kid watched him grimly. He had set himself the task of proving that the bandit who used his name was not himself. If he had doubted that the task was difficult, he realised it now: for the cattle-buyer from Mexico, although his life and his dollars were spared, still doubted him. Again and again the Mexican glanced back in doubt and uneasiness, his look betraying only too plainly that he believed this was some trick to serve some unknown purpose of the trail-robber.

He reached his horse at last and leaped into the saddle.

Instantly he set spurs to the animal and dashed away at top speed.

The Kid smiled a grim smile. The man was not giving him a chance to change his mind. The Mexican rode hard, and took a course that placed the timber island between himself and the boy puncher of Frio.

"The pesky gink!" growled the Kid.



A TRICKY CUSTOMER! "Shoot, and be durned to you!" drawled the Kid. Crack! But even as the Mexican was pulling the trigger, the Kid flung himself backwards over his horse's tail, and went with a crash to the ground. (See Chapter 1.)

in the cattle-buyer's saddle-bags were a prize that the desperado would never miss, if he knew—and he knew, since Poker Poindexter knew.

Suddenly, from the rolling plain ahead, came the loud bark of a revolver.

The Kid laughed grimly.

The Mexican's trail, before him, ran into a timber island, shadowed by big cottonwoods. And the bark of the revolver told the Kid that that

clump of timber was the cover the masked outlaw had picked for holding up the buyer, who was going to Poindexter's ranch with dollars in his saddle-bags. A gun leaped into the Kid's hand, and he gave his horse the spur.

"Old hoss, I guess we've got a cinch on that fire-bug!" said the Kid, and he dashed on at full gallop.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Man in the Mask!

"**N**UESTRA SENORA!" stuttered Don Felipe Santander.

He was taken utterly by surprise.

Danger, he believed, was behind him; and he was riding through the timber at a gallop, where the trail wound under the vast branches of tall cottonwoods, anxious only to put a greater distance between himself and the outlaw he had escaped. Danger ahead he did not dream of. But it was ahead the danger lay.

From an opening in the timber a horseman with a mask on his face emerged into view, with revolver raised.

Santander stared at him. The levelled revolver was a warning; but the Mexican did not halt. He drove the long Mexican spurs into the pinto's flanks, and dashed on desperately, risking his life to save his roll. The revolver rang, and the pinto made a convulsive leap, and crashed down in the grass. Santander was hurled half-stunned from the saddle.

"You durned greaser!" came a savage voice from under the mask, as the horseman rode closer, his eyes glittering at Don Felipe through the holes in the mask. "Put up your paws, you geck, afore I drive a bullet through your cabeza!"

The Mexican struggled dazedly to his feet. He lifted his hands over his head. His horse lay dead in the trail, killed instantly by the bullet that had crashed into its brain. The gleam in the masked rider's eyes told that he was inclined to send a second bullet crashing through the Mexican's head, and Felipe Santander knew that his life hung by a thread.

He made no effort to reach the gun, which the Kid had replaced in his belt under the serape. His dusky hands went promptly over his sombrero.

"Senor! Hold your hand!" he gasped. "I will not resist."

The masked man laughed scoffingly. "I guess you're wise, you god-darned greaser! I reckon you wouldn't live long, if you aimed to pull on the Rio Kid!"

The Mexican started convulsively. "The Rio Kid!" he gasped.

"Sure!" "You—you—you, senor, you are the Rio Kid!" stuttered the Mexican.

"I guess that's what they call me, to home in the Frio country, and if you've heard of me, you sure know that you better not play any tricks!" snapped the masked man.

"Por todos los Santos!" gasped the Mexican.

He stared at the man. He was of slim build, not unlike the Kid. The mark of his grey mustang was black; the animal looked a twin to the Kid's steed. He wore goatskin chaps, like the Frio puncher. There was a band of silver nuggets round his Stetson hat, the well-known sign of the Rio Kid. But for his late meeting with the Kid, a few miles back on the prairie trail, Don Felipe would have had no doubt. But he knew now that the masked man was lying; he knew that this could not be the Rio Kid, whom he had left behind him on the trail.

The Kid had told him the truth; that a secret bandit was riding in his name. Felipe Santander knew that now.

The masked man eyed him grimly.

"I guess I ain't no time to waste!" he snapped. "Jud Blake is riding the prairie to-day, I reckon, and I ain't no hunch to meet up with the marshal of Gunsight. I reckon I know you, greaser—you're Felipe Santander from Chihuahua, and I guess you've got a good-sized roll. Where you stacked it, say?"

The Mexican made a gesture towards the fallen horse.

"In them saddle-bags?" demanded the outlaw.

"Si, senor."

"I guess you want to sort it out, and you want to do it quick!" snapped the man in the black mask. "Pronto, hombre!"

"Si, senor!" faltered Don Felipe.

"Keep in mind that I've got you covered," growled the trail-robber. "You try any tricks, greaser, and you get yours sudden."

"I am at your mercy, senor," said Santander.

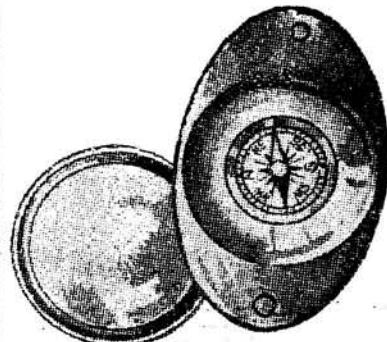
"Sort out that roll, pronto."

The Mexican stepped to the body of the horse, and knelt in the grass beside it. The revolver in the outlaw's hand bore full upon him, a ready finger on the trigger. The Mexican's manner was all obedienc; but there was a glint in his black eyes. The loss of the dollars in his saddle-bags meant ruin to the cattle-buyer; and with all his submissive look, he was prepared to take the most desperate of chances.

He fumbled at the saddle-bags. The horseman rapped out an impatient oath.

"Pronto, I'm telling you!"

"Si, senor."



A JOLLY USEFUL PRESENT—a combined magnifying-glass and compass, which is included in the list of Gifts for POPULAR readers. (See page 2.) THE POPULAR.—No. 532.

Through the holes in the mask, the horseman's eyes glittered to and fro. The trail, winding through the timber, allowed little view in either direction. It was a good spot for a hold-up, hidden from all eyes. At the same time, any rider on the trail could not have been seen till he was close at hand. And the outlaw knew that the marshal of Gunsight was riding the prairie that day—there was little that went on in the cow-town that he did not know.

He was almost feverishly impatient. "Pronto!" he snarled. "By the big thunder, you waste one second, greaser, and I'll lay you in the trail as dead as Abe Lincoln."

The Mexican submissively opened the saddle-bags. From one of them he drew a thick wad of notes, and the eyes through the mask glittered at the sight of it. He stepped to the horseman and held it up—and at the same instant he reached for the gun hidden under his serape and flashed it out.

The masked man fired instantly. It was a desperate attempt—and it failed. Before the Mexican could pull trigger, the masked man's bullet struck him down.

With a loud cry, Felipe Santander fell, his revolver dropping from one hand, the wad of notes from the other, into the grass.

The horseman glared at him over the smoking gun.

"I guess you would have it!" he snarled.

The Mexican sank back, with a deep groan. A crimson stream reddened the fold of the serape over his breast, and his dusky face was white.

With a curse, the horseman sprang to the ground, to help himself to the loot. At the same moment there came the thunder of horse's hoofs on the trail through the timber.

The masked man started, and spun round towards the sound.

The approaching rider was not yet in sight, but was close at hand, screened, so far, by the trees along the winding trail. A fierce oath dropped from the masked man.

A second more, and the Rio Kid was riding down on him, and the gun in his hand was rattling. But the masked man had already leaped back into the saddle, and dashed his spurs into the flanks of his mustang. Even as the Kid burst into sight and began to fire, the masked man rode desperately in the opposite direction, and vanished round the winding turn of the trail.

In the grass lay the wad of notes, unheeded, close by the nerveless hand of the man he had shot down. A second's delay would have sealed the outlaw's fate, but he did not delay the fraction of a second. He rode madly, plying whip and spur, and vanished from the sight of the Rio Kid round the winding trail, though, swift as he was, the rapid shots of the boy puncher went very close.

The Kid's glance turned on the man who lay in his blood in the grass of the trail. His impulse was to ride on in hot pursuit of the outlaw, to ride him down and force him to stop and fight for his life. It was the chance he had long sought, and swift as the masked man's steed was, the Kid would have relied on his mustang to win the desperate race. But as he reached the spot where the cattle-buyer lay, the Kid drew rein.

The outlaw had shot down the hapless man, and to leave him weltering in his blood, unaided, was not the Kid's way. Reluctantly he drew rein, and with the

fleeing hoof-beats of the outlaw still in his ears, bent over the Mexican. If the man was dead, it was but a moment lost—a moment that would be swiftly regained by the fleet-footed mustang. But a groan from the Mexican told that he lived.

"Dog-gone it!" growled the Kid.

He stood for a moment undecided. The hoof-beats of the masked trail-robber were faint in the distance now. He was riding madly to escape, and beyond the timber lay the open plain. A few minutes, and he would be riding the prairie, screened by the dotted timber and the clumps of mesquite. The Kid made a movement to remount his horse, but he turned back to the Mexican. Santander's eyes were fixed on him. The Kid could not resist that appeal.

"Dog-gone the luck!" he snapped.

"Senor," came a faint whisper from the Mexican.

The Kid sighed. To let his enemy escape was bitter, but the Kid would not stand for deserting a wounded man—perhaps dying. He dropped on his knees in the grass beside the cattle-buyer.

Santander tried to speak again, but his voice failed. He sank back heavily in the grass, and his eyes closed. The Kid, whose life had taught him something of rough surgery, stripped aside the serape and the velvet jacket under it, and examined the wound in the cattle-buyer's breast. That the Mexican would live, with care, was likely, but it was plain that only prompt care could save him. With his own neck-scarf, torn in strips, the Kid staunched the flow of blood, and bound up the wound. He worked swiftly and carefully, and all that he could do for the wounded man was methodically done; and while he tended the outlaw's victim the hoof-beats of the masked man died away in the distance and were lost.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Close Call!

THE Rio Kid rose to his feet.

He had done all he could, and he had saved the life of the Mexican cattle-buyer. But Don Felipe Santander lay senseless in the grass, and the Kid was perplexed. To lift him on a horse was to reopen the wound; all that could save him now was to be carried in a litter to Gunsight, where the cowboy doctor could tend him. But that was not in the Kid's power, and to ride into Gunsight to bring help for him was to ride into a hornet's nest.

"I guess this has got me beat!" growled the Kid.

But the Kid was not given time to think out that problem. There was a sudden shout from the timber.

"Put 'em up!"

"Oh, shucks!" ejaculated the Kid.

Three men had leaped out from the cottonwoods, and three levelled revolvers covered the Kid. Half-way to his gun his hand stopped, just in time to save his life. With a grim face the Rio Kid put up his hands and faced the marshal of Gunsight and his men.

"You sure win, Jud Blake," he said coolly.

"Keep 'em up!" said the marshal, finger on trigger. "We've got you now, by the great horned toad!"

"You sure have," said the Kid bitterly, "and you've sure got the big bonehead of Texas, marshal."

The three Gunsight men gathered round him—Jud Blake, the marshal, and Tex Clew and Mohave, of the Poin-

dexter Ranch. While the marshal held his gun almost jammed in the Kid's face, Tex and Mohave disarmed him. And Tex ran a trail-rope round him, and bound his arms to his sides. The Kid made no resistance. The marshal's finger was on the trigger, and a bullet through the head would have been the answer. The marshal of Gunsight was taking no chances with the Rio Kid. Not till the Kid's arms were bound did Jud Blake shove his revolver back into its holster.

"Cinched!" he said, with a deep breath. "You durned coyote, you're cinched good, with the man you've shot up at your feet! You sure ain't showed your hoss-sense this time, Kid. I guess you might have figured that that shooting might be heard, but I reckon you never knew we was riding the prairie so close. Cinched at last, Kid."

"You dog-goned galoot!" said the Kid. "You've sure sneaked through the timber like a pesky gang of Apaches, but you wouldn't have got me if I hadn't been the prize bonehead. You figure that I shot up that Greaser? You dog-darned looted gink, he was shot up by the man that's riding under my name, and I sure was here to help him."

The marshal grinned.

"You won't get away with a yarn like that, Kid," he said. "Durn my boots, you made me near believe that you was square when you talked turkey to me the other day, and allowed that you wasn't the firebug that's raised Cain round Gunsight. You sure did! Now I've rope you in good, and enough evidence to hang every rustler in Texas."

"It sure is a cinch," said Tex. "That galoot allowed that it was our boss, Jim Poindexter, who was riding the trails with a mask on his face, and here we've got him dead to rights, with the man he's shot up lying at his feet. I guess there ain't any more doubt, marshal."

"There sure ain't," said Mohave, "and I guess a rope and a branch is what the guy wants, and wants bad."

The marshal nodded.

"Git your riata, Tex," he said briefly.

"Sure!"

Tex went back through the timber. The Kid smiled bitterly. While he had cared for the wounded man, he had been caught in this deadly trap. The marshal and his men had left their horses and crept on the scene, guessing from the sound of shooting that there was a hold-up in the timber. And now they had him! The senseless cattle-buyer could not speak, and nothing that the Kid could say would save him.

"Jud Blake, you're a durned looted mosshead," said the Kid. "I'm telling you that I never shot up that Greaser, and if you look at him you'll sure see that I've bandaged him good."

"That won't let you out," answered Jud Blake. "If you've bandaged the guy, you sure shot him up first, and that's a cinch. Why, there's his dollars lying in the grass this minute."

"I tell you—"

"Forget it!" interrupted the marshal.

Tex came back through the trees with the lasso. He threw one end over a high branch.

The Kid's face paled a little.

"You ain't toting me into Gunsight?" he asked.

"I sure ain't," answered the marshal emphatically. "It wouldn't help you any if I did; the boys would lynch you on sight. But you're too dog-goned slippery for me to take chances with

you, Kid. You've been roped in before, and you've got clear—more'n once, I reckon. You're caught in the act, and you're going up, pronto."

"I guess you're in a powerful hurry, marshal," said the Kid quietly. "Wait till that galoot's able to speak, and he'll sure tell you that I saved him from the man who shot him up."

Jud glanced at the insensible Mexican. "We ain't wasting time on you, Kid," he answered. "You've shot six galoots in this country, and you've tried to put it on that rancher Poindexter—and I guess you talked so well, you near made me believe you was giving me the straight goods. You got the gall to stand for the same story, with that guy Santander lying at your feet? Sho! You sure take me for some soft Rube, you sure do!"

"Let him speak——"

"You make me tired, Kid," said the marshal. "I guess you get yours here and now, pronto. Put that rope on him, Tex."

"You bet!" grinned Tex.

"Oh, search me," said the Kid. "It sure gets my goat to go up at the hands of a bunch of prize boobs, it sure does! Go ahead with the funeral, marshal, and be darned to you!"

There was a groan from the wounded Mexican. His black eyes opened, and stared wildly on the scene.

A flush of hope came into the Kid's

face. His eyes fixed anxiously on the wounded man.

"You sure seem hard hit, Santander," said the marshal. "But I guess we'll get you to a doc when we're through with this galoot. You're going to see him strung up."

The Mexican started.

"Senor! He saved my life!" he gasped

"You mean to say it wasn't this galoot shot you up?" roared the marshal of Gunsight.

"No, senor!"

"Waal, carry me home to die!"

"It was a masked man—who called himself the Rio Kid," said the Mexican faintly. "He shot me—and this hombre came to my aid! He bound up my wound—he saved me——"

"Dog-gone my cats!" said Jud. He scratched his head, perplexed. "This here galoot is the Rio Kid, Santander."

"I know! The man who shot me up called himself by the same name!" said the cattle-buyer. "He was masked—he rode for his life when this hombre came up——"

The Mexican had half-raised himself in his eagerness.

"He is the Rio Kid, but he saved me from the outlaw!" he said faintly.

"If I live I owe him my life."

There was a long silence. The marshal of Gunsight looked at the Kid, and then slowly threw aside the riata. He made a sign to Tex, who released

the boy puncher's arms. The marshal pointed to the Kid's horse.

"Beat it!" he said laconically.

The Kid smiled.

"I reckon you're wise to it now, marshal, that I ain't the pesky fire-bug that's called himself by my name," he said.

"I guess that's proved," answered the marshal. "There's sheriffs in Texas that want to rope you in, Kid, but I guess that ain't my funeral. You ain't the fire-bug we want, and you've got into this cinch by helping a man what was shot up by that fire-bug. I reckon I ain't got no grouch agin you. There's your hoss, and there's your guns—and you want to hit the trail." Jud Blake hesitated a moment, and then held out his hand. "Shake, and beat it!"

While the marshal and his men were making a litter of branches to carry the wounded Mexican to the cow-town, the Rio Kid rode out of the timber. That night, all Gunsight heard the news, and knew, beyond doubt, that the masked outlaw who had made himself the terror of the section was not the Rio Kid. But who he was was still unknown—though the Kid was resolved that it should be known, before he rode out of the Gunsight country.

THE END.

(Don't miss—"THE RAIDER'S LAST TRAIL!" next week's roaring long complete story of the Rio Kid. It's full of thrills.)

This Week's List of Birthday Dates!

Claim one of our topping gifts if you were born on any of the dates published below!

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- Leather Pocket Wallet.
- Hobby Annual.
- Holiday Annual.

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- November 13th, 1914.
- January 4th, 1914.
- May 1st, 1915.
- March 10th, 1912.
- September 9th, 1909.
- December 5th, 1918.
- June 26th, 1913.
- February 20th, 1916.
- July 30th, 1915.
- August 23rd, 1917.
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THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Under Suspicion!

POKER POINDEXTER rode into the cow-town of Gunsight from the prairie trail.

It was sundown; and shadows were lengthening in the dusty street. Already the naphtha lamps of the Four Aces saloon were alight.

The rancher checked his grey mustang, as he came within the radius of light from the saloon. The Four Aces had an almost irresistible attraction for the most inveterate gambler in the Rio Claro country. But he did not halt. He rode on up the street to Blake's shack. Many curious glances were turned on him as he rode. The Gunsight men returned his greetings as he passed them, but in almost every man's look was something that the rancher did not fail to notice, something that hinted of doubt and reserve.

Jud Blake, the marshal of Gunsight, was seated on a bench outside his shack, smoking his pipe, and staring thoughtfully down the dusty street. He watched the rancher curiously as he rode up. Poindexter pulled rein, and dismounted, throwing his reins over a post.

"Evenin', Jud!"

The marshal gave him a curt nod.

"I guess I've been expecting to hear from you, Jud!" said Poindexter.

"Sho!" said the marshal.

"It's near a week since we was on the trail of that fire-bug from Frio, the Rio Kid. You ain't letting up on him, I reckon?"

"I guess I ain't honing to rope in that Kid!" answered Jud Blake. "I ain't wanting to see him any."

"You ain't wanting to see the galoot that shot up the last marshal of this burg?" said Poindexter. "I guess I'm ready to take the trail with my outfit, when you give the word, Jud. You don't reckon the Kid has hit the trail out of this section?"

"Nope."

"Then why ain't you trailing him?" demanded the rancher, knitting his brows. "You ain't figuring to let him run loose?"

Jud shook his head.

"I guess the Kid ain't the man we want, Poindexter," he answered slowly. "That masked galoot that's shot up half a dozen guys in this section ain't the Kid. He's rode under the Kid's name, and he had us all fooled for a long time; but we're sure wise to it now. He ain't the Kid, and never was."

"Quit fooling!" snapped Poindexter. "You ain't taking the word of an outlaw that's wanted by half the sheriffs in Texas?"

"I guess it's proved up," said the marshal stolidly. "The Kid chipped in when that masked guy shot up San-

The Rio Kid vowed he would unmask the Unknown Raider, and with relentless cunning he has stuck to his task. And now—fortune favours his daredevil adventurer of Texas!

tander, the Mexican cattle-buyer. I guess he can't be two people at once, Poindexter. He sure saved that Greaser's life after he was shot up. That fire-bug fooled us good by calling himself by the Kid's name. But we're wise to his trick now."

"You don't believe it was the Rio Kid that's been riding the trails with a mask on his face?"

"Sure not."

"What you reckon the Kid's doing in this country, then?" demanded the rancher.

"I guess he's hunting for the galoot that's been using his name," answered the marshal—"and that's the galoot we want, too. I sure know now that if we want the fire-bug who's been raising Cain in this section we want to look noener homo for him."

Poindexter breathed hard.

"So that's your idea, Jud?"

"Yep!"

"And you've let up on the Rio Kid?"

"Sure."

"He's got you fooled!" sneered Poindexter.

"Forgot it!" answered Jud. "That masked guy, who called himself by the Kid's name, shot up Santander, and the Kid came along in time to save the Greaser's life. That proves it up. Dog-gone it, Poindexter, you know it as well as I do. What you giving me?"

The rancher's eyes gleamed at him.

"And you got an idea who the fire-bug is, if he ain't the Kid?" he asked. Jud did not reply to that.

"That outlaw's been telling the world that I'm the man," said Poindexter. "He's shouted it out, and all Gunsight's wise to it. You reckon so, Jud?"

The marshal shrugged his shoulders.

"If I reckoned so, Poindexter, you wouldn't be standing there chewing the rag," he answered. "You'd be swinging from a cottonwood at the end of a riata."

"That means that you don't believe it?"

"Sure, I don't."

"The boys have been giving me the marble-eye, and you sure didn't look all-fired pleased to see me, Jud," said the rancher, with a sneer.

Jud looked at him directly.

"I'll give you straight talk, Poindexter. You ain't exactly under suspicion, on an outlaw's word, but—"

"But what?" sneered the rancher.

"I guess this here burg wants to know," said Jud slowly. "Some galoot has been robbing and shooting, and using the Rio Kid's name as cover. I guess that was to save his own hide. The Kid's shouted out that you're the man. Well, whoever the man is, I reckon he's some galoot that belongs to this section—some galoot that wanted the money he's raised on the trails."

THE POPULAR.—No. 533.

Every man in Gunsight knows that you lose more money at poker and faro than your ranch ever earned. I've seen you lose two thousand dollars in the Four Aces, and you sure never raised the money on your ranch. Where did you raise it, feller?"

"That's my business."
The marshal nodded.
"Sure!" he assented. "But you can't blame the boys for wondering a few whether there may be suthin' in what the Kid's shouted out. Dollars don't grow on mesquite-bushes, and they ain't picked up in the arroyos. There's another thing—"

He paused.
"Spill it!" sneered the rancher.
"That Mexican galoot, Santander, was coming to your ranch to buy cattle, with ten thousand dollars in his rags. He was held up on the trail. You was wise to it that he was coming along with the dollars."

"Meaning that I laid for him on the trail?"
"I ain't saying so," answered Jud. "But s'pose he had got to your ranch with the dollars? You ain't any cattle to sell. Every longhorn on your ranch is under mortgage. It sure looks—"

He broke off again.
"I ain't taking the Kid's word that you're the man," he said. "But it don't look quite square, Poindexter; and you can't blame the boys if they look cross-eyed at you."
"I guess they can look as they darned-well like," said the rancher sullenly. "I tell you, the Rio Kid's got you fooled. You're taking an outlaw's word against a cow-man that was raised in this country."

"I ain't," said Jud. "Not any! But it's a sure thing that the Kid ain't the man we want, and I'm letting him alone."

Poindexter swung away, and remounted his horse. He rode slowly down the dusty street of Gunsight.

His brow was black, and his thoughts bitter. As he came again in the light of the Four Aces, he checked his horse. For a few moments he sat in the saddle, staring moodily at the open doorway of the saloon. In the brightly-lighted interior, he had a glimpse of the poker tables and the crowd gathered round the faro lay-out.

If the rancher had thought of resisting the temptation that had already brought him to ruin, it was only for a brief space. He dismounted, hitched his horse with a dozen others to the rail outside the Four Aces, and strode into the saloon.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Kid Falls Among Friends!

"S"HO!" murmured the Kid. He backed his horse from the trail into a clump of cottonwoods.

From the distance the sound of hoofbeats had come to his keen ears, though no rider was yet in sight. It was morning, and the Kid was riding the stage-trail that ran between Gunsight and the town of Claro, fifteen miles away up the river.

The hoofbeats came from the direction of Gunsight, and the Kid prudently quitted the trail and took cover in the trees.

All the cow-town knew by this time that the masked raider was not the Rio Kid, but that did not alter the fact that the boy puncher was an outlaw, and that he rode the trails of Texas with his life in his hand.

Backing into deep cover, the Kid

peered out at the trail from a screen of thick Spaniard's-beard among the branches round him.

A bunch of horsemen came in sight, galloping up the trail from Gunsight.

At their head the Kid recognised Jud Blake, the marshal, and following the marshal came six men; all of whom the Kid had seen before—when they had been hunting him on the prairie.

The Kid smiled grimly. He wondered whether the marshal and his men were on his trail. They had hunted him long and hard in the belief that he was the masked raider who had used his name. But now that they were wise to the truth the Kid reckoned that they might surely give him a rest.

The horsemen came on at a gallop and looked as if they were going to ride past the clump of cottonwoods that concealed the boy puncher. But just abreast of it the marshal drew rein.

"I guess this will fix us, you-uns," he said.

And the marshal rode into the trees, followed by his men.

The Kid's hand dropped on a gun.

They did not know he was there, that was certain, for not a man touched a weapon as they rode under the cottonwoods. But in a few seconds they would know.

"Thunder!" exclaimed Jud suddenly.

Riding into the trees, he almost rode into the halted horsemen there. And the Kid, with a gun in each hand, sat in the saddle and covered the marshal, smiling over the guns.

"You looking for me, Jud?" he drawled. "You've sure found me, whether you're looking for me or not, feller."
"Thunder!" repeated the marshal.

Guns were gripped on all sides. But Jud did not reach to his belt. Both the Kid's guns were looking at him, and he was too wise to attempt to draw.

"You don't want to burn powder, you-uns," drawled the Kid. "I ain't honing for trouble with any of you guys, but if you lift a gun your town will sure want a new marshal."

"Forget it, Kid," said Jud quietly. "We ain't arter you."

"What you doing here, Kid?" demanded Tex Clew. "You waiting for the hack to come along from Gunsight?"

"Jest that," agreed the Kid coolly. "Gee, you aiming to hold up the hack, you dog-goned geck?"

The Kid grinned.

"You big stiff," he said good-humouredly, "if I was aiming to hold up the hack I guess I wouldn't put you wise about it. But I'm here to wait for it, all the same, feller."

"And why?" demanded Jud.

"I'm honing to get a bead on that fire-bug that's been using my name," said the Kid. "He's sure stopped the hack on this trail more'n once. I've been haunting this trail and keeping an

THE HOLD-UP! "Light down!" rapped out the masked raider. The passengers poured from the hack and stood in a row in front of the outlaw. "Now drop your guns!" came the next order. And they all obeyed, for they knew the reputation of this merciless man who had held them up. (See Chapter 3.)



eye open. I guess sooner or later I'll cinch him in a hold-up."

"So that's your game, Kid?"

"You've said it."

The marshal made a sign to his men and guns were holstered. The Kid eyed them warily, however.

"We ain't got no trouble with you, Kid," said the marshal amicably. "I ain't caring a Continental red cent what they say about you in Frio. While I figured that you was that fire-bug who's shot up six men in this section I was arter you with a rope. But that's sure cleared up now. We're arter that fire-bug, and I guess if you want to jine the bunch you're welcome."

"Marshal, you're talking hoss sense," said the Kid, and his guns slid back into his holsters.

"You watch the trail, Tex," said Jud.

"Sure!"
"I guess I'll put you wise, Kid," said the marshal. "I been chowing over what you've said about Poindexter. I ain't believing that a Gunsight rancher



from his outfit, sending a message that we're riding for the Rio Grande country to look for you."

"Oh, shucks!"
"I guess he believes, this minute, that we're the other side of the horizon," said Jud. "If he's the fire-bug you allow I guess he won't figure on seeing us on this hyer trail."

The Kid grinned.
Jud Blake declared that he did not believe the accusation against Poker Poindexter. But that plan he had laid showed that he suspected him deeply. Certainly, he was acting as if he thought it very likely that Poindexter was the man.

"Poindexter or not, the galoot knows all that goes on in Gunsight," went on the marshal. "I've spread it round that we're hitting south to the Rio Grande, and we sure started at dawn, and we've rode twenty miles round, to cover our tracks. Now we're here to see the hack pass—and we're follering on behind all the way to Claro. I guess if there's a hold-up we come on pronto."

"Jud, you've got a whole heap of solid hoss-sense," said the Rio Kid, "and I'm sure riding with you, and I guess if that bandit holds up the hack it will be the last hold-up he will ever handle on this side of Jordan."

"You've said it," agreed Jud.

There was a grim smile on the face of the Rio Kid. He had resolved never to quit the Gunsight country till the masked trail-bandit had been brought to light and the truth made clear beyond all cavil that he had falsely called himself by the name of the Rio Kid. Under that name he had robbed and shot without mercy, and the Kid had determined to call him to account. Long and patiently had the Kid ridden the trails in search of his enemy, and it seemed to him that it was coming to a cinch at long last.

For an hour the bunch of horsemen waited under the trees till Tex gave warning that the hack was coming.

They backed into deeper cover; but the Kid watched the hack, as it passed, from the screen of Spaniard's-beard. There were four passengers in the hack for Claro, and one of them was Don Felipe Santander, the Mexican cattle-buyer, whose life the Kid had saved. The fat, swarthy Mexican looked pale and worn. He was well enough to travel, but by no means recovered yet from the wound the masked robber had given him. No man in the hack glanced towards the cottonwoods, or had any suspicion that a bunch of horsemen were hidden there.

The vehicle passed on with a rumbling of wheels, a clatter of hoofs, and the cracking of a whip. After it was gone Jud signed to his men, and they pushed out into the trail.

"Foller on!" said the marshal.

The Gunsight men rode after the hack, the Rio Kid with them. Far in the distance the hack rolled on. It was out of sight, for the trail was irregular, winding here and there among clumps of trees, or belts of tangled mesquite,

From the distance came the sound of the driver's whip, cracking like a series of pistol-shots. But the sound grew fainter in the distance, and died away. Five miles had passed under the feet of the horses, when from far ahead came a sudden, sharp ring of a revolver.

Jud Blake started.
"I guess that's the signal."
"The signal?" repeated the Kid.
Jud grinned.
"Yes, Santander had it fixed to put us wise. Ride on, you 'uns!"
Gun in hand, the marshal and his men swept on down the trail.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Last Hold-Up!

"HALT!"
The stage-driver from Gunsight did not wait to be bidden twice.

The hack was ten miles out of Gunsight. It was the loneliest part of the trail that ran to Claro.

A horseman with a black mask on his face pushed his horse from the mesquite beside the trail, a gun in his hand.

The hack came to a swift halt. Every eye was turned on the road-agent as he rode up to the hack, revolver in hand.

That it was the "fire-bug" who had so long haunted the trails in the Gunsight country was plain. His grey mustang had a black muzzle. He wore goatskin chaps like a cow-puncher, and there was a band of silver nuggets round his Stetson. It was the bandit who rode under the name of the Rio Kid. And though all Gunsight no longer believed that he was the Kid, he rode now under the same guise as before. Whether he was the Kid or not, no man in the hack reckoned on offering resistance. Whoever it was, he was the man who had shot six men dead in as many months, and the sight of his levelled gun was enough for the passengers.

"Light down!" he rapped out.
The passengers poured from the hack. Don Felipe Santander stepped out slowly, and as he left the vehicle the masked man eyed him curiously through the holes in the mask.

"Drop your guns!" he rapped.
His revolver swayed, covering all the four passengers as they stood in a row in the trail. All of them packed guns. And they jerked the guns from their belts, and dropped them into the trail.

Crack!
One of the revolvers exploded as it was flung to the earth.
"Put up your hands!" snarled the rider.

The passengers' hands went up.
"Keep 'em up!" growled the trail bandit. "You, Greaser, I guess you're my mutton. You want to hand over your roll pronto."

"Si, senor."
The Mexican cattle-buyer slid his hand under the folds of his serape. It came out with a thick roll of bills.

The horseman's eyes glittered through the holes in the mask.

He took the roll with his left hand. Thud, thud, thud!

The masked horseman gave a violent start.
From the trail, in the direction of Gunsight, came a thunder of horses' hoofs.

The passengers turned eager eyes in the direction of the sound. There was a glint in the black eyes of the Mexican cattle-buyer.

is such a pizen skunk as to turn trail-robber and murderer. But I sure ain't satisfied. I guess it's coming to a cinch now. That Greaser, Santander, is well enough to move, and he's going in the hack to-day to Claro."

"Sho!" said the Kid, with interest. "And he's got his roll of ten thousand dollars along?"

"That's it. Since he was shot up he ain't doing any cattle-buying. He's hitting the trail back to Mexico now he can move. He's going to Claro to get the reglar stage. And all Gunsight sure knows that he's going, with ten thousand dollars in his rags."

"Sho!" repeated the Kid. "You've let it out to give that fire-bug a chance to wade in and grab it?"

The marshal grinned.

"Jest that!" he agreed. "I ain't believing anything agin Poindexter, but now there's a doubt I ain't trusting him any. That's only hoss-sense. Poindexter knows that Santander will be in the hack with his dollars. He don't know that this bunch will be on hand if there's a hold-up."

"I sure get you," said the Kid. "Marshal, if the galoot don't suspicion you none he will hold up the hack to-day for that bag of dollars."

"He don't suspicion me none," said Jud. "I've sure borrowed Tex there

The masked man swung his mustang round.

With the roll of bills still gripped in his left hand he rode away up the trail, turned from it, and dashed away through a belt of mesquite.

Thud, thud, thud! came the crashing of hoofs. Scarce a minute after the raider had fled, the bunch from Gunsight dashed on the scene.

Jud Blake drew rein.

"You Santander! He's been here!"
"Si, senior," grinned the Mexican. "He has taken my roll—the roll I had prepared for him. He will not find it of much value if he gets away with it. Todos los Santos!" He pointed out the way the masked rider had gone. "Follow him, senores!"

"Ride!" roared the marshal.

The bunch swept on.

"By the great horned toad!" said the Rio Kid, his eyes gleaming. "We've sure got that fire-bug this time!"

"Ride!" yelled Jud.

The Gunsight men swept through the mesquite. Beyond lay the open prairie, stretching for many a long mile away from the banks of the Rio Claro.

Far in the distance, riding hard, was a horseman, plying whip and spur to escape.

Fast on his track rode the Gunsight men. The quarry was in full view, and revolvers rang as they spurred in pursuit.

The masked man rode desperately.

The grey mustang responded gallantly to his urging. It fairly flew over the rolling prairie. But every man in the Gunsight bunch was riding a picked horse. They kept up in the chase. And one of the bunch drew ahead. It was the Rio Kid, riding as he had seldom ridden before. Slowly, foot by foot, the mustang gained on the fleeing trail-bandit.

There was a grim smile on the Kid's face.

His gun was in his hand; and more

than once he could have dropped the fleeing bandit from his saddle. But he did not fire. He was gaining, and that was enough for the Kid. He would not shoot the bandit in the back if he could help it.

The head of the fugitive turned; the eyes through the holes in the mask glittered at the pursuers. His arm was thrown up, and a shot rang sharply.

But it flew wild. A spatter of bullets from the pursuers answered the shot, and some of them whizzed very close to the desperate rider.

He drove on his steed with whip and spur. Far in the distance across the prairie a line of low hills broke the horizon to the north. The masked raider was aiming for the hills, where he hoped to find cover and escape. But ten miles of plain lay between him and that possible refuge.

Gallop! Gallop!

The Gunsight bunch rode hard and harder. Two or three of them trailed behind, dropping from the race.

But the Rio Kid was still gaining, though it seemed only inch by inch, and Jud Blake was almost level with him. Behind came the rest of the bunch, strung out, riding furiously. Far from the stage-trail, far from the sight of the hack and the passengers, the chase swept on over the prairie, mile after mile racing under the galloping hoofs; and, madly as he rode, the masked man failed to shake off his pursuers—and one of them, at least, gained inch by inch, foot by foot.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Lynch Law!

POKER POINDEXTER stared back, his eyes gleaming desperately through the holes in the mask.

He was riding like a madman; but as he drove on the straining mustang with whip and spur, he knew that the game was up.

He knew that he had been trapped.

The marshal of Gunsight and his men, whom he had believed to be riding to the Rio Grande, were behind him now, in fierce pursuit. The Rio Kid, whose name he had used, whom he had made the whole section believe was the desperate raider of the trails, was riding with the bunch behind him.

The game was up—unless the speed of his horse could save him, and he knew that it could not. If he could reach the hills, and stand at bay; if he could escape from sight long enough to discard his outlaw garb, and wash the black paint from the muzzle of the grey mustang—but he could not.

With ten minutes—five minutes at his disposal, he would have been safe. But ten seconds were not granted him. He was in full view of the galloping bunch. In full view of the Kid, who could have sent whizzing lead into his back had he chosen, and that he did not choose could only mean that he was confident of riding him down.

Poindexter grated his teeth with rage.

He had been trapped—deluded into holding up the Gunsight hack, with the marshal and his men ready at hand to chip in. He understood it now. The explosion of the Mexican's revolver, as he had flung it down, had not been an accident, it had been a signal. He knew it now: With bitter rage in his heart, he spurred madly on.

He had no mercy to expect if he was run down. One of his own men was in the pursuing bunch; but Tex would noose the riata for his neck as readily as any other man in the Gunsight country. He had robbed on the trails, he had shot without mercy, and if he was roped in, the penalty had to be paid. He spurred and spurred the flanks of the straining mustang streaming crimson under the cruel revals.

He looked back again.

The Rio Kid was gaining faster now, and the marshal was a little behind. Strung out in a long line, the rest of the bunch followed on as fast as their horses could stride. Poindexter's eyes blazed through the holes in the mask at the Kid.

But he dared not stop to fire. A minute's delay would bring the whole bunch riding down on him. He might kill the Kid, but a volley from the rest would lay him out on the prairie.

He rode desperately on. Only a few weeks before he had ridden with the marshal in pursuit of the Rio Kid. Now the Kid was riding with the Gunsight bunch in pursuit of him. It was a turn of fortune's wheel that he had never dreamed of. He cursed as he rode, gritting his teeth.

Whiz!

He heard the whiz of the lasso. Instinctively he bent forward, and spurred madly, and the whirling lasso dropped behind him.

The Kid coiled in the rope as he rode on after the fugitive.

Poindexter panted. The escape had been narrow, and the next cast of the lasso would not fail, for the black-muzzled mustang was gaining on him slowly but surely.

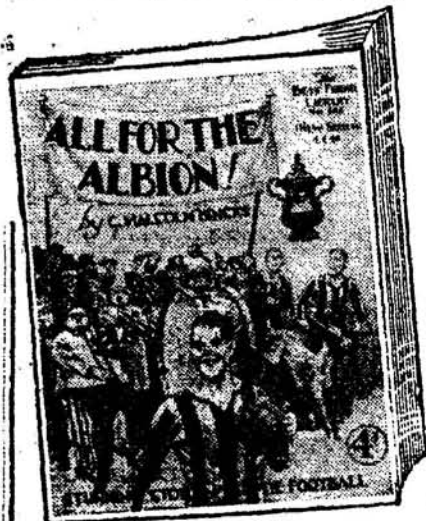
With mad rage in his eyes, the masked man whirled round his horse, his gun in his hand. Escape was beyond hope, unless he could drop the leaders of the pursuit.

But the Rio Kid was watchful.

His gun was ready.

Even as the masked horseman spun round and raised his weapon, the Kid's gun roared.

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Crash!

It was the tossing head of the grey mustang that received the Kid's bullet.

The animal went plunging to the earth, tossing the masked man into the grass as it fell.

He scrambled madly to his feet.

He was dismounted now, and hope was gone. The Kid's gun roared again as the outlaw scrambled up, and the revolver in his grip went spinning from a shattered hand.

There was a fierce yell from the masked man.

Wounded, desperate, fierce as a cornered cougar, he tore the second revolver from his belt with his left hand.

But it was too late. The Rio Kid was riding him down, and the crash of his horse sent the masked man staggering to the earth. The Kid leaped from the black-muzzled mustang, and his grasp closed on the man who was rolling in the grass.

With a clatter of hoofs and a yell of triumph, the Gunsight bunch galloped up.

They sprang from their bronchos, and hands were laid on the struggling desperado on all sides.

It was the finish. The marshal's grip was on one arm, the Kid's on the other.

Tex tore the black mask from his face.

Every eye was fixed on the face, convulsed with rage and fury, that was revealed—the face of the owner of the Poindexter Ranch.

"Thunder!" roared Tex. "It's sure the boss!"

"Poindexter!" yelled the marshal.

The Kid smiled grimly.

"I reckon I allowed it was Poindexter!" he said.

The rancher panted.

The game was up now; he was unmasked; and in the grim faces round him he knew what was to follow. Six men of Gunsight had fallen by his hand in his desperate career as a trail-robber, under the name and guise of the Rio Kid. The blood that had been shed had to be answered for. Already one of the Gunsight men was uncoiling a lasso.

The marshal made a gesture towards a tall cottonwood at a little distance.

"Put him on a cayuse," he said.

"You've got me," said Poindexter bitterly. "You'd never have got me but for that Kid! I'd go up willingly if I'd shot him up before I went." He ground his teeth.

"Feller," said the Kid quietly, "you're sure going to get yours, and I ain't no lurcher to rub it in. You've shot up men that was your neighbours, with a mask on your face, calling yourself by my name. I guess if my luck hadn't been good, it's me that would have been strung up for what you've done. You've sure asked for it, and you ain't got no kick coming."

"Bring him along!" said the marshal of Gunsight grimly.

The outlaw rancher, or the marshal's horse, was led towards the cottonwood, his arms bound. The Rio Kid did not follow. His work in the Gunsight country was done, and he had no lurcher to look on the grim punishment of the man who had placed his crimes on him, and who, at long last, had been unmasked and brought to justice.

While the Gunsight bunch led the bandit to his doom, the Rio Kid mounted the black-muzzled mustang, and rode away on the trail to the south.

Not once did the Kid look back.

By the time the Gunsight men were through with their grim work, and returned to the horses, the Kid was out of sight, swallowed up in the distances of the grassy prairie.

Jud Blake and his men rode back to Gunsight. Behind them they left the raider swinging from a branch of the cottonwood—his desperate trail ended at last. They did not see the Rio Kid again, his trail led him far from the cow-town on the Rio Claro.

The Kid was riding for the Rio Grande.

In Gunsight there were many who were friendly to him now, and who would not have cared to remember that he was an outlaw in his own country. The Kid, had he ridden back to Gunsight with the marshal's bunch, would have found friends there.

But the long arm of the law was still stretched out for the boy outlaw of Frio, and in his own land of Texas there was no rest for the Rio Kid.

The sun that rose on the prairie the following day found the Kid on the south side of the Rio Grande; over the border, in Mexico. The Kid had no love for greasers, and he sighed as he looked back at the land he had left.

But the Rio Kid was not the man to grouse. He had resolved to try his fortune in a new country; and, with a cheery heart and a cheery face, he turned his back on the border and rode into Mexico.

THE END.

(The Kid meets with another thrilling adventure. This time on Mexican soil. You'll all enjoy reading: "THE RIO KID IN MEXICO!" It's Ralph Redway at his best!)



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