

FIVE LONG STORIES and Every One a THRILLER!

The POPULAR

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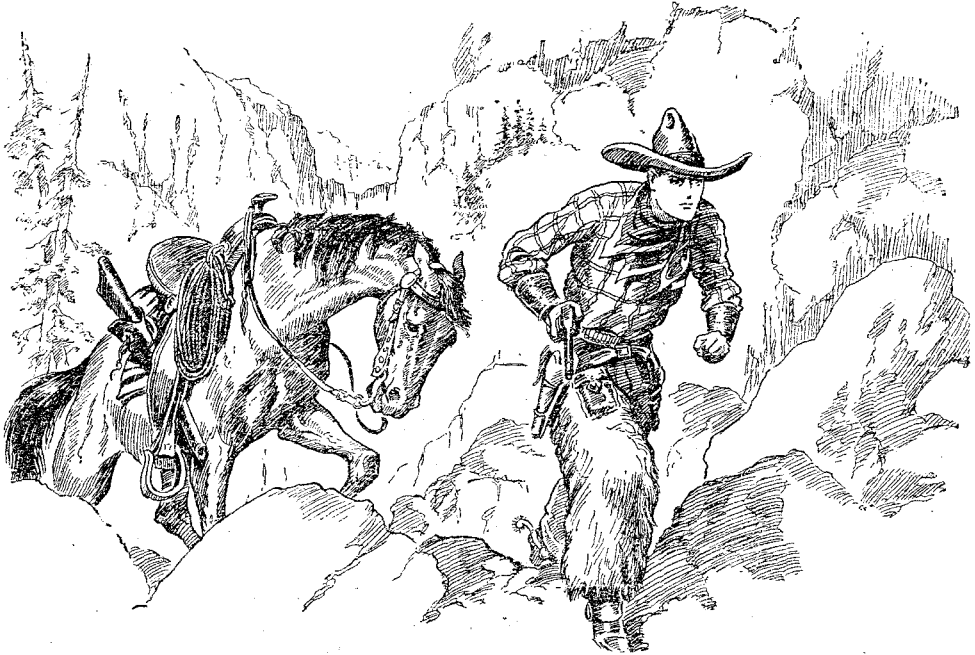
“THE HOLD-UP!”

A FULL-OF-THRILLS TALE of the WEST,
featuring the RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

THE GREATEST TALE OF THE WEST EVER WRITTEN!

The HOLD-UP!

BY
RALPH
REDWAY.



The Law has made the Rio Kid an outlaw again; its emissaries have driven him from his ranch to the lonely chaparrals; and the Kid, in his bitterness, vows that what they have made him he will be—an outlaw—a terror of the trails!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

On the Jack-Rabbit Trail!

"HOLD in your hosses!" It was a quiet, drawling voice. There was no excitement in it—no hint of a threat. But the driver of the Jack-Rabbit stage pulled in his team so suddenly that the horses almost rolled back on their haunches.

"The Rio Kid!" he ejaculated. He dragged on the reins as the horseman pushed out of the mesquite into the trail.

There was no need for the Kid to lift the long-barrelled Colt in the hand that hung at his side. The sight of the handsome, sunburnt, reckless face, in the shadow of the Stetson hat, with its circle of silver nuggets, was enough for the stage-driver. He might have chanced whipping his horses to a rush in dealing with any other outlaw in Texas. But he was not taking chances with the Rio Kid.

The Kid smiled sourly. From the window of the vehicle two or three startled faces looked out. But no weapon was shown. The passengers in the stage did not hone for gunplay with the Kid.

"I see you know me, Ribbons!" said the Kid, as the driver brought the tramping horses to a standstill.

"I should smile!" answered Billy Fresh, the driver. "Say, I ain't giving you any trouble, Kid—not by a jugful!"

"I guess it'd be the last thing you'd do this side of Jordan, if you did," answered the Kid. "Tell them guys to light down and pony up the dust."

Billy Fresh eyed him curiously.

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"Say, Kid, you holding up this hearse?" he asked.

"You've said it."

"It's sure a new break for you, Kid."

The Rio Kid shrugged his shoulders. Without waiting to be bidden, the passengers were descending from the stage into the rough trail. Scared glances were cast towards the boy rider, sitting in the saddle of the grey mustang, his revolver held down by his side. They knew the name and fame of the Rio Kid, and they knew that that long-barrelled, walnut-butted gun was ready to spit fire and death with lightning swiftness.

"Say, Kid—" went on Billy Fresh. "Aw, can it!" snapped the Kid. "This hyer is a new break for me, just as you say. I allow it's the first hold-up I ever figured in, but it sure ain't going to be the last. They won't let me be anything but an outlaw, and it's me against all Texas! And I'm sure aiming to let all Texas know that they'll heap better have left me alone on the Lazy O Ranch."

The Kid's eyes flashed. The boy outlaw was in a black and bitter mood, and that mood had lasted for days. It had lasted since he had ridden away from the Lazy O Ranch in the Packsaddle country, to avoid being rounded up by the Texas Rangers.

Wild as the Rio Kid's reputation was, wild as were the deeds laid to his charge, the Kid was at heart what he had always been—a cowpuncher born and bred, as in the old days on the Double-Bar Ranch at Frio. And the Kid had made an attempt to leave outlaw trails behind him—an attempt upon which fortune, at first, had seemed to smile.

But it was not to be. The Rio Kid was destined not to run his ranch—not to ride Side-Kicker on peaceful trails. Fate had been against him, and he had been hunted from his new home, driven from his hope of leading a peaceful life within the law. No man in Packsaddle could say that the Kid had wronged him; many had been proud to call themselves his friends; but the shadow of the past had fallen on him once more, blackening his fair prospects, and the Kid had had to ride.

He rode with a heavy and bitter heart. Wild tales were told of the Kid at every rodeo and cow-town; but the Kid, at least, knew that they were wild. Hold-ups and shootings, the deeds of others, were put down to the Kid. His name had grown almost into a legend on the banks of the Rio Grande. Fame had wronged him. But, in spite of what men had said of him, the Kid had remained what he always was, as straight-dealing a galoot as any in Texas, till now—

Now, as he rode once more an outlaw trail, a hunted man with a price on his head, after his attempt to throw the past behind him, the Kid's thoughts had taken a new line.

They had made him an outlaw again—they had driven him to the sierra and the chaparral, and the Kid, in his bitterness, swore that what they had made him he would be! If they would not have him for a friend they should have him for a foe, and they would learn how dangerous a foe. Outlaw, gunman, fire-bug, hunted for his life, why should he not live up to his reputation, and take the game as well as the name?

In that bitter mood the Kid rode the

Jack-Rabbit trail, for the first time, as what men called him—a fire-bug and a hold-up man. The die was cast. The Kid, at last, had become what he was called.

Sitting Side-Kicker in the trail, the Rio Kid watched the frightened passengers alight. His gun was ready, but it was not wanted. No man there was likely to burn powder with the Rio Kid.

"One—two—three," the Kid counted, as the passengers stepped out. "Put up your paws, you—uns!"

They stood in a row in the trail, with their hands up. The Kid pushed his horse a little nearer.

"I guess you've got another passenger, Ribbons," he said coolly.

"I guess not," said Ribbons.

"Can it!" said the Kid. "Jonas Sylvester, the boss of the Silver Star Ranch, got on this hearse at Injun Ford. I guess I'm wise to it, and I reckon Jonas has been selling cattle, and he's going back to Jack-Rabbit with a big wad. Tell him to hop out."

Billy Fresh grinned.

"You're too late, Kid."

"How come?" asked the Kid.

"Mister Sylvester ain't in this hyer hearse."

The Kid made a motion with his gun.

"You don't want to fool with me, Billy Fresh," he said warningly. "I'm after that hombre, and I guess I know he got on the hearse at the Ford. Say, you want this hyer shebang to get a new driver?"

"I'm telling you, Kid; you're too late."

"If that guy don't light down instanter, I'm sending hot lead through the hearse," said the Kid. "I ain't after that caboodle that's lining the trail. I want the boss of the Silver Star. Say, they've made me an outlaw agin, and I'm sure after big game. You get me?"

"I guess you can riddle the hearse if you want, Kid; but Mister Sylvester won't stop any of the lead," said the driver. "I'm telling you he ain't on the shebang now. You're too late, Kid. The hearse was stopped a mile out of Injun Ford by the Jadwin gang, and they've got him."

"Sho!" ejaculated the Kid.

He rode closer to the stage and peered in at the window. The vehicle was empty. The three passengers, standing at the side of the trail with their hands up, were all it had contained. Those three passengers—a storekeeper, a bartender, and a bank clerk, of Jack-Rabbit—were hardly worth any hold-up man's attention. Jonas Sylvester, the wealthiest rancher in the section, was big game, and he was the Kid's game, now that the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had taken to an outlaw trail in deadly earnest.

Billy Fresh grinned down at him.

The fate of his passenger, taken by force from the stage by a gang of desperadoes, did not worry Billy. To the stage-driver, passengers were merely goods that he carried at a fee. So long as his horses and himself were safe, Billy did not worry about the incidents of the trail. He grinned, as if at a good joke, as he looked down at the Kid. It seemed a rare jest to Billy Fresh that the Rio Kid should have held up the stage to go through Mister Sylvester, when Mister Sylvester had already fallen into the hands of a gang of hold-up men.

"Sho!" repeated the Kid. "Carry me home to die!"

Billy Fresh chuckled. "Your more'n an hour too late, Kid," he said. "Them guys—three of them—held us up a mile outside the Ford. They was after Sylvester's roll, and they sure was mad when they found that he'd banked the money for the cattle at the Ford. Yes, sir, Mister Sylvester hadn't more'n ten dollars in his rags, and him the richest man in Jack-Rabbit. I'm telling you that they was horn mad."

"Sho!" said the Kid. "And what for did they take the guy out of the hearse? What was the good of the guy without his dust?"

The driver chuckled again.

"I guess the Jadwin gang know how to make him spill dollars," he said. "Mister Sylvester will have to buy his skin dear from that gang. Bill Jadwin will sure make him sweat dollars."

The Kid smiled grimly. He could guess what the rich rancher's fate was likely to be in the grip of the most savage and lawless gang of desperadoes in the section. No torture known to Apache or Comanche would be spared to force plunder from him. Mister Sylvester, of the Silver Star Ranch, would have fared better at the hands of the Rio Kid.

Billy Fresh gathered up his reins.

"I guess I'm late for Jack-Rabbit, Kid," he said persuasively. "You going through them guys, say?"

The Kid made a gesture.

"I sure ain't picking crows," he said. "I stopped this hyer hearse for old Sylvester. I reckoned he'd have ten thousand dollars in his rags."

"That was what the Jadwin gang reckoned, I guess!" chuckled Billy. "And they was hoppin' mad! But I guess they'll sweat ten thousand dollars out of him afore he hits the Silver Star agin, search me!"

He grinned at the Kid. "You're sure too late, hombre," he said.

The Kid made no answer; he burst into a laugh. It was a ringing, good-humoured laugh. The Kid had a sense of humour. This was the first time he had followed an outlaw trail in earnest, and his intended prey had slipped through his fingers. The Kid was amused.

Deep in his heart, perhaps, the Kid was glad that it had happened so. It was passionate resentment, something like despair, that had led him to live, for once, up to his wild reputation. But Fate had intervened once more.

"Say, you ginks, you can sure hop into that hearse," said the Kid, with a gesture to the waiting passengers. "You ain't my game!"

The three passengers gladly took advantage of the permission. The Kid turned to Billy Fresh.

"You can beat it, Billy," he said curtly.

"Sure!" said Billy cheerfully.

The driver cracked his whip, and the stage rolled on along the trail towards the cow-town of Jack-Rabbit.

The Rio Kid, sitting motionless in the saddle of the grey mustang, watched it disappear. There was little in the handsome face to express his feelings; but deep down in his heart the Kid was glad that Fate had intervened, and that the hold-up had not been a success. He sat Side-Kicker and watched the stage as it disappeared, at last, in a cloud of dust in the far distance. Then, with a shrug of the shoulders, the Kid turned his horse from the trail and rode into the mesquite.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Way of the Kid!

"YOU pesky gink!" growled the Rio Kid.

He was speaking to himself. There was a cloud on the Kid's brow a glint in his eyes. He was angry—angry with himself, irritated by the thoughts that he drove from his mind and that would return.

From the Jack-Rabbit stage-trail the boy outlaw had ridden away through the mesquite at a gallop. But the gallop slackened down to a loping trot, the trot to a walk.

"You dog-goned geck!" growled the Kid.

Side-Kicker, once or twice, twined round his glossy neck, graceful as a swan's, and looked at his master. The horse felt the rider's hesitation and indecision. It was unusual for the Kid to be irresolute; but he was irresolute now, and the mustang was aware of it. More and more slowly the Kid rode, as if checked by some power outside his own will.

He drew the mustang to a halt at last, and Side-Kicker lowered his head and began to crop the herbage. The Kid, sitting idle in the saddle, communed with himself angrily.

"If you ain't the prize boob, Kid Carfax!" he said. "If you ain't the world's biggest bonehead, carry me home to die! Ain't you hit enough trouble, you god-darned gink, without hornin' into another guy's? Say!"

But it was useless for the Kid to argue. He knew what he was going to do. all the while he argued.

Rancher Sylvester, of Jack-Rabbit, had been his game. He had expected to find the rich rancher in the Jack-Rabbit stage. From cover on the trail, he had seen the stage drive out of Indian Ford, with the Silver Star rancher in it; and he had cut across country to waylay the stage half-way to Jack-Rabbit. He was glad that he had failed, he admitted that now. Driven to desperation by the persecutions of Fate, hunted by innumerable enemies, the Kid had figured that he was going to be what they made him. But there was nothing to it, he was not a hold-up man. Even had Rancher Sylvester been on the stage, he doubted now whether he would have lifted the rancher's wad. There was nothing to it, and the Kid realised that. And he had ridden away, realising that; but—

But, in spite of himself, his thoughts lingered on the rancher, a prisoner in the hands of the Jadwin gang.

The Kid knew the reputation of the Jadwins. Three brothers, the hardest cases in Texas: savage, lawless, ferocious; wanted for a dozen murders and robberies. He could have pitied even a deadly enemy who had fallen into the hands of the Jadwin gang. And Jonas Sylvester was no enemy. He was a fat old rancher, popular in the section, well liked by his outfit, and he had a wife and daughter at home at the ranch. The wife and the daughter the Kid had never seen, but his thoughts went to them now.

For he knew what was going to happen to the boss of the Silver Star. With such a prize in their hands, the Jadwin gang would not let him off lightly. They had kidnapped him from the stage-coach for what he was worth, and they would reckon that the rich rancher was worth a fortune to them. Somewhere deep in the trackless chaparral, the prisoner would remain in the hands of the Jadwins till he had paid for his liberty. He was said to be an obstinate man—a man of iron

will, and if that was the case, the Jadwins would not find it easy to wring dollars from him. But the Kid knew the methods they would employ to break down Sylvester's resistance. It was not the first time the Jadwins had played that game. A rope twisted round his neck, or his feet shoved into a campfire—the Kid did not like to think of it. And if he did not yield to their demands—death!

Surely it was no business of the Kid's. He told himself angrily and savagely that it was no business of his. The three Jadwins were deadly gunmen. Bill, the eldest and leader, reputed one of the deadliest shots in Texas; Sam and Mike Jadwin, both desperadoes, both dangerous foes. It was no business of the Kid's to come into conflict with that savage gang, for the sake of a man he hardly knew even by sight—a man he had aimed to hold up on the trail!

It was the business of the sheriffs who hunted the Kid—of the Rangers who had hunted the Kid from the Lazy O. They were the guys whose business it was to track down the Jadwins and rescue their victim. The Kid's business was to ride, while there was time to ride—to get out of the Jack-Rabbit country, out of the danger of being rounded up by the men who would soon be searching for Rancher Sylvester and the Jadwins.

That was the Kid's business, and he was not going to do it. He knew what he was going to do. The Kid's old weakness had cropped up again. He was going to horn into trouble that was not his. He had ridden the Jack-Rabbit trail to hold up Rancher Sylvester, and he was going to risk his life to save the man from the outlaws, for the sake of the wife and daughter who would be waiting, with anxious hearts, at the ranch. That was what the Kid was going to do. A strange enough outcome of his first essay as a hold-up man on the trails.

Long the Kid sat idle in the saddle, debating the matter in his mind, yet knowing all the time how the debate would end. He swung Side-Kicker into motion again at last, wheeling round and riding back the way he had come.

"It's you that's the prize gink, Kid Carfax," he said bitterly, as he rode back to the Jack-Rabbit trail. "Say, wouldn't this guy Sylvester put the riata round your pesky neck as soon as the next man? He sure would! Why can't you leave him to what's coming to him, you god-darned geck? Say!"

There was no answer to that question; only the Kid knew that he was not going to leave Jonas Sylvester to what was coming to him.

He reached the open trail, and rode in the direction of Indian Ford. A mile out of Indian Ford, Billy Fresh had said, the rancher had been taken from the stage. It was there that the Kid's trail began.

Side-Kicker's swift hoofs covered the ground rapidly. The Kid's keen eyes picked up the spot when he reached it. He did not trouble to dismount. He read the sign where the stage had halted, and where three horsemen had trampled the trail. He picked up the prints of the boots, where Jonas Sylvester had walked into the chaparral, a prisoner in the hands of the three riders.

Not a sign escaped the lynx eyes of the Rio Kid. There were few men in Texas so keen at reading sign. It was a game at which the Kid could beat Apache or Comanche. But he knew that difficulties would begin later. The Jadwins would look for pursuit, though not by the Rio Kid; they would blind

their trail the best they could. The whole section would be up in arms when the news spread of the kidnapping of the rancher. It would not be easy to track them down; but the Kid was the man to do it, if any man could. From the saddle, the Kid picked up sign enough to guide him, and he was about to ride into the chaparral, when he caught the sound of distant hoofbeats.

He looked along the stage-trail towards Jack-Rabbit, and smiled.

Far in the distance, from the direction of the cow-town, came that thunder of hoofs, and the Kid had a glimpse of bobbing Stetson hats.

Men were riding from Jack-Rabbit already. Billy Fresh had driven in with two startling items of news for the cow-town—that Rancher Sylvester had been kidnapped by the Jadwins, and that the Rio Kid had held up the stage. The Kid smiled grimly. The men who were riding out of Jack-Rabbit were, doubtless, riding to the rancher's rescue; but if they came on the Rio Kid, he would be their game. They were on the same quest as himself, but there would be gun-play if they fell in with him. He was taking the trail with foes before and foes behind.

The Kid shrugged his shoulders, and turned Side-Kicker into the thickets.

Through the tangled chaparral the trail left by the Jadwins was plain enough for a distance. The Kid followed it at a trot. The stage-trail disappeared behind him; the hoofbeats of the Jack-Rabbit outfit died away in silence. But they were coming on; they would follow where the Kid was following—so long as there was sign to lead them. But the Kid figured that that would not be long, and he gave little thought to the foes behind him as he pushed on through the chaparral.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Trail!

"S HUCKS!" grunted the Kid. —

More than a mile he had followed the Jadwin trail through tangled thickets and scrubs. For a time there had been the footprints of the man who walked among those of the three horses. But after a time those footprints vanished, and the Kid figured that the prisoner had been taken up behind one of the riders. Indeed, the Kid's unfailing eyes could pick out which of the horsemen had lifted the rancher, for the deeper tracks of the animal told of the double weight. Three hours at least had elapsed since the Jadwins had ridden that way, but the trail was more than fresh enough for the Kid—it was fresh enough for any plainsman—and he knew that the Jack-Rabbit outfit would be following it. But now the Kid had come to a wide stretch of stony ground, thick with alkali dust blown in the wind, and he dismounted from the mustang to search for sign.

He had expected something of the kind. He knew that the Jadwins would not leave a trail that any galoot in Texas could follow with his eyes shut. So far, a tenderfoot could have followed them, but from now on the keenest Apache might have been beaten.

Beyond the alkali plain lay a range of low hills. Somewhere in the hills the Jadwins had taken refuge with their prisoner, but the alkali dust told no tale. The tracks of the Kid's own mustang were obliterated almost as soon as they were made by the wind that tossed the dust in clouds ever shifting. If the Kid was able to keep on it would call for all his skill, and he reckoned that the Jack-Rabbit outfit would be beaten when they reached that spot,

It seemed, for a little time, that the Kid himself would be beaten. He tried to and fro, and long minutes passed; and a sound came from the dim chaparral behind him that told of horsemen approaching. The Jack-Rabbit outfit were coming on through the scrubs, and they would come on the Kid if he lingered there.

But it was not long that the Kid lingered.

Few eyes would have picked up the sign that guided the Rio Kid onward. But anything that was visible to an eagle's eye was visible to the Kid's. One broken twig in a sage-bush was enough, and the Kid rode forward at a gallop, the shifting alkali dust behind him washing out his trail as fast as it was made.

The direction was all he wanted, and that almost indistinguishable sign had told him. The Jadwins had turned at a sharp angle from their former course, aiming to cross the alkali plain diagonally, though a pursuer would naturally have figured that they had struck right across it to the refuge of the hills.

The Kid rode at a gallop, and the inequalities of the plain soon hid him from the eyes of the Jack-Rabbit outfit when they emerged from the chaparral at the spot he had left behind.

The Kid reckoned that at that spot they would be beaten, and he looked for no further following.

It was the task ahead that occupied his thoughts.

The Jadwin trail, if the Kid had picked it up correctly, lay almost parallel with the line of the hills. But at some point they would turn off to strike into the hills, and if the Kid missed that point he might ride on and leave what he sought behind him.

He slackened speed, scanning the ground, and at last dismounted and proceeded on foot, the patient mustang following him.

Overhead, the blazing sun of Texas poured down heat; the plain reflected the glare. But the Kid did not heed dust and heat. For mile on mile the alkali plain lay round him, dotted with dusty, scrubby sage, and here and there a gaunt cactus. And it was the broken blade of a yucca that told the Kid that he was still on the right trail; and later, a single hoofprint that the dust had not obliterated. An outcrop of stone, thick with dust, sheltered that single sign from the wind, and preserved it for the Kid's eyes, which gleamed as he scanned it.

"I guess them Jack-Rabbit guys won't pick up a trail like this, a whole lot!" chuckled the Kid.

He looked back.

There was no sign of horsemen on the plain. The men from Jack-Rabbit had been beaten, as the Kid expected, and as the Jadwins certainly had calculated. The Kid pictured them hunting for a sign that they would never find, sweating and cursing; he laughed at the mental picture. If the Jadwins and their prisoner were found it would not be by the outfit that had ridden out of Jack-Rabbit to search for them.

The Kid pressed on.

He had forgotten all his doubts and hesitation now—forgotten that he was horning into another man's trouble that did not concern him—in his keen interest in picking up the most difficult trail he had ever followed.

He picked it up, sign by sign and inch by inch. From that point the Jadwins had been less wary and watchful, certain that they had left no sign behind that any but a magician could have followed. Two trackless miles—trackless to any but the Rio Kid—lay behind the gang,

and they had felt safe. From now onward the Kid's hard task was easier. He picked up trampled sage, a burnt match, and a cigar stump—infinitesimal objects in the rolling plain, but not too infinitesimal for the eyes that found them. Where the gang had turned, at last, towards the line of the hills, the Kid turned, too; and now he remounted Side-Kicker, and rode.

Black and barren lay the arid hills before him, and in the rugged line was a narrow opening—a dark, rocky gulch, by way of which, if the Kid's figuring was not out, the Jadwins had ridden into the hills. The Kid's eyes were not seeking sign now; they watched the dark hills before him as he rode, and his gun was very near his hand.

Whether the Jadwins had ridden deep into the hills, or whether they were camped in that gulch, he could not tell yet; but he knew that if he was sighted a shot would be his first warning of it. His heart did not beat faster, but his eye was keener than ever as he rode towards the dark opening of the gulch.

He reached it at last, and rode into the opening—a split in high rocks, scarce six yards wide, rugged and precipitous. It wound away into the mass of the hills, and the eye could not follow its windings more than a score of yards ahead.

The Kid dismounted again.

Followed by his mustang, gun in hand, the Kid tramped up the rugged, rocky floor of the gulch. Suddenly, from the silence of the hills, came a sound to his ears; and the Kid halted, breathing hard, and listened. It was a cry that had reached him—the cry of a man in pain. It was repeated, ringing eerily down the rocky gulch.

The Kid's eyes glittered.

He made a sign to Side-Kicker, and the mustang halted.

The Kid moved on—silent now as a panther stealing on his prey.

Again came the cry—and again. It guided the Kid, if he had needed guiding. With his gun gripped in his hand, finger on trigger, the Rio Kid crept on. And as he came round the base of a great cliff, and a startling scene burst upon his eyes, he knew that he had come to the end of the trail.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Sharp Shooting!

DOG-GONE you, hombre! You reckon you want more?"

It was a deep, gruff, savage voice.

Bill Jadwin, the leader of the outlaw gang, stared down grimly at the bound man who lay at his feet.

On either side of Rancher Sylvester knelt Sam and Mike Jadwin. The boss of the Silver Star Ranch lay helpless, bound hand and foot with raw hide ropes. His face was white and tortured. On his broad chest lay a huge mass of rugged granite, held in position by the two ruffians who knelt. Its weight almost crushed the hapless man stretched beneath it.

"You want more, dog-gone you?" growled Bill Jadwin.

A faint cry was the only answer.

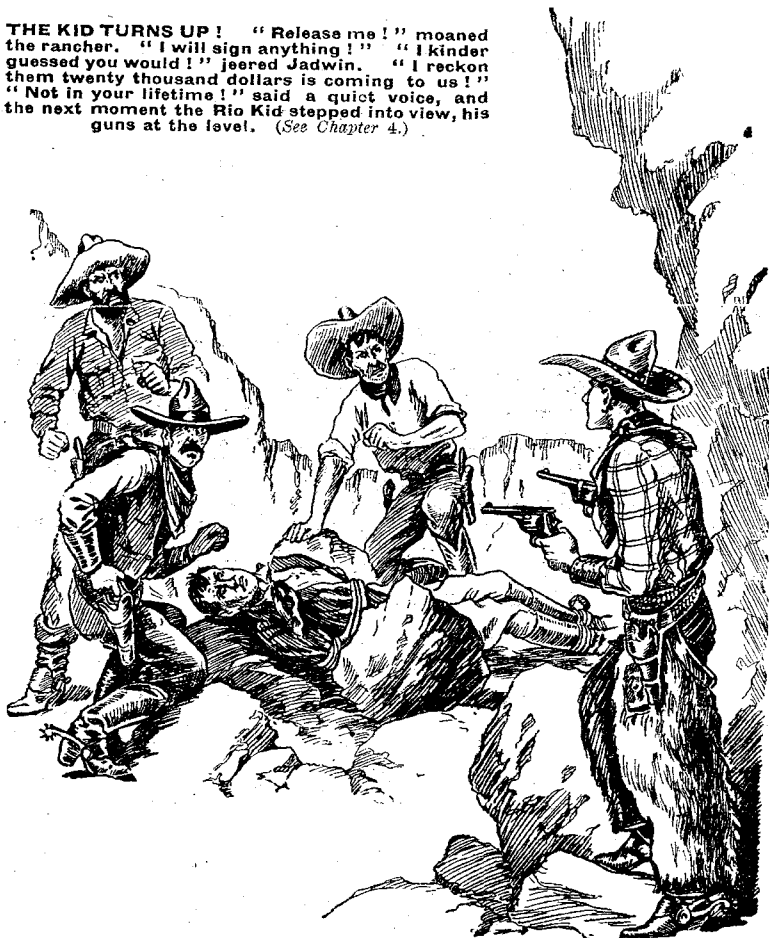
The ruffian uttered an oath.

"Say, Mister Sylvester, I reckon you know where you are," he snarled. "You're with the Jadwins. And I guess you've heard of their reputation. You reckon you can beat us to it, when we've got you by the short hairs, jest where we want you—say?"

"I guess the hombre wants some more," chuckled Sam Jadwin. "You jest heave another rock on him."

The rancher panted.

THE KID TURNS UP! "Release me!" moaned the rancher. "I will sign anything!" "I kinder guessed you would!" jeered Jadwin. "I reckon them twenty thousand dollars is coming to us!" "Not in your lifetime!" said a quiet voice, and the next moment the Rio Kid stepped into view, his guns at the level. (See Chapter 4.)



"You scoundrels! My outfit will get you, and hang you for this."

Bill Jadwin gave a savage laugh.

"I guess your outfit won't find us in these hills," he said. "You had your eyes open the way we came. You sure saw the trail blanketed. You figure that any guy on the Silver Star Ranch will ever pick up sign enough to follow us home?"

The rancher groaned.

"You've got it coming to you," snarled Bill Jadwin. "We reckoned we'd lift off'n you the wad you got at Injun Ford, selling cattle; and there was nothing to that. But we got you."

"We sure did, feller," chuckled Mike Jadwin.

"I guess it was ten thousand dollars," said Bill Jadwin. "But I sure reckon it's going to touch you for twenty thousand to get clear of this, Jonas Sylvester. You get me? You got to fix up the paper fair an' square, and stay here with us, while Mike goes to collect on it. And if the dollars ain't paid on the nail, and anything happens to Mike, you want to be sorry for yourself, for you'll burn at the stake like you was with the Apaches in the Staked Plain. You get me, durn you?"

There was no mistaking the ruffian's savage earnestness. But the only reply from the rancher was a cry of pain. The heavy rock crushed him to the earth with its weight.

"Heave on another donick, Bill," exclaimed Mike Jadwin impatiently. "The guy will sure talk turkey then." "Never!" panted the rancher. "You

may kill me, but I will never sign the draft! You shall never touch a cent of mine!"

"I guess we'll see about that," snarled Bill Jadwin; and he grasped a heavy boulder, and placed it on top of the great mass that already crushed the hapless man.

A low moan burst from the rancher. "I guess that will do the trick," grinned Sam Jadwin. "Say, hombre, you want to have some hoss sense! I reckon your bones will sure begin to crack."

The rancher moaned again. The pain was intolerable. And the obstinate doggedness died out of his face.

"Release me!" His voice was a faint moan. "I will sign."

Bill Jadwin laughed hoarsely. "I kinder guessed you would," he jeered. "Say, you gink, you've sure been wasting a whole lot of time. I reckon them twenty thousand dollars is coming to us."

"Not in your lifetime," said a quiet voice.

The three ruffians spun round at the voice, with startled oaths. The boulders piled on the rancher, no longer held in position, rolled off with a crash, and the tortured man breathed again.

The three outlaws grasped their weapons as they turned, and the Rio Kid rapped out sharply.

"Put 'em up!" In amazement and rage the Jadwin gang stared at him. Suddenly, as if he had fallen from the skies, the Rio Kid had appeared on the scene, and the Jadwins could scarcely believe their

eyes as they stared at him. A gun was in either hand of the Kid as he stood scarce a dozen feet away.

The Kid smiled over the levelled barrels at their enraged faces.

"I guess you don't collect them dollars, a whole lot, fellers," he drawled. "I surely guess not. Keep them guns down, or you get what's coming to you—sudden."

"The Rio Kid!" breathed Bill Jadwin.

"I guess you're wise to me," smiled the Kid.

The bound man on the earth turned his head, gazing at the Kid.

"Help me!" he panted. "Save me—save me from those demons! I will reward you! Any reward you name!"

"Can it!" interrupted the Kid. He spoke to the rancher, but his eyes were eagle-like on the three glaring outlaws.

"I guess I ain't after your dollars, Mister Sylvester."

"The Rio Kid," repeated Bill Jadwin, his grasp convulsive on the gun he dared not raise. "You dog-goned fire-bug,

what you horning into this game for? You that's wanted by a dozen sheriffs—you that's hunted by the Texas Rangers! Let up, you gink, and stand pat, I'm telling you!"

"Not by a jugful!" answered the Kid cheerily. "I guess I'm here to get that hombre away from you, feller."

"What darn business is it of yours?" roared Bill Jadwin. "You an outlaw, same as this gang—"

"You've said it," agreed the Kid. "I guess Texas won't let me be nothing but a pesky outlaw. And that goes! But not the same as you, Bill Jadwin. I reckon. Not in your lifetime, hombre. But I guess I didn't hop into this outfit to chew the rag. Put up your hands!"

The three ruffians hesitated. Well they knew the shooting of the Rio Kid; and his two Cofts bore full upon them. But they were three to one, and hardy desperadoes; and burning with rage at the thought of being robbed of their prey. A quick glance was exchanged among the three.

"Don't!" said the Kid warningly. "I guess we'll take you into the rifle, Kid," said Bill Jadwin hoarsely, "Stand in with us."

"Forget it!"

With a fierce curse Bill Jadwin lifted his gun-arm, and his brothers acted as promptly.

Crack-ack! Both the Kid's guns roared instantly. Bill Jadwin spun over backwards with a bullet in his heart. And Sam Jadwin crumpled where he stood, and dropped, and never stirred again. Mike Jadwin's hands flew above his head, and he yelled:

"Let up, Kid! Let up!"

The Kid eyed him grimly. "I guess you wasn't any too soon putting up them paws!" he snapped. "I reckon you can live, you dog-goned coyote! Keep 'em up!"

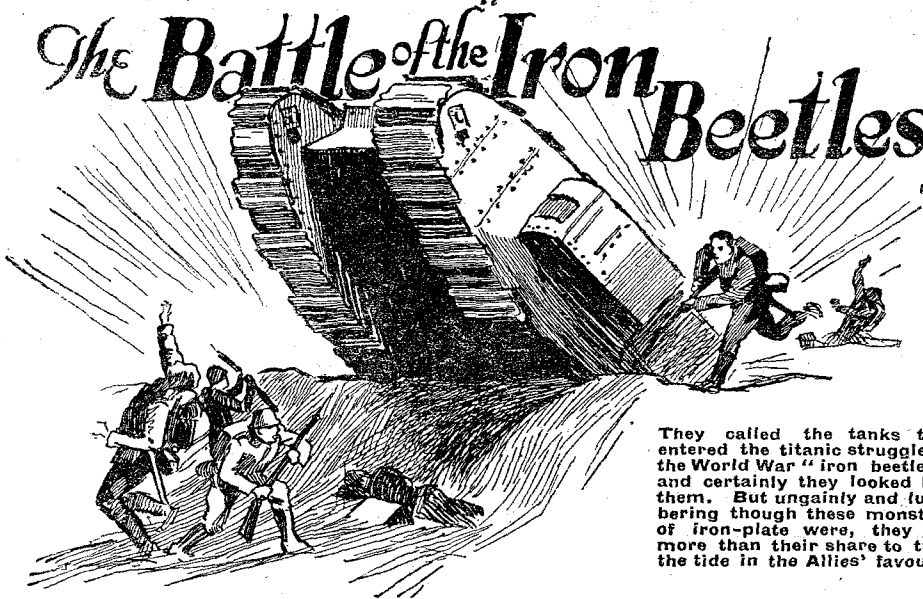
The Kid advanced and disarmed the ruffian, who eyed him with malevolent hate.

"Git on your cayuse, an' beat it,"

(Continued on page 12.)

OUR POPULAR SERIES—STIRRING DEEDS OF THE GREAT WAR!

The Battle of the Iron Beetles!



They called the tanks that entered the titanic struggle of the World War "iron beetles," and certainly they looked like them. But ungainly and lumbering though these monsters of iron-plate were, they did more than their share to turn the tide in the Allies' favour!

And out of the gun-muzzles that poked from the Tanks' sides poured endless streams of bullets; clouds of them that riddled everyone and everything in the path.

As the Tanks cleared broad paths, so the Infantry followed through. No longer was the enemy secure from the bayonet point of the British. Nothing could stand before them, as the Tanks lurched on and made torn and perilous roads for the eager feet of the attackers. And behind the Infantry came—what? British Cavalry! Cavalry that had been impatiently kicking its heels in impotent idleness. Horses that had been straining at the bit for months and months. Men who had been swinging keen-edged sabres for months and months, but only in imagination, for this had been, up to now, a war of

Infantry and Artillery and Aircraft only. Our Cavalry had not been called upon.

Now that the Tanks were having it all their own way the rest-less Cavalry were getting a look-in. After the Tommies went the mounted men, now swinging their heavy sabres in deadly reality. At the trot they went, clearing up the enemy villages as the Tanks and Infantry pushed the German defences farther and farther back.

Tanks were now being hit by heavy shells. The armour plate fortresses were being reduced in number. But those whose machinery remained in workable condition went on and on—as inevitable and undodgeable as Father Time himself!

There was also a procession in the opposite direction—German prisoners by the hundred moving back to the British wire "cages" prepared in readiness for them.

Dawn had become mid day, and the rearward procession of dejected prisoners was continuing unbroken. Mid day became dusk, and still the advance of Tanks, Infantry, Cavalry, and Artillery went on. And always prisoners were being shepherded back.

Before night fell 8,000 of the enemy were hemmed in behind our wire compounds. The first and second fighting lines of the vaunted German hosts had fallen to us. It was a great and famous victory, and a few hours later all Britain knew of it. The church bells at home were ringing a wild, glad peal. The Hindenburg Line was "done"—and the Tanks had helped to do it!

And what of those men who fought in the Tanks—who wedged themselves into what might easily have proved to be their metal coffins? Casualties were vast, but always that must be the price of victory. The "Iron Beetles" had won the day.

Fortresses on wheels! Such are the Tanks of our Army to-day. When, during the hectic days of the Great War, when first they were sprung on the enemy as a staggering surprise they were just daring experiments. Ungainly, lumbering monsters of armour-plate, with men inside and the muzzles of guns poking viciously out, with "caterpillar tracks" that they carried with them and wound up and unwound as they lurched along; no wonder the Germans' hair stood on end when first these fortresses heaved into battle.

The experiments proved amazingly successful. No rumours of them had reached the enemy's ears.

The great battle was to open on November 20th, 1917—the Battle of Cambrai. As dawn broke the heavens reverberated to the incredible crashes of enormous British guns. The artillery were opening "the fair"! Deep down in the immense and intricate tunnels of the Hindenburg Line the Germans were wondering what was afoot.

In front of them was barbed wire by the thousand ton. No bombardment of British heavy artillery could have swept away the vicious series of entanglements—so what had they in the Hindenburg Line to fear?

The answer was—Tanks! It was a ten mile front over which this tremendous battle for Cambrai was to wage. And that meant thousands upon thousands of troops. And those troops were coming on, across shell-pitted No Man's Land.

But what were those ludicrous shapes of metal lumbering and waddling in front of the Tommies? There they were—right on top of those masses of barbed wire. Now they were nosing into it, and in all directions that barbed wire, that had stood almost untouched by shell-fire for many months, was breaking like strands of cotton!

"Yaroooh!" roared Trimble. "Keep him off! I never did it! I wasn't— Help! Rescue! Yow-ow-ow!"

"Gwooooh! Oh deah!" Blake dragged up the breathless Gussy. A crowd of fellows gathered round. Arthur Augustus groped for his eyeglass and jammed it into his eye.

"I've got him, you chaps!" he gasped. "Don't let him get away!"

Tom Merry and Manners and Lewther chuckled. Evidently D'Arcy the Detective was still on the trail of the hapless Trimble. Baggie, guilty of many things, was undoubtedly innocent on this occasion; but the St. Jim's detective was not to be denied.

"I—I say—" howled Trimble. "What's this game?" demanded Cardew.

"Twimble is the guilty partay!" explained Arthur Augustus breathlessly. "Havin' fixed it on him, you know, I was goin' to make him own up before all the fellows—and he has been dodgin' me up and down and wound about—"

"What has he done?" asked Levison of the Fourth.

"He's the man!" "What man?" shrieked Blake. "The man that bagged Mr. Selby's banknote and hid it, you know! I have completed the case!" said Detective D'Arcy, with dignity.

Levison stared blankly. There was a roar of laughter from the other fellows.

"Weally, you fellows—" "So Trimble's the jolly old criminal, is he?" chuckled Ralph Reckness Cardew. "This is rich—really rich! How do you make it out, Gussy?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" "I wasn't—I didn't—I never—" babbled Trimble.

"Stop him!" yelled Arthur Augustus. Baggie Trimble was bolting for the door. But the juniors did not stop him; they opened to let him pass. Arthur Augustus rushed after him.

"Stop, you wottah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Crash!

Baggy Trimble reached the doorway. But he got no farther; for just as he was tearing through, the stalwart figure of Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, appeared there from the corridor.

There was a terrific collision.

Baggy Trimble yelled and sat down. Mr. Railton staggered against the door, gasping.

"Why, what—what—what—" he stammered.

"Bai Jove!"

"Trimble! How dare you rush into me like that!" thundered the Housemaster.

"Ow-wow! That beast D'Arcy was after me!" howled Trimble. "I never did it! I never touched old Selby's banknote—yaroooh!"

"What! D'Arcy! Have you accused Trimble?"

"I did not mean to report it to you, sir," said Arthur Augustus. "But as Twimble has mentioned the mattah, I have to inform you, sir, that I have investigated the case and pwoved beyond doubt that it was Twimble who played a jape with Mr. Selby's banknote!"

"You absurd boy!"

"Eh?"

"Silence! My boys," said Mr. Railton, looking round, "I came here to make a statement, which I desire to be known to the whole House, on this very subject. You all know that some boy picked up Mr. Selby's banknote, and kept it back for a time, and restored it in an anonymous manner. The foolish boy who played this foolish trick has now admitted it."

"Oh!"

Levison's face brightened. Cardew smiled.

"It was Racke of the Shell," went on Mr. Railton. "He came to my study of

his own accord and confessed to having played that foolish trick."

"Racke!" murmured Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove!"

"As Racke made a voluntary confession," said Mr. Railton, "I have not punished him; I think that the trouble he has caused will be a warning to him in the future. The matter is now quite cleared up. That is all."

And the Housemaster walked away, leaving the crowded room in a buzz.

"It was decent of Racke to own up," remarked Tom Merry.

"Wasn't it?" smiled Cardew.

Levison of the Fourth looked very bright. He smiled cheerily as he met his minor's eyes.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's face was a study. His aristocratic cheeks were very pink. Even D'Arcy the Detective realised now that there was a screw loose somewhere in his masterly chain of reasoning.

Baggy Trimble chortled.

"What have you got to say now, D'Arcy?" he hooted.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus had nothing to say. He faded out of the Common-room, to hide his blushes in the seclusion of Study No. 6. It was likely to be a long time before Arthur Augustus again exercised his wonderful gifts as a detective!

But everyone else was satisfied; even Aubrey Racke was kindly looked upon for having spoken up at last and cleared the last vestige of suspicion from Levison minor. The unfortunate affair of Mr. Selby's banknote was done with at last—though that happy conclusion was not due to D'Arcy the Tec!

THE END.

("CATCHING A TARTAR!" is the title of next week's topping long complete tale of Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's.)

"THE HOLD-UP!"

(Continued from page 6.)

said the Kid briefly, when he had searched Mike for weapons. "Light out, you durn scallawag, afore I change my mind and send you after the other ginks! You get me?"

There was a crash of hoofs as Mike Jadwin threw himself on his horse and galloped down the gulch. He turned in the saddle to shake a clenched fist at the Kid, and yell out a threat at which the Kid smiled contemptuously, and then he vanished from sight, and the galloping hoofs died away in the distance.

The Kid turned to the rancher.

A few slashes of his bowie knife, and the boss of the Silver Star was free. The Kid helped him up, and the rancher sat gasping on the rock that had so lately crushed him to the earth.

The Kid went to the two remaining tethered horses, cast one loose and saddled the other and led it to the rancher.

"I guess you can borrow this cayuse," he said. "Say, Mister Sylvester, they'll sure be powerful anxious about you at the Silver Star, and you want to hit the trail pronto."

Sylvester rose from the boulder. His eyes were strangely on his rescuer.

"You're the Rio Kid, same as that hombre said?" he asked.

"Sure!"

"The outlaw of the Rio Grande?"

"You've said it."

"And you've saved me from those fiends," muttered the rancher. "Say,

this sure gets my goat! They won't believe this in Jack-Rabbit."

The Kid laughed.

"They'd sure believe you a whole lot, if you told them that the Rio Kid had held you up for your roll," he said.

"They sure would," said Sylvester.

"Outlaw and fire-bug, whatever you are, you've saved me, and you've got a friend for life if you want one, Kid."

"Forget it," said the Kid lightly. "I guess I horned into this rookus jest because I never could mind my own business, feller. Get on that cayuse, and hit the trail."

The Kid called to Side-Kicker and mounted, and rode down the gulch with the rescued rancher. They rode in silence. Far away on the alkali plain a horseman was vanishing in the dusty distance, and the rancher cast a glance for a moment after Mike Jadwin.

"You've made a bad enemy there, Kid," he said.

The Kid shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess I've made a whole heap already, and one more won't worry me any," he answered carelessly. "This way, Mister Sylvester. I guess you'll be meeting up with your friends soon. There's an outfit from Jack-Rabbit in the chaparral, and I allow they're hunting for you."

They rode on in silence across the alkali plain towards the chaparral that bordered the Jack-Rabbit trail. On the edge of the dark green chaparral horsemen were seen, at last, moving to and fro on the plain, and the Kid grinned. The Jack-Rabbit outfit were still there trying to pick up the Jadwin trail in the alkali dust. But the horsemen turned their heads, and

bunched together, and there was a shout as the two approaching riders were seen on the plain.

The Kid pulled in his mustang.

"I guess you hit it alone from here, Mister Sylvester," he said. "It sure would not be healthy for me to strike that bunch."

The rancher glanced at the distant horsemen now approaching them, and turned to the Kid again.

"They're my friends," he said. "Ride with me, Kid, and I'll answer for your safety."

"Not by a haiful," grinned the Kid. "Say, Mister Sylvester, them guys are hunting you, and, likewise, they're huntin' a galoot who held up the Jack-Rabbit stage this morning after your wad, thinking you was aboard."

"And that was—"

"This hombre," said the Kid, laughing.

"Search me!" said the rancher, in amazement.

The Kid raised his Stetson.

"Adios, hombre!" he called out lightly; and, with a touch of the spur, Side-Kicker leaped into speed, and the Kid galloped away.

"Kid!" called out the rancher; but there was no answer, and Sylvester rode on to join his friends.

Far in the distance a little cloud of alkali dust marked the way of the Rio Kid. It died down, and the Kid was seen no more.

THE END.

(Christmas with the Rio Kid. See next week's roaring long tale of this daredevil outlaw, entitled: "THE TRAIL IN THE SNOW!")

Grand Enlarged Christmas Number

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"The **VICTOR!**" Read the Thrilling
Tale of Ancient Rome —
"Champion of the Arena!" inside

CHRISTMAS IN THE WEST WITH THE RIO KID, OUTLAW!

THE TRAIL IN THE SNOW!



It is not the first time the Rio Kid, outlaw, has saved an enemy at the risk of his own life!

THE FIRST CHAPTER. Shot for Shot!

A NOTHER shot rang from the pines, and the Rio Kid set his teeth hard. It was not often that the wary Kid was caught at such a disadvantage, but in the windy, snowy passes of the Huecas he had not looked for a foe. It was bitter winter weather—in many a drift on the ranges cattle froze, and up in the rugged Huecas the snow was stacked in every arroyo and gulch and gully. Even the grey mustang, Side-Kicker did not find easy footing, though Side-Kicker could clamber wherever a goat could clamber.

But the path the Kid was following by a barren, snowy hillside was slippery with snow. On his right the slope rose steeply to a belt of pines; on his left it fell more steeply to a deep ravine choked with snow, where a fall meant burial at the bottom of a thirty-foot drift. Slowly but surely the grey mustang trod that perilous path across the rugged hill, through a bitter wind, so bitter that even the Kid's goat-skin chaps hardly protected his legs from its bite, and his hands in his cowboy gloves were chilly.

It was going to be a hard Christmas-tide in the uplands of the cow country—frozen death to many of the herds, to many, perhaps, of the men who herded; but up in the Huecas the grip of winter was harder and more savage than on the wind-swept ranges below.

At least, the Rio Kid told himself, the hunt for him would slacken; sheriffs and rangers would have no hunch for tracking him by frozen hillside and yawning snowdrift. In the Huecas he looked for no foe, though the hunt had been hot at his heels on the plains. But the Kid for once missed his guess, as he was suddenly apprised by the rifle-shots that rang out from the pines a hundred yards above him.

A shot, and another shot; and both too close for comfort. The Kid's glance swept up the rugged slope to the pines; but the man who pulled trigger was unseen, skulking in the cover of the gaunt trees, keeping out of the Kid's sight while he burned powder. That, no doubt, accounted for the lead whizzing by the Kid without touching him, close as it flew; the unseen marksman was more careful of his own skin than anxious to penetrate the Kid's, though the way he pitched his lead showed that he was keen enough to drop the boy outlaw from his horse.

"You durned polecat!" the Kid muttered, his eyes gleaming at the frosty trunks that hid his enemy. "You dog-goned prairie wolf! I guess if you'd show yourself a piece I'd put you wise about potting at me from them pines, you all-fired scallywag!"

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By
RALPH REDWAY.

it had gone closer than the others. The Kid bitterly figured that the unseen gink was getting the range fine. And it needed long minutes for the Kid to pass out of range of the pines, and for every second of those long minutes he was under fire. The Kid reckoned that it was all Texas to a Mexican dollar that he would be all shot up before he could wind round the hill and get out of the fire.

The Kid's eyes gleamed under his knitted brows; his teeth were clenched with rage.

Many enemies the Kid had, and he looked for gun-play if he met up with any of them. But this was not the kind of gun-play that he looked for. Potting at a guy from cover while he was following a difficult and dangerous trail that slowed down his horse and made him an easy mark—that was not what the Kid looked for from sheriff or ranger. It was no sheriff's man, no Texas Ranger, who was burning powder in the pines, the Kid reckoned; it was some private enemy, some roughneck or gunman who had a bitter grouch against him. Heap plenty of scallywags, roughnecks, and bushwhackers had fallen foul of the Kid, and this was one of them, he figured, who had got him where he wanted him, in the lonely passes of the Hueca sierra.

His eyes gleamed with rage, all the more because of his helplessness to retaliate.

He had released a gun from a holster, and he glanced up again at the dark pines crowning the hillside.

But the bushwhacker was still in cautious cover. Evidently he was a man who knew the Kid well, and knew well that a single glimpse of him would have been enough for the most unerring shot in Texas. Only a glimpse the Kid wanted—the merest glimpse. But he did not get it.

He pushed on—slowly! Side-Kicker was a good cayuse, sure-footed as a mountain goat; but the path was sloping, slippery, perilous; hurry meant a fall into the snowdrift below.

Crack!
Had the man above stepped out of the pines and taken deliberate aim nothing could have saved the Kid. But he hugged cover as he potted at the boy outlaw, and it spoiled his shooting. But the fourth bullet clipped a lock of hair away from the Kid's head, and he did not reckon that it would last much longer. And as the bullet whizzed by so close, and the report followed it, booming among the frosty pines, the Rio Kid pitched suddenly off Side-Kicker, and crumpled into the snow.

There was a yell in the pines above—a yell of triumph. From the shadows of the gloomy trees a man leaped, rifle in hand.

But the marksman did not show himself; the keen eyes of the Kid, scanning the belt of pines high up the slope, detected no sign of him. And the Kid pushed on his way, knowing that for quite a distance he had to ride under the fire of his enemy, powerless to retort, and powerless to escape. For no horseman could have ridden up that steep slope, slippery with snow, to the pines, to get to close quarters, and below lay only the deep-piled snow in the hollow. The Kid had to pursue his way, and to pursue it slowly, for a single false step meant death to horse and rider.

Crack! came again from the pines, and the Kid felt the sting of the bullet as it tore through his Stetson hat. It grazed his forehead, and a tiny trickle of blood ran down under the Kid's thick hair. It was the third shot, and

He stood in full view, and the Kid knew him. The Rio Kid had wiped out the Jadwin gang at Jack-Rabbit—except Mike Jadwin. It was the last of the Jadwin gang who had tracked him in the Huecas. Standing in the open, the bushwhacker clapped the butt of the rifle to his shoulder, taking deliberate aim, to riddle the fallen outlaw with bullets before he ventured to approach him.

Bang!

It was the roar of a Colt, and it came from the boy outlaw who was crumpled in the snow beside his pawing mustang.

Mike Jadwin did not pull trigger.

The rifle dropped from his hands, and he staggered back to the pines, yelling.

The Kid was on his feet the next second.

His ruse had succeeded; he had drawn his enemy from cover, and his gun was levelled to send his second shot through the heart of the bushwhacker.

But a desperate leap back into the trees saved Jadwin.

The Kid's shot missed him by a fraction of an inch as he disappeared into the pines.

He was wounded—there was blood on his face, spots of crimson on the snow, but his yell of rage showed that he lived. Twice again the Kid fired, sending his lead whistling into the pines. But no answering shot came. The bushwhacker's rifle lay where he had dropped it, and at the distance a six-gun was of little use in any hand but the Kid's.

The Kid holstered his revolver, remounted the grey mustang, and pushed on his way.

He was smiling now—a grim smile.

Mike Jadwin had regained the cover of the pines, wounded; and the Kid figured that a wounded man had little chance of pulling out in the bitter wintry waste of the Huecas.

A few minutes more, and the Kid had passed round a bend of the hillside, and the dangerous path was behind him. From the man in the pines came no sound or shot as he went. He was done with Mike Jadwin.

"I guess, old hoss," said the Kid cheerily to the grey mustang, "I kinder guess that that guy had got his—and if the coyotes of the Huecas don't get him, I shall sure be surprised, old hoss."

And the Rio Kid rode cheerily on his way.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Trail in the Snow!

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid. Grey dawn was creeping over the sierra.

The Kid had camped for the night in a cave he knew, high up in the Huecas—a cave in a lonely canyon that had afforded him refuge before, when sheriffs and their men had been hard on his traces.

Rolled in his blankets and slicker, the Kid had slept, without waking till dawn crept over the Huecas.

Now he was standing at the mouth of the cave, looking out on a world of white.

The Kid's idea was to gather pinecones, and renew his camp-fire in the cave, and cook his beans and bacon and boil his coffee before he saddled up to hit the trail. The Kid did not intend to linger in the Huecas—the Kid had his own plans for that Christmas-tide, and it was not a lonely Christmas in the sierra that he planned.

But almost the first glance that he took, as he looked out from the cave

mouth showed him something that brought a startled exclamation to his lips.

It was a track in the snow.

High up in the Huecas, the Kid reckoned that there would be no man but himself to leave a trail.

He stared at the footprints.

If there was any galoot but himself in those lonely passes, he reckoned that it must be some puncher from the ranges, who had lost his way in search of stray cattle. If that was it, the puncher had lost his horse also, for the trail that ran past the cave in the snow was left by cowboy riding-boots.

"Shucks!" repeated the Kid.

He stepped out and bent over the trail to examine it. The thought of Mike Jadwin came into his mind for a moment. But he was long miles from the pine wood where the bushwhacker had fallen under his bullet—what was left of the last of the Jadwin gang, he reckoned, was only bones gnawed by the hungry coyotes of the sierra.

The snow had ceased to fall towards morning. It lay thick and velvety as far as the eye could reach. It was since the cessation of the snowfall that an unknown man had passed along the canyon; or the tracks would have been covered up.

An hour ago, the Kid reckoned, the galoot had passed, leaving a trail in the snow, winding away into the rocky wilderness.

The Kid stood with a thoughtful brow.

Somewhere in the hills, amid the snowdrifts, was the man who had tramped by on foot in the night; passing the cave, without knowing anyone was there—passing by the help that he needed.

For, outlaw as the Rio Kid was, he was the galoot to help any man—especially a cowman—who was down on his luck; and cheerfully would he have shared his blankets and his grub with a puncher lost in the snow-waste. And that the man who had left that lonely trail was in need of help would have been plain to a less searching eye than the Kid's. The footprints were irregular—it was the track of a man who had sometimes tottered, sometimes halted—and in one place was unmistakable sign where he had fallen on his knees and dragged himself up again to stagger on his way.

"Oh, shucks!" growled the Kid, for the third time.

The Kid had no time to waste if he was to carry out the plans he had laid for that Christmas. He had ridden into the tractless waste of the Huecas to throw pursuit off his trail; and he was satisfied that he had succeeded. It was the Sun-Dance ranch, on the western side of the sierra for which the Kid was bound—where, if his plans did not miscarry, he was to be an unexpected guest that Christmas. But the Kid stood where he was, gazing thoughtfully and frowningly at the tell-tale prints of the man who was lost in the snowy waste, whose staggering footsteps were leading him only to death in a snowdrift.

The Kid sighed.

"You gink!" he said to himself. "You're an ornery guy that can't mind his own business—you sure must horn into another galoot's troubles, as if you ain't got a whole heap of your own. You dog-goned geck, ain't you aiming to get out of the Huecas jest as fast as hossflesh can go, and have you got time to go trailing some pesky bone-head that's lost himself in the snow? You sure ain't!"

The Kid shook his head.

"You ain't got the time and you ain't got the inclination, and all the same that's jest what you're going to do, you pesky mutt!" he told himself.

A pale gleam of wintry sunshine came through the dark clouds banked over the Huecas. The Kid blinked in the dazzling reflection from the carpet of snow.

"Say, old hoss!" he called; and the grey mustang came from the cave at his call.

The Kid was not thinking of a camp-fire now, or of breakfast. More likely than not that sinking wanderer in the snow had already sunk down to die; but if there was a chance of saving him every minute was worth a fortune. More likely than not it would be a dead man, frozen stiff, that the Kid would find at the end of the trail, if he followed it; but there was a chance that he would find a living man, and that chance was enough to make the Kid forget his own business and horn into another guy's. He chewed cold, hard bacon by way of breakfast as he followed the trail in the snow, the grey mustang following at his heels.

The trail was more than easy to follow.

Deep in the velvety snow the tracks had sunk, and again and again the Kid came on sign where the wretched man had fallen and dragged himself up again.

Once the trail led him by the very edge of a precipice, where the tottering man, in the darkness, had passed within a foot of death. But the wanderer, unseeing, had passed in safety, for the trail led on and on into the blinding wastes.

The Kid reckoned that he was gaining on the man fast, even if the wanderer was still pursuing his tottering way. And then suddenly the trail ended.

The Kid halted.

The trail ended on the verge of a cliff, and beyond lay a deep hollow where the snow lay piled in a drift.

The sudden end of the footprints told its own tale.

In the darkness the wretched wanderer had staggered blindly over the edge of the cliff, and fallen into the chasm beyond, and there were no signs that he had climbed out—indeed, climbing out would have been impossible, even for a man in his full strength.

The Kid whistled softly.

It was the end of the trail—an end that might have been expected—indeed, the end the Kid had looked for.

The boy outlaw of the Rio Grande dropped on hands and knees, and crawled to the edge of the cliff.

It was neither easy nor safe to approach the verge, down a steep cliff that was almost like a wall.

Twenty feet below was the snowdrift in the hollow. The snow was deep—how deep the Kid could not tell.

Into it the wanderer had fallen, and there he still lay—the Kid knew that. Frozen to death long ago—

The Kid caught his breath.

Deep in the snow at the bottom of the cliff something stirred.

The Kid's keen eyes picked out a dark object that lay there in the snow—the figure of a man, half buried, in the hollow that had been made by his fall.

But the man had not been frozen to death—not yet, at all events. For he was stirring.

A gleam of the sun, through a rift in heavy clouds, fell like an arrow into the arroyo below the cliff. It gleamed on

a white, hard stubbly face that was turned upward—a face on which blood had frozen—a face that the Rio Kid knew.

"Sho!" said the Kid.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

In Peril of His Life!

"CARRY me home to die!" murmured the Rio Kid.

It was Mike Jadwin who lay in the snowdrift twenty feet below. It was the last of the Jadwin gang—it was the bushwhacker who had fired on the Kid from the pines, savagely and ruthlessly seeking his life. Wounded, weak, sinking from loss of blood, the desperado had struggled to escape from the snowy wilderness, into which hatred and revenge had led him. He had lost his horse—fallen from it, as likely as not—and, on foot, he had covered many weary miles in snow and darkness—to fall, at last, over the cliff into the snowy arroyo, and find a grave there.

The Kid's face hardened.

It was not some lost cowpuncher who had left that trail in the snow. It was

Mike Jadwin, thief, outlaw, bushwhacker, assassin. Let him lie where he had fallen.

He turned away from the giddy verge, and crawled back, and stepped to the grey mustang who stood waiting.

"I guess, old hoss, that it's us for the trail," said the Rio Kid; and he threw the reins over his arm and led the mustang away.

From the icy silence behind him came a cry.

It was a faint cry, inarticulate; but it told that the man who lay half-buried in the snowdrift was conscious, that he knew that another human being was at hand in that frozen solitude.

The Kid halted.

The cry was not repeated. It seemed as if all the remaining strength of the wretch had been expended in that one effort.

The Kid moved on again.

It was a savage-hearted ruffian, a wretch whose hands were stained with blood, who lay at the bottom of the cliff. A scallywag whose life was not worth saving, if the Kid could save it; and only at the imminent risk of his own life could he save the man who

had sought to kill him, who would seek again to kill him, given the chance.

But the Kid turned back.

He took the coiled riata from his saddle, and approached the verge of the cliff again.

Crawling to the edge, he looked down.

Deep in the hollow that the force of his fall had driven in the snow, lay Jadwin, but he did not stir now. He was unconscious. The Kid looked long and hard at the savage, bearded face.

Then, coolly and quietly, he secured the end of the riata to the horn of his saddle, and threw the slack of the rope over the cliff.

The mustang, well away from the verge, planted his forefeet firmly, to stand the strain, knowing what was required. The Kid patted Side-Kicker's neck.

"Stand to it, old hoss," he muttered.

Taking hold of the rope, the Rio Kid crept to the verge of the cliff. The mustang watched him with intelligent eyes as he slid over the dizzy verge.

Down below, the end of the forty-foot rope was straggling in the snow beside the senseless bushwhacker.

The Kid did not look down.

(Continued on opposite page.)

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Hand below hand he swung himself down the stout rope. It stood the weight easily enough; it was built to stand the strain of the wrench when a careering bull was suddenly roped and brought to a standstill. And the mustang, trained to stand firm when the rope gathered in a charging steer, stood firm now, and the trailing rope over the precipice gave hardly an inch.

Hand below hand the Kid swung in dizzy space. The face of the cliff hollowed out as it descended; there was no foothold for the Kid, nothing that his feet could touch. He swung in space, lowering himself into the windswept arroyo, swinging to and fro in the bitter wind.

Slowly but surely the Kid went down, till his riding-boots touched the snow of the drift, and he stood, sinking in snow till it was up to his belt. Under it he felt firm footing, some ledge of rock from the cliff that jutted out into the arroyo. It was upon this that the falling bushwhacker had landed, and it had saved him from plunging to certain death in thirty feet of snow that was banked in the chasm.

There was no movement from Mike Jadwin; his eyes were closed, he seemed scarcely to be breathing. The blood was clotted over the gash that the Rio Kid's bullet had left above his ear. Half an inch nearer, and Mike Jadwin would never have stirred after it touched him.

The Kid stooped by his side, and started and felt his heart throb. He was on the very edge of the rocky ledge that supported the fallen bushwhacker. For a second his foot had gone over space—space filled with snow that was ready to swallow him and hide him from all eyes.

"Gee!" murmured the Kid.

Very carefully the Kid felt his way on the snowy ledge. Bending over the insensible bushwhacker, he wound the end of the lasso round him, under his shoulders, and knotted it fast.

Jadwin did not stir.

But as the Kid rose from his task the ruffian's eyes opened, and he cast a wild glance round him and stared up dazedly at the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. The Kid looked down at him grimly, and slowly recognition dawned in the eyes of Jadwin. Recognition—and fear—fear that made his eyes dilate and his faint breath come with a sob.

"The Kid!" he muttered huskily.

"Right in once!" said the Kid.

"The Kid!" repeated Jadwin. "The Rio Kid! Dog-gone you, you durned firebug, you've got me now—got me dead to rights!" He made a feeble motion to his belt, and his nerveless fingers groped on the butt of a six-gun.

The Kid kicked the gun from his hand and tossed it into the snow in the abyss.

"I guess you won't be wanting your hardware, Mike!" he grinned. "Can it! You figure that I'm here for your scalp? Forget it!"

He turned away from the ruffian.

Jadwin made an effort to rise, and sank helplessly back.

That he expected death—ruthless death—at the hands of the man he had trailed and sought to kill was evident in his looks. Why the Kid turned from him without driving a bullet through his heart the ruffian could not guess. Neither could he understand, as the Kid went up the rope, hand over hand, swinging himself up the face of the steep precipice. Jadwin watched him, with half-closed eyes, dizzily, uncomprehendingly.

Hand above hand the Kid went, climbing steadily. The strain on his arms was heavy, and once his hands slipped and the Kid hung on, resting, his breath coming quick and fast. Then he climbed again, with set teeth, all his strength in the effort.

High over him, on the rugged rock, the grey mustang stood fast, never yielding to the tug of the rope. Higher and higher rose the Kid, till he was at the top of the precipice, and clambered over, and sank down in the snow, with aching limbs, breathing in deep gasps. For long, long minutes he had swung over a terrible death; but he had made the grade at last, and now he lay in the snow, gasping for breath, waiting for his strength to revive.

But he did not rest long. Still breathing hard and deep, the Kid rose to his feet and moved over to the grey mustang. To pull the bulky ruffian up the cliff would probably have been beyond the Kid's strength, sturdy as the

boy outlaw was; but Side-Kicker was there to help.

"I guess you want to hump it, old hoss!" murmured the Kid. "You sure got to pull that firebug up, old cayuse."

He headed the mustang away from the cliff and set him in motion. The rope tautened, and the half-conscious ruffian below felt the drag of it.

Mike Jadwin gave a faint cry as he felt himself dragged up.

"Hump it, old hoss!" murmured the Kid.

The grey mustang moved on steadily, dragging the tautened riata after him.

The Kid, on hands and knees, moved back to the edge of the precipice.

Lying there on his face, he grasped the rope, and gave a tug, to ease the strain on the mustang. But Side-Kicker was more than equal to the strain; slowly and steadily he moved on away from the cliff, dragging on the rope; slowly and steadily the burly ruffian swung up from the snowy ledge below, and swung at last clear of the snow.

The Kid looked down.

As the rope slid past him, dragged by the steady pull of the mustang, Mike Jadwin rose nearer and nearer, closer and closer to the dizzy edge of the precipice where the Kid lay. Steadily he came up, till he was pulled on to the cliff.

"Whoa, Side-Kicker!"

The grey mustang ceased to pull.



Jadwin raised the lump of rock high over the head of the outlaw who had saved his life. One fierce blow and the Rio Kid would never wake again!

Jadwin lay sprawling on the snowy summit of the cliff. The Kid lay beside him for some minutes, exhausted with his efforts.

He staggered to his feet at last.

He released Jadwin from the riata, coiled it, and hung it on the saddle of the grey mustang; then he lifted the bushwhacker to his feet.

"I guess you got to hit the trail pronto, Mike," he said pleasantly.

Only a dull, uncomprehending stare replied. The Kid half led, half carried the burly ruffian to the horse and lifted him to Side-Kicker's back. Mike Jadwin sagged in the saddle.

He could not have sat the horse without the Kid's aid. But the Kid was there to help him; his strong hand held the bushwhacker on the mustang's back as Side-Kicker moved away.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. The End of a Feud!

A RUDDY gleam of flame lighted the shadows of the cave in the Huecas.

The camp-fire, fed with pinecones and broken branches, burned steadily, and cast a radius of warmth and light.

Outside the cave the setting sun glimmered on sheets of snow. The Huecas were deep under a snowy pall.

On the blankets by the fire Mike Jadwin lay.

He was alone in the cave.

But he knew that he was not to be left alone. The Kid would return. Every time he had left the cave he had returned again, and Jadwin knew that he would come.

For three days Jadwin had been in the cave under the Kid's care. He had been very near death when the Kid had saved him from the snowdrift in the arroyo, but care and warmth and food had brought him round. The Kid had rescued him in time; the bushwhacker was on the way to recovery now. He was able to sit a horse—if he had had a horse to sit—and on a horse he could have escaped from that dreary waste of frost and snow and ice and frozen rock. On foot it was very doubtful.

He was thinking of that as he lay by the fire.

What the Kid's game was the ruffian could not understand. He did not know why the boy outlaw had risked his life to drag him from the snowdrift; why he had brought him to the cave and tended him like a brother.

He had a blood-feud with the Kid. The last of the Jadwin gang had trailed the Kid like a bloodhound to kill him. And the Kid knew it; he had not been left in any doubt about that. Yet he had taken the risk of death to drag the ruffian from the drift in the arroyo; he had tended him in the cave with unflinching care. The dull, savage brain of the outcast could not understand it.

But what he could understand was that the Kid's horse would carry him to safety if he could lift Side-Kicker; and that, although the Kid had disarmed him, there might be other ways of getting at the boy outlaw and turning the tables on him.

And now, as he lay by the ruddy camp-fire waiting for the Kid to return, Mike Jadwin held in his hand, hidden from sight under a corner of the blanket, a jagged lump of rock. He had pondered and planned and schemed while he lay in the Kid's blankets in the Kid's camp, and that was the outcome. The desperado was waiting and watching for his chance.

There was a trampling of hoofs in the snow without, a jingle of harness; the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande was returning at last.

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A burning glitter came into the sunken eyes of the man who lay by the fire.

The dim daylight at the entrance of the cave was darkened by the handsome figure of the Rio Kid. He led Side-Kicker into the cave; and, to the bushwhacker's surprise, another horse followed at the end of a trail-rop.

The Kid glanced at the bushwhacker and nodded.

"Feelin' fine?" he asked cheerily.

"I guess I'm mending," muttered Mike Jadwin.

"You sure are mending," said the Kid. "I reckon you'll be able to hit the trail in the morning, feller. Say, I've rustled you a cayuse."

Jadwin stared at the horse.

"That's my critter," he said.

"Sure!" said the Kid, smiling. "I figured that he would be loose in the Huecas, and I've sure been trailing him some. I guess I've had a long pascar hunting that cayuse, Mike; but I got him at last and roped him in."

The Kid led the horses into the cave and fed them. The bushwhacker lying in the blankets watched him in silence. His grasp was hard on the hidden lump of rock. If his chance came—

The Kid came towards the camp-fire. Mike Jadwin's eyes gleamed strangely in the firelight. The Kid sat carelessly on a boulder within a few feet of him.

"Say, feller, I reckon you're mended enough to hit the trail at dawn," he said. "We're sure getting to the end of the fodder hyer; the cayuses have finished up their feed, and the grub's running short for us. Now you've got a hoss, I guess you will be able to make the grade, say?"

"I reckon!" muttered Jadwin.

The Kid made supper for two, and they ate, while the darkness fell on the Huecas and deepened outside the lonely cave. From the heights above a bitter wind blew, laden with snowflakes. It was a black and bitter night on the sierra, but within the cave there was ruddy light and warmth.

The Kid mended the fire with pine-wood, banking it up for the night, and yawning.

"I guess I'll be turning in," he remarked.

"You've fixed me up in your blankets," muttered Jadwin.

"I guess the slicker's enough for me."

"You letting me go in the morning?"

The Kid looked round at him.

"Sure!" he answered.

"What's your game, Kid?" muttered the ruffian. "You shot up the gang at Jack-Rabbit, and I was trailing you for your life. You ain't letting me light out arter that? What's your game? There's a reward out for me at Jack-Rabbit. You figure on handling it?"

"You durned pesky bonehead!" answered the Kid. "Forget it!"

"Then what's your game?" snarled the bushwhacker. "I guess I ain't wise to it. You've saved my life, and you've got back my hoss for me. And you tell me I can hit the trail?"

"Sure!"

"And why?" snarled Jadwin.

The Kid laughed.

"You can search me," he answered. "You're a bad man from the toes up, Mike, and I reckon your life wasn't worth saving; and I sure don't know but you'll be gunning after me agin if you get a dog's chance. I don't rightly know why I don't put a bullet through your cabeza, like you deserve, you pesky fire-bug; but I guess I was always a dog-goned gink, and you can put it down to that if you want."

"It's Christmas," said the Kid reflectively, "and mebbe that helps. Anyhow, you ain't going to leave your

bones in the Huecas—and that's a cinch."

And the Kid, rolled in his slicker, settled down with his feet to the fire, and there was silence.

For a long time there was silence. The cave was deeply dusky, the fire dulled by the wood the Kid had banked on it. Only every now and then came a flicker, dancing on the rocky walls and for a moment illumining the dusky hollows.

Jadwin stirred at last. Slowly he raised himself from the blankets.

He was kneeling at last, the jagged rock in his hand. His chance had come, and the ruffian's eyes burned at the motionless form of the Kid stretched by the fire.

He crept closer.

One fierce blow, and the Kid would never wake again. The bitter feud would be ended, the Jadwin gang avenged!

The sinewy hand that held the jagged lump of rock was raised—

It was lowered again.

The Kid had saved his life, risked his own to save it; the Kid was letting him—an enemy—go free, after tending him while he lay helpless. It was Christmas-tide, the Kid had said; and in the savage mind of the bushwhacker there lingered some memory of far-off boyhood, of Christmas and its associations. Strangely enough, a long-forgotten phrase came into his mind, old words, half remembered—"Peace on earth, good will to men—"

The hand that held the murderous rock trembled. He could not strike.

He could not do it! The murderous hand was lowered. The ruffian crept back to his blankets.

A soft voice drawled in the silence.

"Say, feller, I reckon that was your best guess."

Jadwin started violently.

The Kid was not asleep!

He sat up in the folds of the slicker, and the firelight caught the gleam of a gun. It caught also the Kid's smiling eyes as he looked at the scared, startled face of the bushwhacker.

"Why, you bonehead," said the Kid, "I was awake and watching you; and if you'd tried to cave in my cabeza with that donick, I guess I'd have drilled you so sudden you'd never have known what hit you till you woke up on the other side of Jordan!"

Then he laughed.

"Say, Mike, you're sure a bad man, but you ain't so pesky bad as you allow! Go to sleep, hombre, and dream of a Merry Christmas!"

There was silence in the cave.

Under the wintry glimmer of the morning sun two horsemen rode by snowy paths in the Huecas. From the cave they took different trails—Mike Jadwin to the east, and the Rio Kid to the west. They parted in silence; but at a little distance the Kid turned his head and found that Mike Jadwin was also looking back, and their eyes met.

The Kid smiled and waved his hand. "Merry Christmas, feller!" he shouted.

And Jadwin, his grim, stubbly face breaking into an unaccustomed grin, waved back and shouted, too.

"Good-bye, Kid! And a Merry Christmas to you!"

And they rode their different ways.

THE END.

(Where does the Rio Kid spend his Christmas? See next week's quick-moving yarn of the West entitled: "TRAPPING THE KID!")

THRILLS, FROM BEGINNING TO END, IN THIS
GRAND WESTERN YARN!

A clean fight, gun to gun,
the Rio Kid enjoys. But
when it comes to treachery,
and shooting a man in the
back, then the Kid gets
his "mad" out!



Crapping the Kid!

By
RALPH
REDWAY.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Sun Dance Ranch!

CHRISTMAS, the Rio Kid reckoned, was not a time for camping in the lonely chaparral, or lurking in the untrodden recesses of the snowy sierras. Most times the Kid found his own company good enough for him; but he had a cheery and sociable nature, and when Christmastide came round the desire was strong on the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande to mingle genially with his fellow-men.

The Kid would have given much to ride back to his own country of Frio, and share in the rough joviality at the bunkhouse on the old Double-Bar Ranch. But that was not possible for the Kid. He was far from the valley of the Rio Frio, and though he had no doubt that the old bunch would have given him a welcome, danger would have dogged him there and those who welcomed him. The Kid had thought of that, and dismissed it from his mind. When he rode out of the snowy passes of the Huecas the Kid struck westward for the wild and almost trackless ranges of the Sun Dance Ranch.

The Sun Dance lay in a section of Texas where the Kid was not known, and where he figured that he could ride without every guy he met dropping his hand on a gun. His name and fame were known there, as they were known all over Texas; but he had never yet been on the Sun Dance trails, and to the eye the Kid looked what he really was, a handsome young cowpuncher, and few would have guessed merely on looks that he was an outlaw, hunted by sheriffs and rangers over all the wide

country between the Rio Grande and the Colorado River.

Carefully the Kid had blotted out all he could of his identity. The band of silver nuggets no longer encircled his Stetson; the silver spurs had disappeared, and Side-Kicker, the grey mustang, had been given a white stocking on his left foreleg, for the Kid was as skilful in disguising a horse as any horse-thief in Texas. It was not only of himself and his safety that the boy outlaw was thinking when he thus carefully blotted out the signs by which he might be known. He had to think of Buck Stenson, boss of the Sun Dance. If Buck was going to entertain him over the festive season, Buck had to be guarded against the penalty of sheltering an outlaw on whose head was a price of a thousand dollars. The Kid would have spent his Christmas in the loneliest recess of the Huecas rather than have brought peril on the Sun Dance boss.

But there would be no danger for Buck, the Kid figured. He would not call himself by his own name while he was Buck's guest; he would call himself Smith or Jones or Robinson, and he would happen into the ranch just as a puncher who had known Buck in the old days, when Stenson was a puncher himself. It was as simple as pie, the Kid figured.

That Buck would give him a hearty greeting the Kid had no doubt. Buck had been a puncher on the Double-Bar at Frio in the old days when the Kid had ridden with the Double-Bar bunch. He had been the Kid's comrade in the bunkhouse and on the range. Since those old days their ways had lain far apart. The Kid had been driven into outlawry, and Buck had cinched a

fortune from a distant relative, and come into the Sun Dance Ranch in the Hueca country. Once or twice, on his wild trails since those days, the Kid had had a word from his old pard, and he knew that Buck's friendship had not changed. Never yet had he visited the Sun Dance, though Buck would have been glad to see him there. The outlawed Kid had a delicacy in these matters. Now at last he was riding for Buck's home, leaving behind him the thick December snows in the Huecas—looking forward, with a light heart, to meeting his old comrade, and to Christmas under a hospitable roof.

It was a bitter winter, and there was snow on the ranges. Behind the Kid, as he rode westward, the frozen Huecas barred the steely sky. In the searching wind the Kid was glad of slicker and his goatskin chaps.

There was trampled snow on the trail—the trail that the Kid had reckoned was leading him to the ranch. But he was a stranger in the Sun Dance country, and when he sighted a pilgrim on the trail, he was glad to make sure of his way. A dark-skinned Mexican, mounted on a shaggy broncho, and wrapped, shivering, in a thick woollen serape, came down the trail, and the Kid pulled in his mustang to hail him as he was passing. Under his sombrero the Mexican eyed him with keen black eyes, suspiciously, the Kid thought. But the Kid was in a cheery and genial mood, and he greeted the Greaser like a man and a brother.

"Say, feller!" sang out the Kid. "You happen to belong to the Sun Dance outfit?"

"Si, senior."

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"Then I reckon you can put me wise," said the Kid. "Am I hitting the ranch on this here trail?"

"Si señor."

"Heap good," said the Kid.

The Mexican cowman pulled in his broncho. He drew nearer to the Kid, still scanning him keenly from under the rim of his sombrero. It came into the Kid's mind, with some discomfort, that this Greaser might have seen him before, in some other part of Texas where he was better known, and might guess who he was. That was not what the Kid wanted at all in the Sun Dance country.

"Say, you figure that you know me, feller?" he asked, restive under the keen scanning of the black, sharp eyes.

"No, señor, you are a stranger to me," said the Mexican. "If you seek the Sun Dance Ranch, it lies straight before you—three—four miles."

"Muy bien," said the Kid.

At a little distance he glanced back over his shoulder.

The Mexican had not gone on.

Sitting his broncho in the trampled snow of the trail, the swarthy cowman was staring after the Kid, as if deeply interested in the puncher who had asked his way to the Sun Dance Ranch.

The Kid's eyes glistened.

But as he saw the puncher looking back the Mexican wheeled his horse and rode on, and disappeared in the folds of the plain.

The Rio Kid rode on his way again, but there was a cloud on his brow. It looked as if that Mexican cowman knew him, or fancied that he did, and the Kid did not want to be known in the Sun Dance country. But, after all, the man might only be curious about a guy who was riding in the Sun Dance in the depths of winter, and strangers were few on these lonely ranges. The Kid dismissed the matter from his mind at last.

The grey mustang's hoofs covered the ground swiftly. The Kid came in sight of the ranch-house and the outbuildings. It was a large and handsome timber building, the ranch-house, and smoke was rising from several chimneys against a steely sky. Two or three men were to be seen about, and they glanced at the Kid as he rode up. One of them opened the gate for the rider, and the Kid called to him cheerily.

"Say, feller, is the boss at home?"

"Sure," answered the cowman.

"Good!" said the Kid. "I guess that's O.K."

The cowman looked at him as the gate crashed shut after the horseman.

"Say," he remarked.

"Shoot!" said the Kid, checking his horse.

"You aiming to ask the boss for a job?"

The Kid grinned.

"Nope," he answered. "Jest dropping in to see him and chin over old times, feller."

"Nothing doing hyer this time of year," said the cowman. "But if you want grub and a bunk, you only got to hump along to the bunkhouse, and you're sure welcome, feller. Sing out for Texas Bill, if you want me. I'll sure see you fixed."

"You're sure a white man, Texas Bill," said the Kid, "and I'll sure be glad to know you better; but I reckon the boss will be so glad to see me that he won't let me out of the ranch-house. You see, he's an old pard of mine."

And, with a nod, the Kid rode on to the house, leaving the puncher staring after him.

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THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Surprise for the Kid!

"SHUCKS!" murmured the Rio Kid.

He was a little worried.

He sat in a well-cushioned chair in a handsomely-furnished room. His riding-boots steamed at the stove. He had been waiting quite a long time.

The Kid did not get it somehow.

A peon servant had taken his horse, another had shown him into that handsome room, and requested him to wait while the "senor" was informed of his arrival.

Naturally, the Kid had not given his name—it was a name that would have made the peon jump for cover if he had heard it. He had simply stated that he was an old friend of the rancher who desired to see him. That was enough to get him word with Buck Stenson. But the Kid, as he waited for Buck to horn in, was feeling more and more unquiet.

Buck had grown rich since the old days, he knew; but he had not expected to find a lot of change in him. But the handsomely-furnished house, the carpets and mirrors, the silent-footed peon servants, gave the Kid rather a shock. If this was Buck's way of life, then Buck had changed a whole lot since he had ridden Double-Bar trails with the Kid. Changed, at least, in his ways and his surroundings, the Kid was sure that his heart had not changed.

He was keeping the Kid waiting a long time before he came, but then, of course, he did not know that the visitor, who had given no name, was the Kid, and likely enough he was busy. Still, the Kid was feeling unquiet. He had not expected these handsome and almost luxurious surroundings. Perhaps some doubt rose in his mind while he waited whether Buck would, in these new and changed circumstances, be glad to see an old pard in spurs and chaps.

The Kid, having steamed his riding-boots, rose from the chair at last and moved rather restlessly about the room. He wished that Buck would come. From somewhere in the house he could hear voices; there were a good many guys about, he figured.

The echo of a girlish voice came to his ears, and gave him a start. It had never even crossed his mind that Buck might have married since he had last heard from him more than a year ago. The Kid began to wonder whether, after all, he had done wisely in dropping in at the Sun Dance for Christmas. Still, if he found his presence there likely to be awkward for his old pard, it would be easy to bed down for the night and ride in the morning.

The door opened, and the Kid swung round with a clink of spurs towards the newcomer.

But it was not Buck Stenson who entered.

It was a man of about forty; a fat and portly man, with a rather hard and heavy face, and very keen, hard eyes. The Kid, at the first glance, did not like his looks much.

The sharp eyes fixed on the Kid.

"You wanted to see me?"

Surprise dawned in the Kid's face. "I'm sure glad to see you, feller," he answered amiably; "but it was the boss of the Sun Dance I asked for."

Surprise was reflected in the other's face.

"I am the boss of the Sun Dance."

"Sho!" ejaculated the Kid.

"Lester Leigh, at your service," said the rancher. "I guess I'm rather

busy to-day. Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Carry me home to die!" said the Kid, staring in dismay at the fat rancher. "Say, I reckoned my old pard, Buck Stenson, was boss of this shebang. Buck, that was my pard in the Frio country."

"I get you," assented Lester Leigh. "Stenson sold out six months ago."

"Oh shucks!"

The rancher smiled faintly. "Sorry you've been disappointed," he said. "Mister—I don't think I've got your name."

"Oh, I guess that don't cut no ice now," said the dismayed Kid. "It sure never struck me that Buck wasn't boss of this here ranch any more. Say, you savvy where Buck has located?"

"I've heard that he went to California after she sold out here, but I reckon I couldn't say for sure."

"Dog-gone my boots!" said the Kid. He picked up his quirt and slicker.

"Well, this sure has got my goat," he remarked. "I reckon I'm sorry I horned in here and wasted your time, Mister Leigh. I sure figured that Buck was running this ranch, like he was when I last heard from him. I knowed he'd be powerful pleased to see an old pard. But I reckon this child has loped into the wrong corral!" said the Kid ruefully. "It's me for the trail, Mister Leigh."

"I guess you don't want to hit the trail to-day, with the sun setting and more snow coming," said the rancher. "You're welcome to bed down in the bunkhouse if you like, and I guess the boys will make you welcome."

The Kid glanced from the window. The red of the sunset was reflected on heavy snow-clouds that banked the steely sky. He nodded.

"I guess I'll take that offer, and thank you, sir!" said the Kid politely. "I've ridden a long trail, and I'll sure be glad to bed down in your bunkhouse with your leave."

"You're welcome," said the rancher carelessly; and he stood by the open door while the Kid walked out of the room. Evidently the new master of the Sun Dance looked upon him simply as a cowpuncher, and did not care a continental red cent whether he bedded down for the night in the bunkhouse or rode on his way.

The Kid walked out of the ranch-house.

His brow was wrinkled; but a faint grin lurked on his face. Buck Stenson was gone, and the ranch had a new boss, and the Kid's plans for Christmas were knocked sky-high. He called himself a dog-goned gink for taking too much for granted as he walked away to the cowmen's quarters.

But the Kid was not the galoot to allow his spirits to be dashed for long. With his quirt under his arm and his slicker over it, he walked to the bunkhouse and looked in at the open doorway.

"Say, you Texas Bill!" he called. "You around?"

"Here," answered the cowpuncher who had let him in at the gate. "Wade in, feller. Wasn't the boss glad to see you?"

He grinned as he spoke.

"I guess he wasn't the boss I was looking for, feller," said the Kid. "This here shebang has changed hands, I reckon. Was you here in Buck Stenson's time?"

"I sure was," said Texas Bill. "Most of the outfit has been changed, but I was one of Buck's men; and a good man he was, feller. I guess I'm the last of the old bunch, and I'm taking my time after Christmas."

"You don't pull with Mister Leigh?" Texas Bill granted.
 "I ain't saying nothing agin my boss so long's he's my boss," he said. "But a harder-fisted skinflint than Mister Leigh never got a cowman's goat!"

The Kid chuckled.
 "So long's he's my boss," went on Texas Bill, "I ain't saying nothing agin the guy; but if he didn't double-cross Buck in buying this ranch off'n him, I'm a Greaser. So long's he's my boss I ain't talking about him, but let me give you the office not to do any business with him, feller, or you'll come out at the little end of the horn. That man Lester Leigh is a hard cuss, he sure is."

Texas Bill, it seemed to the Kid, was spilling a whole jugful—for a man who was not going to say anything against his boss.

However, it was no business of the Kid's.

He found a cheery welcome in the Sun Dance bunkhouse, and ate beans and bacon with the outfit when they came in. From the talk that went on, he gathered that Mister Leigh was no favourite with his outfit, and, remembering the hard, cold eyes of the rancher, he was not surprised at it. But the Kid had nothing to say on the subject; the rancher, "hard cuss" as he was, had given him leave to bed down in the bunkhouse, and the Kid was glad not to be riding a snowy trail that winter's night.

Looking out of the bunkhouse after supper, he saw many lights shining from the ranch-house. There were to be big celebrations there at Christmas he learned from the punchers; many guests from near and far, and a fancy-dress dance—"some jamboree," Texas Bill told him. Ranchers and their families for thirty miles round would be coming, and every sort of vehicle in the Sun Dance country would be converging on the ranch on the great occasion. The Kid yawned and went to the bunk that had been assigned him.

The boy outlaw, rolled in his blankets, slept the dreamless sleep of health and youth. But if he had dreamed he would not have dreamed of what was passing in the rancher's office over at the ranch-house while he slept.

In that room Lester Leigh was listening, with a cold, glinting eye and a hard-shut jaw, to a Mexican, who was excitedly telling him news.

"Verdad, senior," the Mexican was saying, "it is that picaro, the Rio Kid! I tell you, senior, that I saw him at Pecos Bend; it is now two months; he rode the street openly, like a hombre that has nothing to fear, though there was a crowd of hundreds, and many were grasping guns. It is the Rio Kid, senior—that hombre is the Rio Kid, and on his head is a reward of a thousand dollars!"

The rancher nodded slowly.

"He gave no name; and on his looks he fits the descriptions of the Rio Kid!" he said.

"I swear it, senior! I know him—know him like my own hand!"

"A thousand dollars!" said Lester Leigh.

"Si, senior!"

"I guess you're right, Fernando, but cinching the Kid—" The rancher spoke slowly. "That hombre is lightning on the shoot. And I guess the outfit here wouldn't jump to take him at my order."

"Keep him long enough for the sheriff of Sun Dance, to come, senior. By noon to-morrow. I will ride all night—"

The new boss of the Sun Dance Ranch

stood silent, thinking. Even with a cold, hard, grasping nature like his the laws of hospitality weighed for something. Outlaw or not, the Kid had come in peace, and intended to go in peace, and it was in trust that he slept under the bunkhouse roof. But if Lester Leigh hesitated, he did not hesitate long.

"He shall be taken, and you shall have two hundred dollars from the

The rancher's hard eyes searched his face as he nodded a greeting. This wandering puncher, who looked little more than a boy, was the Rio Kid; that was a cinch. Now that he knew, the rancher could fit him to the descriptions that were circulated all over Texas. But of what was in his mind, the Sun Dance boss' cold, hard face gave no sign.



"I tell you, senior," hissed the Mexican, "that that picaro who has come to stay here is the Rio Kid, and on his head is a reward of a thousand dollars!"

reward, Fernando, if you bring the sheriff here in time, and he is taken."

"Muy bien, senior!"

"And—not a word!"

Fernando grinned.

"Keep him, senior, till I return with the sheriff."

The Rio Kid, sound in slumber, did not wake at the beat of horse's hoofs on the trail.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Black Treachery!

"ME for the trail, I guess!" said the Rio Kid.

The morning sunshine streamed down on whitened plains. The Kid, standing in the doorway of the bunkhouse, looked out, and his face was cheerful enough. The Kid had been disappointed; but he was not the galoot to let that damp his spirits for long. Cold as it was, with snow on the trails, it was a clear, bright day; the keen air was like wine to the Kid, and he was ready to saddle up and ride.

From the ranch-house the portly figure of Lester Leigh came into his view. As the rancher came towards the bunkhouse the Kid swept off his Stetson in polite salute.

"Morning!" he said, with cold geniality. "I'm sure sorry you missed seeing Stenson here. You aimed to stop at this ranch over Christmas, I reckon?"

"I sure did aim to," the Kid admitted. "I guess Buck would have been glad to see an old pard."

"You knew Stenson long ago?"

"Yep! In the Frio country, when he was a puncher, along with me," said the Kid, unsuspectingly.

Leigh's eyes glinted for a moment. He knew that the Rio Kid belonged to the Frio country. If he had doubted before, he was sure now.

"Well, you don't want to hit the trail in a hurry," said the rancher easily. "You aimed to stop along over Christmas; and there's sure room in the bunkhouse, and I guess the boys are civil. Why shouldn't you bed down here, jest as you aimed to do?"

"You're sure powerful good, sir!" said the Kid in surprise. From the talk of the outfit, and from his own impressions of the "hard cuss," the Kid had never expected this. True, it was no great thing for a rancher to allow the hospitality of the bunkhouse to a wandering puncher. Still, merely to a

remember him, and think of him showed a kind heart, to the Kid's mind. The Kid felt that he had been unjust in his thoughts to the new boss of Sun Dance.

"I guess it cuts no ice with me," said Lester Leigh. "But I'll be glad if you'll stop along, jest as you aimed to do, and I reckon the boys will make you welcome. That so, Texas Bill?"

"Sure, sir!" answered the puncher, eyeing his boss in surprise. He had never before noticed Lester Leigh taking this kindly interest in any guy.

"I sure thank you, sir," said the Kid gratefully. "I ain't anxious to hit the trail with the snow thick on the ranges. I'll be glad to stay along this shebang a few days, Mister Leigh."

"It's settled then," said the rancher, and, with another nod, he turned away and walked back to the ranch-house.

The Kid took the change in his plans cheerfully. Christmas was not going to be as he had expected, but the Sun Dance bunkhouse was a warm corner for the boy outlaw, fresh from the snowy trails and icy precipices of the Huecas. The Kid reckoned that he would put in a few days at Sun Dance and hit the trail again when the weather mended a little, and, having no claim on Mister Lester Leigh, except the claim of any wayfarer in the hospitable cow country, he felt very kindly indeed towards the rancher. Not only for that reason, but because the Kid hated laziness and to loaf while other men worked, he joined some of the outfit who were mending the corral fence that morning, and lent a willing and useful helping hand.

He joined the outfit at dinner, and by that time the Kid was on cheery terms with all the Sun Dance punchers, and most of them had told him they were glad that he was staying over Christmas. Which was very pleasant hearing to the Kid, though he wondered a little what they would have said had they known that in the valley of the Rio Grande he was called the Rio Kid, and wanted by a dozen sheriffs and town marshals.

But that out no ice now. The Kid was no outlaw by his own desire, and in a country where he was not known he was only too glad to drop outlawry behind him and be once again the cheery, care-free puncher of old. His few days at the ranch, the Kid reckoned, were going to be pleasant enough before he rode on a lonely trail, leaving the Sun Dance crowd in ignorance that they had entertained an outlaw.

That was how the Kid figured it out, with all his keenness never guessing what was in Lester Leigh's mind, or what the rancher had learned from the Mexican cowman, never dreaming that while he talked cheerily with the punchers-horsemen were riding for Sun Dance ranch, armed to seize him.

It was early in the afternoon, and the Kid was saddling the grey mustang, Side-Kicker, when a bunch of riders appeared on the trail. Texas Bill and two or three other cowmen were going out to look for steers that were lost in the snowy ranges, and the Kid had offered to ride with them and help. It was hard, bitter work on the frozen range, and the Kid's help was very welcome. He had saddled Side-Kicker, taking no heed of the beat of approaching hoofs on the trail, when a word from one of the punchers drew his attention.

"Say, what's the sheriff of Sun Dance want hornin' in here?"

The Kid looked round quickly at that. The Kid was not on friendly terms with sheriffs.

Four horsemen had reached the gate, and were coming in. The Kid had no difficulty in picking out the Sun Dance sheriff—a burly, muscular man, with a grim, determined face. Two of the men with him were sheriff's men from the distant cow-town of Sun Dance. The fourth was the Mexican cowman, whom the Kid remembered having met on the trail. And at the sight of Fernando's grinning face the Kid knew what to expect. The Greaser knew him, and had brought the sheriff's men down on him. That was sun-clear to the Kid, at a glance. But what was not clear to him was how Fernando knew that he was still at the ranch. But for Lester Leigh's invitation to stay he would have been a score of miles away, or more, by that time. And with that thought it came into the Kid's mind like a flash how he had been tricked.

"Shucks!" the Kid muttered between his teeth. "That dog-goned rancher's double-crossed me! He knew, and he got me hanging on while the Greaser fetched the sheriff. The dog-goned dirty skunk!"

The Kid's eyes burned.

The black treachery of it got his goat. Had the rancher, guessing him to be an outlaw, pulled a gun on him, or called on his bunch to seize him, the Kid would have had no kick coming. But a friendly invitation to stay at the ranch, to accept the hospitality of the bunkhouse, with the intention of trapping him—that made the Kid sick. He would not have looked for treachery like that from a half-breed horse-thief.

He stood beside his mustang at the gate of the corral, and gave his belt a hitch, to bring his guns closer to his hands. Fernando had sighted him, and called out to his companions, and the three grim-faced men from the cow-town rode directly towards the corral. The Mexican took another direction. He had done his part, and had no desire to be in at the death when the lead began to fly.

The Sheriff of Sun Dance pulled in his broncho. His keen eyes were on the handsome puncher standing beside the grey mustang.

"Say, Heenan, what's this hyer circus?" asked Texas Bill, his glance going from the Kid to the sheriff, and from the sheriff to the Kid, in surprise.

"I guess you're my mutton, Kid!" said Sheriff Heenan. "Don't touch a gun, or we'll riddle you!"

"Say, what's got you?" drawled the Kid. "I guess you're a stranger to me, feller, and I don't want any trouble with you."

"You deny that you're the Rio Kid?" snapped Heenan.

"The Rio Kid!" repeated Texas Bill. The name was repeated right and left. The Sun Dance punchers gathered round, staring on at the scene.

"I guess there's no mistake," said Heenan. "You fit the description O.K., hombre; and if you ain't the guy we want, you can prove it up in town. I'm taking you!"

"Forget it!" smiled the Kid. "Say, you sure you ain't got the wrong cayuse on the rope? You speak to Mister Lester Leigh, and he'll tell you that he asked me polite to stay over Christmas along with this outfit on his ranch."

The sheriff gave a gruff laugh.

"Mister Leigh sent for us to take you," he said. "He allowed that the Rio Kid was here, letting on to be a puncher, and bedding down in his bunkhouse, and he sent for us to cinch you."

The Kid's eyes flashed, but his face was calm.

"Say, that sure was playing it low

down," he remarked casually. "Mister Leigh asked me to stay on here, very kind and polite, and he sure wouldn't do that, jest to rope in the reward for an outlaw. He sure would not, sheriff. You making out that Mister Leigh is such a dirty, ornery, all-fired polecat as that comes to!"

"Can it!" said Heenan. "Mister Leigh sent us word that he'd got you here, and we've come for you. Put your paw to a gun, and we'll riddle you with lead! You're my mutton, Kid, with the wool on!"

"Aw, can it!" smiled the Kid. "I ain't handing over my guns a whole lot, Mister Heenan. Say, don't you be in a hurry; there's always time to shoot, feller. Mister Leigh would sure be a heap mad with you if you shot up his guest at the gate of his corral!"

"Guest nothing!" snapped the sheriff. "Mister Leigh kept you on here to give us time to horn in and cinch you. Ain't you wise to that yet, you bonehead? Hand over them guns before we riddle you with lead!"

The sheriff's gun rose to a level. Bang!

The shot came from the Kid's hip, and the bullet smashed the revolver from the sheriff's hand. The Kid leaped back into the corral as the sheriff's men open fire, and the tall wooden fence covered him. Sheriff Heenan clasped his numbed right hand with his left, yelling with pain.

"Shoot!" he roared. "Shoot! You've got him cinched! Shoot!"

He rode on into the corral, a gun in his left hand now, with his men. There seemed no escape for the Kid, only a fight to the death against the odds, or surrender. But the Kid was on Side-Kicker's back now, riding at a gallop across the wide corral to the farther fence. The fence was high, but Side-Kicker was more than equal to the leap, and the Kid rode at it and lifted the gallant mustang to the jump.

Crack, crack, crack! rang behind him as the mustang cleared the fence, and the lead flew close to the Kid, rapid as his movements were. The mustang's hoofs rang with a crash outside the corral wall, and the tall wooden fence was between him and his pursuers. And Sheriff Heenan and his men, not caring for the desperate leap the Kid had taken, rode savagely back to the corral gate, to ride round the fence at the outlaw.

The Kid gave his mustang a light flick of the spur.

"I guess it's us for the trail, old hoss!" he said.

And the grey mustang stretched himself to the gallop.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Kid's Last Word!

THE Rio Kid looked back. Behind him the Sun Dance Ranch and its buildings had sunk to a patch in the distance.

But closer behind came three grim-faced, determined horsemen, spurring on their bronchos. At intervals they loosed off shots at the fleeing outlaw, but the Kid kept out of effective pistol range. The Sun Dance three were well mounted; but Side-Kicker was the fastest cayuse in Texas, and the Kid could have walked away from his pursuers had he liked. But once at a distance, he did not let the mustang out, and the pursuers were allowed to keep him in sight on the snowy plains.

Before him lay the wide ranges of the Sun Dance Ranch, powdered with snow, with deep drifts in barrancas and arroyos and coulees. It was dangerous

riding, and the Kid was not hurrying. The Kid's brow was black as he rode. He had no bitterness towards the men who were hunting him; they stood for the law, and he was an outlaw.

But towards Lester Leigh, the man who had bought Buck Stenson's ranch, the Kid's feelings were black and bitter.

He looked back, and smiled grimly as he saw one of the pursuers flounder in a snowdrift. Two pursuers were now on the Kid's trail as he rode onward, keeping him in sight.

Still the Kid did not draw away from the chase. And in a short time one of the hard riders behind tailed off, his exhausted broncho failing to keep up the pace. The Kid, looking back again, saw the Sheriff of Sun Dance alone, and smiled.

And the Kid halted at last and wheeled his mustang, and sat in the saddle, a long-barrelled Colt in his hand, waiting for the sheriff.

Heenan slackened speed a little as he saw the boy outlaw waiting for him. He came on, however, and the gun in his left hand was barking. Two bullets flew wide of the mark; the third came closer; the fourth whistled by within a yard of the Kid. Then the Kid reckoned that it was time for him to burn powder, and he threw up the six-gun and fired.

Sheriff Heenan had heard of the Rio Kid's shooting, and now he learned for himself what it was like. The bullet would have gone through his heart had the Kid chosen, and Heenan ground his teeth as he realised that the outlaw was playing with him. The lead whizzed between his right arm and his body, cutting away cloth without touching him.

Bang! went the Kid's gun again, and this time the bullet passed under his left arm, again without breaking skin. The Kid was smiling, and the Sun Dance sheriff's brow was black as thunder as he rode on, taking desperate aim with his gun. But the third shot from the Kid carried away the six-gun from the sheriff's hand, and spun it away into the snow, leaving him disarmed.

The Kid rode towards him.

"Put 'em up!" he snapped.

He was not smiling now, and his eyes glistened like cold steel over his gun.

Heenan hesitated a moment, and then his hands went up over his head, and he sat his broncho, staring blackly at the outlaw of the Rio Grande.

"That's better," said the Kid coolly. "Say, sheriff, you woke up a lobo-wolf when you figured that you was catching a prairie rabbit. Why, dog-gone your pesky hide, I'd have wiped out your bunch if I'd had a mind to! But I guess I ain't spilling any guy's juice at Christmas, if I can help it. Git off'n that cayuse!"

Heenan, black with rage, dismounted. "You sure are a good little man, and know how to do as you're told!" commented the Kid. He gave the broncho a lash of his quirt, and the animal lunged up its heels and dashed away. "I ain't going to hurt you any, sheriff. I ain't got any grouch agin you for trying to rope me in. You got to walk back to the ranch, and I guess when you've hoofed it six miles, you'll be powerful sorry you horned in after the Rio Kid. That lets you out, sheriff."

"Dog-gone you!" muttered Heenan. "I got to let you light out of the Sun Dance country, dog-gone you!"

The boy outlaw's eyes flashed.

"You hit it back to the ranch," he said quietly. "You tell Mister Leigh that I'm on his trail! Tell him that I'm horning in at the ranch this Christmas, and that I'm going to shoot him up in his own ranch! You get me?"

"I guess you won't dare hit Sun Dance agin!" growled Heenan.

"You want to forget it," said the Kid. "Come Christmas, I'm shooting up that durned polecat in his ranch! I ain't spilling your juice, sheriff; I got no grouch agin you. I'm shooting up that pizen skunk that tricked me and sold me out, and you want to put him wise to it!"

And with that the Kid wheeled his mustang and dashed away.

Sheriff Heenan stood staring after him till the horseman vanished in the misty distance of the ranges. Then slowly, on foot, the sheriff started for the ranch, with a grim and thoughtful face.

The Kid would keep his word—all Texas knew that the Rio Kid was the slave of his word. But if he came to the Sun Dance Ranch again that Christmas, he would find the ranch swarming with enemies, with the sheriff at their head, and the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande would be cinched at last—so the sheriff said to himself grimly, as he tramped wearily across the snowy, misty ranges. It would be a wild Christmas for the Rio Kid if he kept his word—and the Kid was the man to keep it.

THE END.

"THE RIO KID'S CHRISTMAS GIFT!" is the title of next week's roaring Western tale. Don't miss it, chums!

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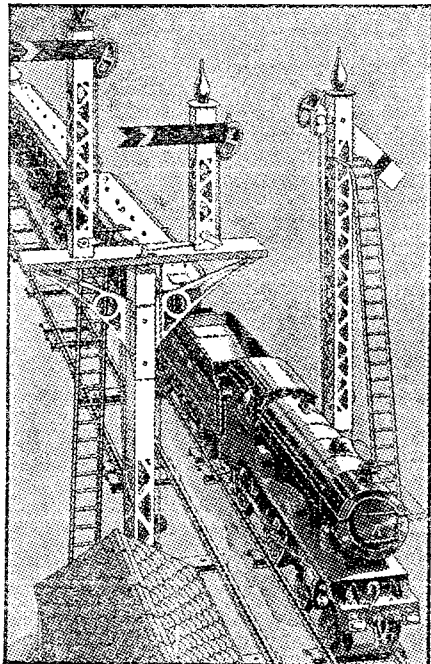
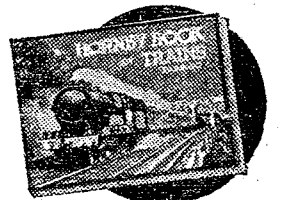
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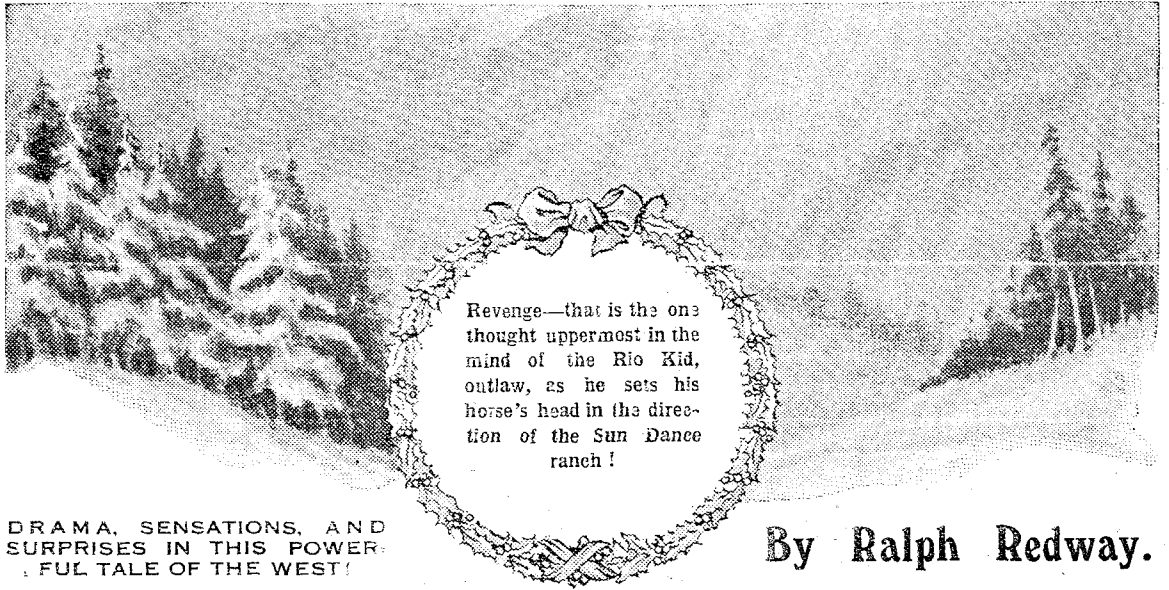
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DRAMA, SENSATIONS, AND SURPRISES IN THIS POWERFUL TALE OF THE WEST!

By Ralph Redway.

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Word of the Kid!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You reckon so?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"He would be throwing his life away."

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

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

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

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

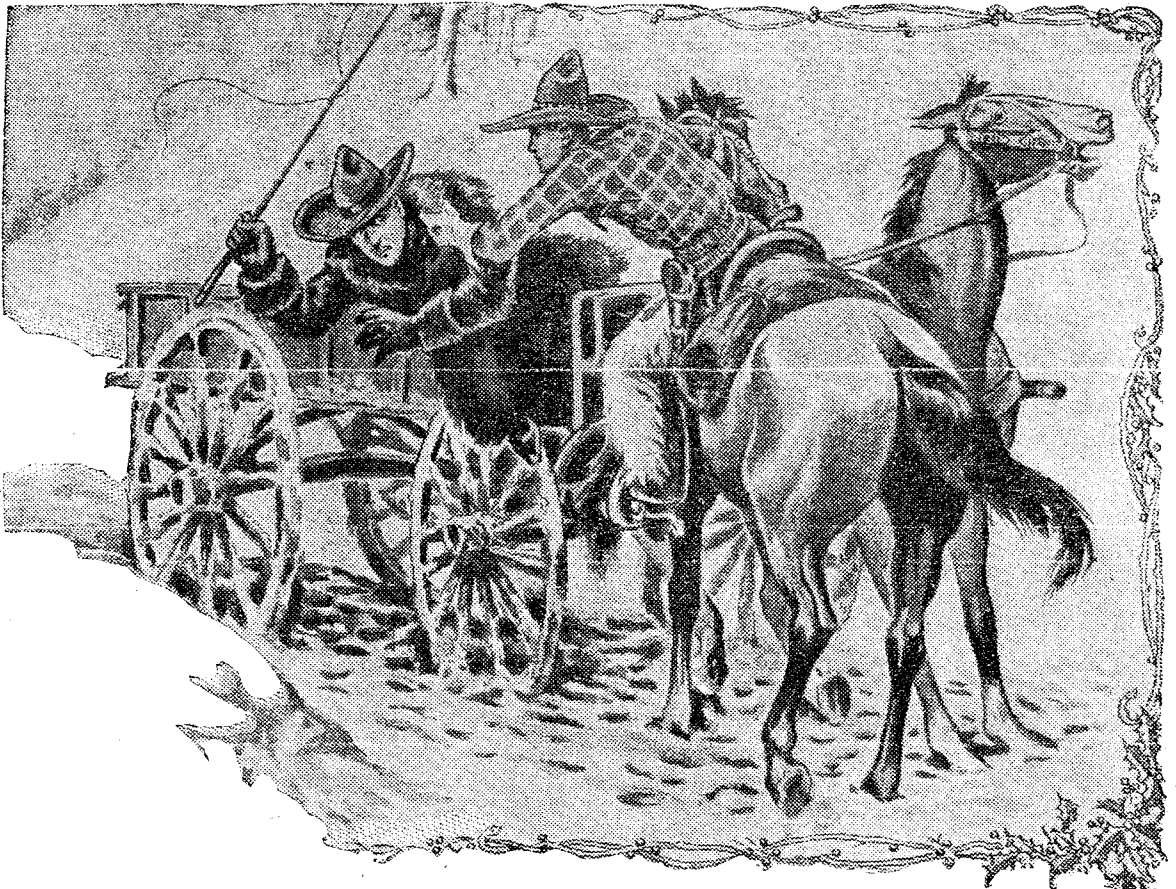
"You reckon he aims to shoot me up?" he said.

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

The rancher frowned.

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

"Daddy!"

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

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

"Yes, Pet!"

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

"Mummy wants you, daddy," said Pet.

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

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

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

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

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

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Borrowed Outfit!

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

Young Tom was taken quite by surprise.

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

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

The horseman rode closer.

"Put 'em up!" he remarked casually.

Harrigan stared at the cool, steady, sunburnt face, the glimmering revolver, the steady eyes that glistened behind it, and put up his hands.

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

Harrigan grinned.

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

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

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

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

"Nope!"

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

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

"You've said it."

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

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

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

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

The trail rider laughed.

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

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

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

"Sho!" ejaculated Harrigan.

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

"Shucks!"

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

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

"You get me."

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

"Search me!" said the rider.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harrigan caught his breath.

"I've heard that you've threatened to

shoot up Rancher Leigh in his own ranch," he said.

"Sure," said the Kid icily. "That's my game, feller.

The guy double-crossed me, and I guess it was a close call for me. I

guess I told him I'd shoot him up in his own ranch, and all Texas can tell

you that I keep my word. That all-fired skunk talked to me

fair and friendly—and sent for the sheriff and his men to rope me in—and

me his guest, trusting to his word."

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

But that ain't your business."

"Ain't it?" said Harrigan between his teeth. "If I'd a gun on me, darn

you, I'd try my luck agin your Colt!"

"I guess you'd hit Jordan so sudden you'd be s'prised to find

yourself there," said the Kid amiably.

"Forget it! Oh thunder!"

Young Tom Harrigan suddenly dropped his raised hands, grasped his

whip, and made a desperate blow at the horseman beside

the buckboard. He expected the six-gun to roar; he knew that he was taking a

desperate chance.

But the Rio Kid did not pull trigger; he hated, as he said, to spill any guy's

juice, especially at Christmas-tide. Swift as the blow was, the Kid shifted and eluded it, and the next moment he

grasped the young rancher and dragged him from the buckboard.

Young Tom Harrigan went with a crash into the snow that powdered the trail. He sprawled there with spinning

brain, and the next moment the Rio Kid was out of the saddle and bending over him, the six-gun jammed to his ear.

"Let up!" said the Kid quietly.

"Dog-gone you!" panted Harrigan.

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

He strove to struggle up, reckless of the six-gun. Still, the Kid, with a patience strange in a hunted outlaw, did not pull trigger. The long barrel of the Colt rapped on the fallen man's

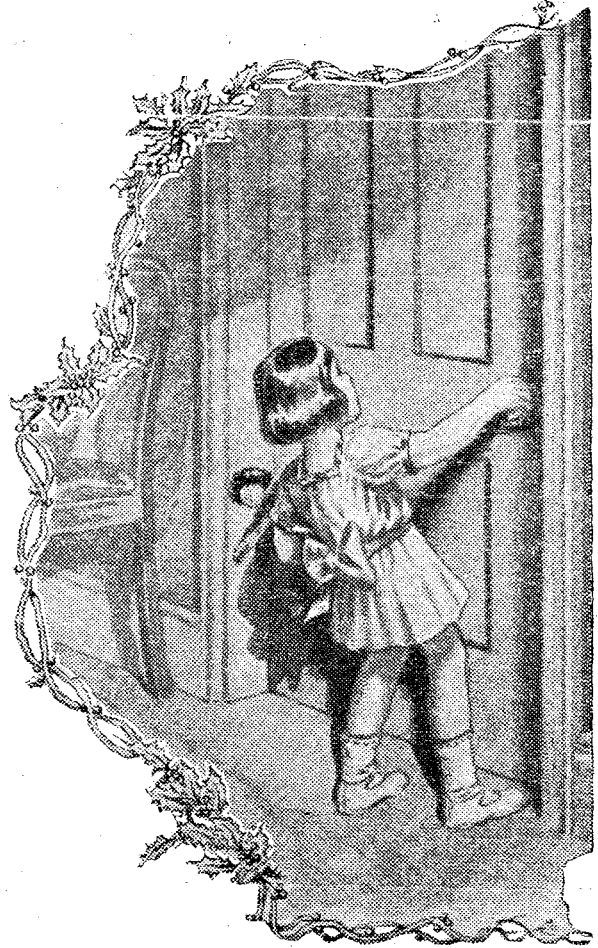
head, and for several minutes Young Tom Harrigan's senses left him.

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

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

The Kid smiled down on him.

"You don't want to get your mad



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

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

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

"I sure got to make you safe," he



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

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

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

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Santa Claus!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sure!" said Texas Bill.

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

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

"You bet!"

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

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

"Nope."

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

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

"Forget it," said Leigh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. Saved From Vengeance!

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

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

"Say, you know me in this outfit?"

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

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

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

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

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

Leigh started violently.

"The Rio Kid?" he breathed.

"Yep!"

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

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

"Come with me," said Lester Leigh abruptly.

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

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

"Sure!"

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

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

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

The rancher staggered back.

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

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

"The Kid!" breathed the rancher hoarsely.

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

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

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

"You—you here—"

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

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

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

"You—you can't—"

"Forget it!"

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

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

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

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

"Daddy!" A shudder ran through Lester Leigh.

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

"Shucks!" breathed the Kid hoarsely.

He bent towards the rancher.

"Say, who's that—what—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Kid paused.

"Little one!" The voice under the scarlet hood was soft.

"Little one, I guess you know I'm Santa Claus, that brings gifts for little ones at Christmas-time—"

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

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

He pointed to the open doorway.

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

The Rio Kid hurried away.

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

THE END.

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