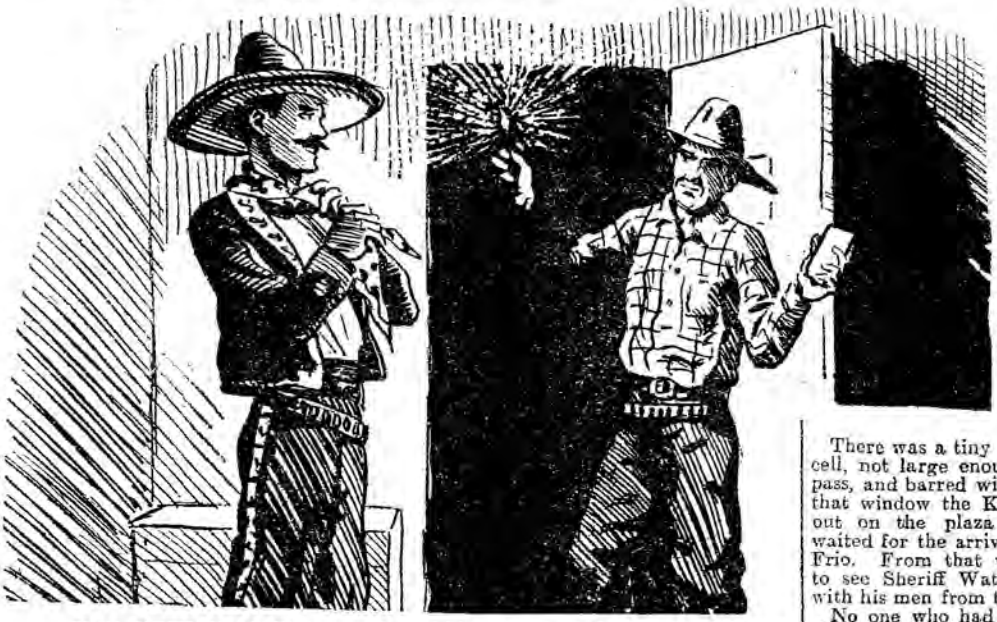
THE KID IN PERIL! Little did the Rio Kid realise when he did a tenderfoot a good turn, that a time would come when that same tenderfoot would be in the position to return the compliment!

THE RIO KID!

By RALPH REDWAY



This week:
"A LIFE FOR A LIFE!"

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

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Going Back to Frio!

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

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

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

Going back to Frio!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Kid regarded the man thoughtfully.

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

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

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

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

The gaoler shook his head.

"Nope."

"Spill it, then."

"I guess it's the auction."

"The auction!" repeated the Kid.

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

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

"Your'n!" explained the gaoler.

"Mine?"

"Yep!"

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

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

"You've said it."

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

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

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

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

The wicket closed.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Man who Remembered!

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

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

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

"Nope! But I guess I won't feel safe about you, Kid, till you're handed over to the sheriff," said Harker. "I'll be glad when he comes to take you. You're rather too tough a handful for me to want."

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

Harker grinned.

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

"And when will that be, marshal?"

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

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

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

"Heaps."

"Spill it," said the marshal.

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

Hank Harker laughed.

"Nothin' else?"

"No."

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

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

He sat down to his meal.

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

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

The western sky was a blaze of purple and gold. Beyond the shanties and shacks, the Rio Toro wound down, like a streak of silver, from the great bluffs that marked the edge of the vast table-land of the Staked Plain. Westward the Kid's eyes turned longingly. The sierras and New Mexico and the golden land of Arizona lay to the west, under the setting sun—the land where the Rio Kid had hoped and planned to begin a new life, when at long last he had fallen into the hands of his enemies. That dream was over now. Eastward lay the way the Kid had to follow—back to Frio—back to the country he knew, and that knew him. And what awaited him there? It was by no fault of his own that the Kid had been driven into outlawry; but it was the fate of the outlaw that waited for him in the country where he had ridden, in happier days, with the Double Bar bunch.

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

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

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

"Kid!"

The man whispered hoarsely.

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

"Kid! Quiet."

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

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

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

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

"Sure!"

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

The Kid stared at him harder.

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

The Kid remembered him now.

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

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

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

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

The gaoler nodded.

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

"I get you," said the Kid.

His eyes were gleaming now.

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

"Good enough," said the Kid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Kid nodded.

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

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

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

"I owe it to you, Kid."

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

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

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Mexican!

THE Kid looked into the little hand-glass held by the gaoler, by the glimmer of a match in the man's other hand, and grinned.

The glass did not reflect the Rio Kid.

Not a sign or a trace remained of the handsome Kid, known from the Pecos to the Rio Grande.

In the glass he saw the reflection of a Mexican—a dark-skinned, moustached Mexican to the life.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sure."

"I can trust you, Kid. I reckon you

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

"Not on your life, feller."

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

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

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

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

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

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

And the Rio Kid gagged his unexpected rescuer securely, and left him lying motionless and silent on the floor.

Quietly he opened the back window of the gaoler's room.

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

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

He breathed in deeply the air of freedom.

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

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

He rubbed shoulders with the men of Toro, none of whom gave him a second glance. In the crowd on the plaza there were more than a score of Mexicans, and one more was not likely to excite any interest or attention.

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

"Buenas noches, senor."

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

He smiled as he went.

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

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

The Kid breathed hard.

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

The Kid stood with a dark brow.

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

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

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

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

"All ready, fellers," said Harker. "Shove that box this way, Mike."

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

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

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

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

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

"One hundred dollars, senor."

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

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
A Bid for Freedom!

HANK HARKER glanced carelessly at the Mexican.

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

"Two hundred dollars!"

"Three!"

"Four!"

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

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

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

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

"Five-fifty!" came another voice.

"Six hundred!"

Hank Harker looked round.

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

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

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

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

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

"Muchas gracias, senor," said the Mexican.

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

Mike Cassidy bustled up to the Mexican.

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

The Mexican nodded.

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

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

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

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

The marshal's man grinned.

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

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

Cassidy sniffed.

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

A bunch of horsemen were riding into the street. The Mexican glanced at them. Sheriff Watson of Frio drew rein outside the marshal's house, where Hank Harker waved a hand in greeting.

"You've got him safe, marshal?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cassidy stared at him.

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

The Mexican smiled under the brim of the sombrero.

"I did not mention that, so far from having six hundred dollars for you, senor, I have not even six cents," he said.

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

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

With a bound, the Mexican reached the half-breed who led the 'breed let go the horse and dodged away. He was not likely to face the man who had knocked the burly Cassidy senseless with one blow.

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

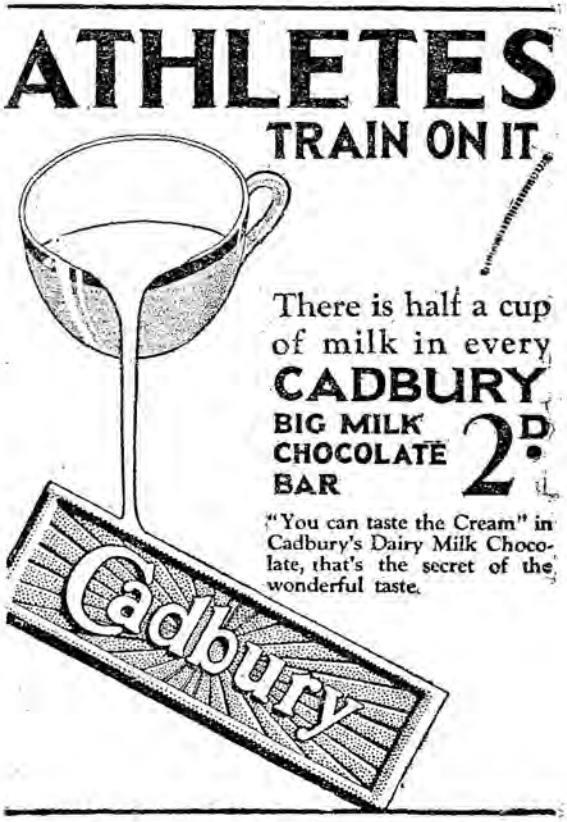
Hank Harker was standing, staring down at the bound gaoler, like a man in a dream; Sheriff Watson stood in the doorway raving with rage.

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

The sheriff choked with rage.

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

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

THE END.

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