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No. 525.

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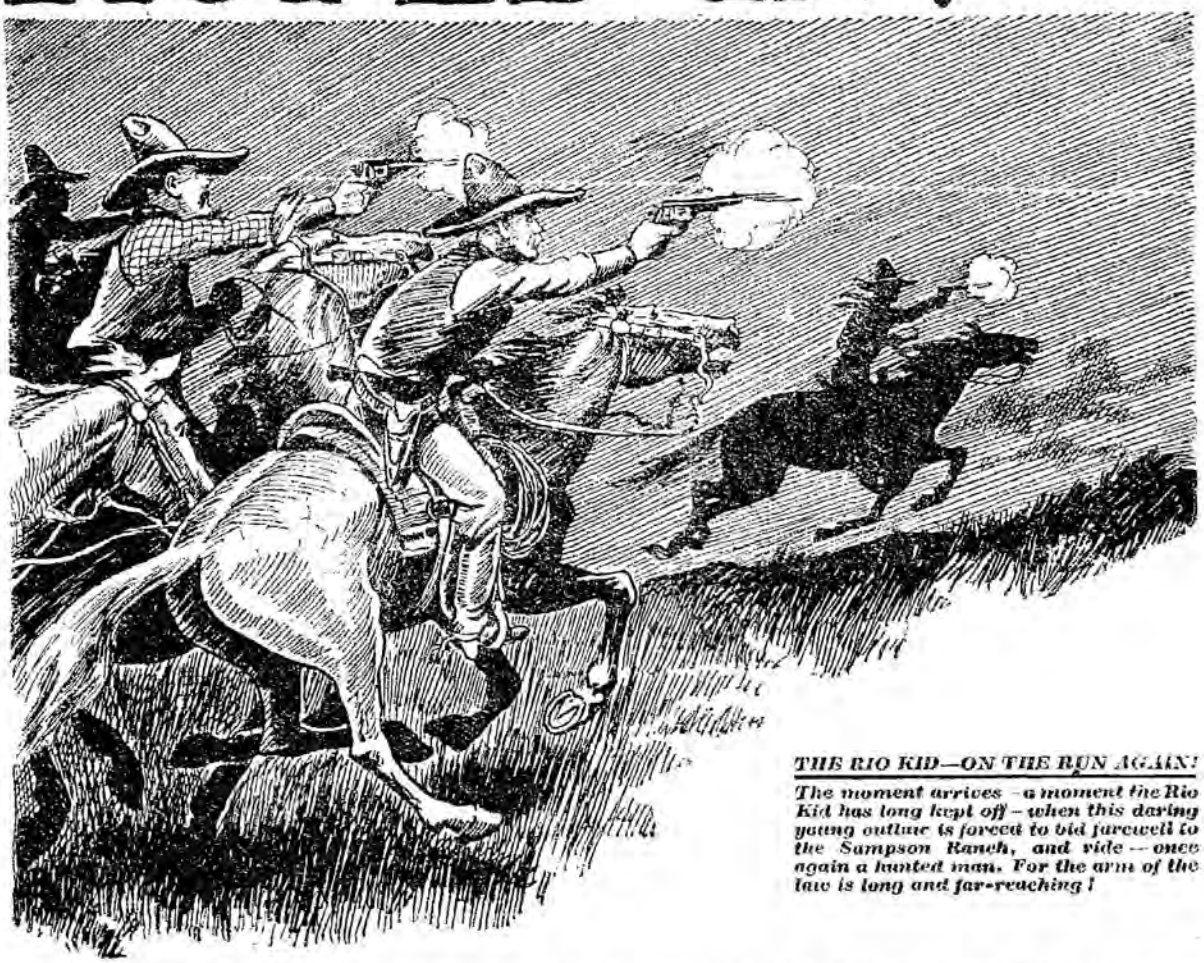


THE RIO KID—ON THE RUN AGAIN!

The moment arrives—a moment the Rio Kid has long kept off—when this daring young outlaw is forced to bid farewell to the Sampson Ranch, and ride—once again a hunted man. For the arm of the law is long and far-reaching!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Kid Has a Grouch!

"THE Kid's got a grouch!"

Santa Fe Sam made that remark in the bunkhouse of the Sampson ranch.

Five or six heads were nodded in assent.

Every man in the Sampson outfit had noticed, for some time past, that the Kid had a "grouch."

"Old Man" Sampson had noticed it, and asked the Kid what the matter was; but the Kid had not explained. All the bunch wondered.

Kid Carfax had always been one of the cheeriest members of the Sampson bunch. Although he had become a partner of Old Man Sampson, he still bunked with the punchers, rode range with them, and punched cows with them. Every man in the outfit liked him; and there was no man in the outfit whom the Kid did not like. From the day he had joined the bunch the Kid had been cheery and light-hearted; it was utterly unlike him to have a "grouch."

But he had it now.

From the open doorway of the bunkhouse that sunny morning the Kid could be seen coming away from the corral, where he had turned in his horse after a ride.

A handsome figure he made, lithe and active, with sunburnt, good-looking face, shaded by a Stetson hat. But the handsome face was clouded now; he walked with his eyes on the ground, and seemed immersed in deep and troublesome thought.

"The Kid's got a grouch, for sure!" said Jeff Barstow, the foreman of the ranch. "What's up with him, you-uns?"

"You can search me!" said Santa Fe Sam.

"I guess I've asked the feller," said Long Bill. "But he sure ain't let on. Somethin's worryin' the Kid."

"He's been like that," said Santa Fe Sam, "ever since that galoot Cactus Pete moseyed in, and the Kid quirted him off the ranch. And that's two days ago."

The Kid was passing the bunkhouse at a distance when Jeff Barstow hailed him.

"Say, Kid!"

The Kid started and looked round. His cheeks coloured a little as he saw many eyes upon him. Deep in his reflections, whatever they were, he had been unconscious of his surroundings.

"Hallo, you!" he answered, coming towards the bunkhouse.

"Give it a name, Kid!" said the foreman, with a grin.

"Meaning——" asked the Kid.

"Fur two days now," said Jeff, "you've been looking like you was going to your own foner'l, Kid. We're all friends hyer. The whole bunch is sure wondering where you picked up that big hump."

The Kid smiled faintly.

"I guess it ain't nothing—nothing I can tell you boys," he said. "I reckon you'll know soon, too."

"Well, that ain't putting us wise," said Jeff. "Look hyer, you got a rookus on with that gol-darned pizen cuss, Cactus Pete, the hombre you quirted off'n the ranch. You ain't letting that worry you any, sure?"

The Kid laughed.

"Not any," he answered. "I guess nothing would please me better than to meet up with Cactus Pete, and see him pull a gun on me. I'd sure make it last sickness for that pizen coyote!"

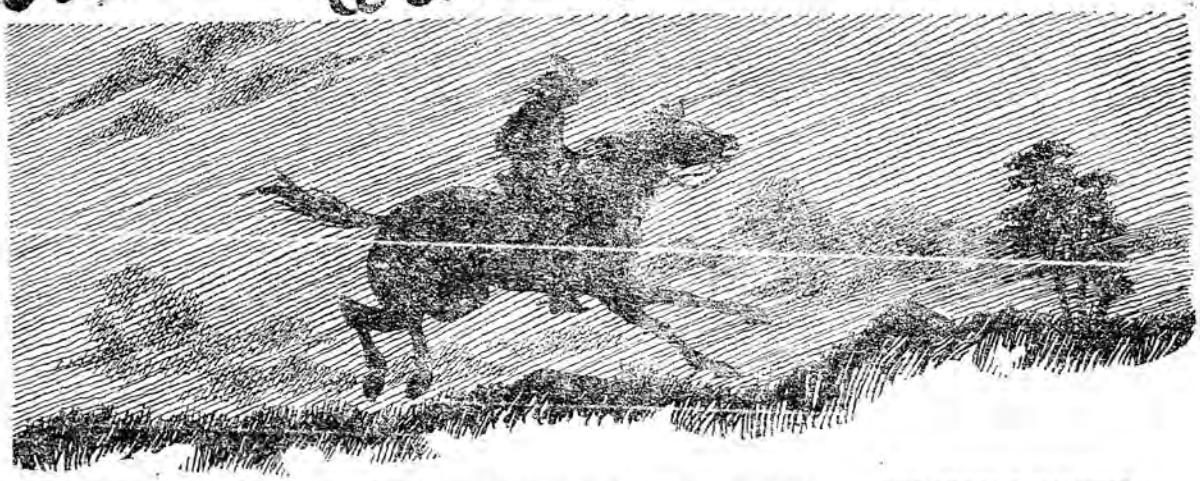
"Then what's the grouch?" demanded Jeff.

The Kid was silent. He had not meant his looks to betray him; but in these days the Rio Kid's heart was heavy. He had been happy on the Sampson ranch; happy as a member of the cheery, contented bunch; happy as

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE!

Our Roaring Western Yarn

By Ralph Redway



a partner of the Old Man; and the place had become like home to the boy outlaw who had, for so long, ridden lonely trails, and camped in the solitary chaparral, and trusted to his aim with his six-gun, and the speed of his mustang, for life and liberty.

Sorely against the grain had the Kid been driven into outlawry; and in that remote corner of Texas, three hundred miles from the Frio country, he had hoped to throw it all behind him. Yet at the back of his mind had always been the thought that the past was not so easily thrown behind; that sooner or later it would rise up against him, and then he would have to mount and ride. And now it had happened—since he had seen the evil face of Cactus Pete, the man from Frio, the Kid had known that he must ride. He knew it—and knew that there was little time to lose; and yet, so far, he had not been able to make up his mind.

Yet every day, every hour, that he lingered, was fraught with peril. Cactus Pete, sore from the Kid's quirt, had fled to San Pedro; and already he must have told his tale—the startling tale that Kid Carfax, partner of Old Man Sampson, was the Rio Kid, the outlaw for whom a reward of a thousand dollars was offered. Ere long armed men would be riding to the ranch, to seize the boy outlaw—the Kid knew that it would come, that it must come. And yet he had not gone.

It was in his heart to regret that he had not put a bullet through the head of the man from Frio, and thus silenced his tongue.

"You ain't letting on, Kid?" asked Jeff, as the boy puncher stood silent. "Can't you trust this bunch?"

"Sure!" said the Kid at once. "But—I reckon, you-uns, I've got to quit, and I hate quitting. I reckon it's me for the trail, and I got to say good-bye to you hombres."

"You quittin' the ranch?" exclaimed Jeff.

The Kid nodded.

"You ain't got any grouch agin the Old Man?" asked Jeff anxiously. "He's sure got a powerful sharp tongue, Kid; but he's a white man down to the boot soles, and he likes you a lot."

"It ain't that," said the Kid. "I like the Old Man, and I guess I like the bunch; but I got to ride—I can't remain here any longer."

"Aw, forget it!" said Santa Fe Sam. "You ain't hitting the trail from this hyer ranch, Kid, you sure ain't! I'll take my riata to you, and rope you in, sure as shootin', if you quit."

Some of the punchers laughed, and the Kid smiled faintly. Jeff Barstow eyed him very keenly.

"You got to go, Kid?" he asked.

"Yep."

"You ain't saying why."

"I guess you'll know mighty soon," said the Kid wearily. "I guess you-uns'll p'r'aps be glad I've beat it, and figure that you're well shut of me."

"If that ain't ornery, gol-darned fool-talk, I've never heard any!" said Santa Fe Sam. "What are they goin' to tell us about you, Kid, arter you've hit the trail?"

The Kid opened his lips, but he closed them again. Not a man on the ranch suspected his secret; and he would not tell them—till it could be hidden no longer. They would know soon enough, when the sheriff came from Nuce, with armed men, seeking him.

"I guess the sheriff of Nuce will put you wise, afore you're much older, fellers!" was all the Kid said.

And with that he walked away to the ranch-house leaving the punchers staring. Santa Fe Sam whistled.

"Now, what did the Kid mean by that, you-uns?" he asked.

Jeff Barstow contracted his rugged brows.

"The Kid's in trouble," he said. "But I reckon he's as white a man as ever saddled a bronc; and if the sheriff moseys along from Nuce, wantin' the Kid, he'll sure go home quicker'n he came. I've got a gun hyer that will back up the Kid agin all the sheriffs in Texas!"

And there was a murmur of approval from the punchers. The Kid would not lack friends, if it came to a fight for his liberty. But it was that very thought that was in the Kid's mind, and that made him realise that he must ride, and ride without delay. And the Kid was going to the ranch-house now, to see Old Man Sampson, and tell him that he had made up his mind to quit.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The Outlaw!

OLD MAN SAMPSON, in his rocker on the porch of the ranch-house, glared at the Kid under his bristling grey brows and grunted.

The Old Man was reputed to have the fiercest temper, and the most lurid flow of language, of any rancher in Texas. But all the bunch knew that he had a heart of gold, and the Kid knew it; and he had grown to have a deep affection for the gruff old cattleman.

In many ways, half-unconsciously, the grim old rancher had shown his liking for the Kid, and the boy puncher hated to break the news to him that he must go. It was concern for him, not anger, that made the Old Man scowl at him as he came up to the porch. The Kid's deeply clouded face worried him.

"You sure look like you've got a grouch, Kid," said the Old Man gruffly. "You got tired of this hyer ranch?"

"I guess not," said the Kid, with a sigh. "But it's two days since I ought to have saddled my mustang and hit the trail, boss. I guess it ain't easy to go, and that's a fact. But I got to."

"Oh, shucks," said Mr. Sampson. "What's biting you now, you ornery young galoot?" He glared at the Kid in alarm. "You ain't sich a locoed mossback as to get your back up over an old man shooting off his mouth occasional? You surely ain't. I'd sure bite off my pesky tongue if I figured it was that."

"Forget it," said the Kid.

"Then what's the trouble?"

"I got to go, sir," said the Kid. He stared out over the wide, sunlit prairie, half-expecting to see a bunch of horsemen topping the grass, from the direction of Nuce; "I guess the time's come to put you wise, sir, afore I beat it. I sure hate to spill it; but you got to know."

He paused, and the Old Man stared at him.

"I guess you've found me a white man," said the Kid restively. "You'll remember me as a square man."

"Square as a die!" said the rancher. "But you ain't beating it any."

"I've got to beat it—or be taken!" said the Kid with an effort.

"Taken—by whom?"

"The sheriff of Nuce."

"Shucks! What you done?" asked the Old Man incredulously.

"You took me on trust hyer, sir!" said the Kid.

"I guess I know a white man when I see one," growled the Old Man. "Don't let on that you ain't square; that won't go with me."

"Did you ever hear of the Rio Kid?"

The Old Man puckered his brows.

"The Rio Kid! Yep—I guess I've heard the name—a young fire-bug who raised Cain in the Frio country—cow-stealing, holding up banks—a durned gunman wanted by half the sheriffs in the west of this state. Yep!—I've heard of that durned young cuss. You surely ain't never had anything to do with that fire-bug!" exclaimed the Old Man, in alarm.

The Kid smiled bitterly.

"I reckon they lay more to the Rio Kid, than he's ever heard of," he answered. "There ain't a hold-up between the Pecos and San Antone, that they don't put down to his account."

"He's sure got some reputation," said the Old Man. "But you ain't nothing to do with that cuss, I guess."

"Only——"

"Only what?" snapped the Old Man.

The Kid drew a deep breath.

"Only—I'm the Kid. I call myself Kid Carfax here, sir—but in my own country they call me the Rio Kid."

It was out now! Old Man Sampson sat as if frozen in his rocker, his eyes fixed on the Kid's troubled face. A thunderbolt falling at his feet could not have startled him more. For a full minute he was silent, bereft of speech; and when he spoke at last, his voice was husky.

"You're loco," he said, "plumb loco! What you mean, you durned young ornery cayuse, letting on that you're that fire-bug, the Rio Kid."

"It's true, boss."

"It ain't true!" roared Old Man Sampson. "I tell you you're loco."

"I guess you got to get it down, boss," said the Kid wearily. "Any minute the sheriff's posse may be here for me; and if they find me, it's me for the long jump. I got to ride, or go back to Frio tied on a hoss. That pesky galoot Cactus Pete knew me in the Frio country, and he's given me away down at San Pedro."

The Old Man clenched his hands.

"You durned young galoot, why didn't you let on afore? The bunch would have strung that coyote up to a tree, if they'd knowed."

"I guess it was bound to come soon or late, sir," said the Kid. "I couldn't go without telling you; and I guess I didn't want to tell you. I'd rather you heard it from me than from the sheriff of Nuce—you'll hear it from him soon enough. You don't want to think too hard of me when I'm gone, sir. They tell a lot of yarns about the Rio Kid; but he never heard of the hold-ups they put down to him, and he'd never rustled a cow in his life. He'd be a square man if he was let."

added the Kid bitterly.

The rancher stared at him.

"But how——" he stammered.

"I guess trouble was fond of coming my way," said the Kid. "I punched cows on the Double Bar Ranch once, down at Frio. One day I was sent into town to get the pay for the bunch; and I was held up by a mob of greasers, coming back, and they went through me and took the roll. Old Man Dawney, the boss of the Double Bar, never believed that I was held up—he figured that I'd roped in the roll myself, and come back with lies to him. That was the beginning of it—I lit out from the Double Bar before I could be handed over to the sheriff; and since——" The Kid shrugged his shoulders.

"And since——" muttered the Old Man.

"Since then, all Texas can tell you about the Rio Kid. I guess I wasn't being roped in, sir, not so long as I knew how to use a six-gun," said the Kid grimly. "But you don't want to believe that I ever was the gun-man and fire-bug that they tell of. I guess if I had been, Cactus Pete wouldn't have lived long enough to tell his story to the sheriff at Nuce."

There was a long silence.

The Kid broke it.

"I guess I've told you, sir, because you was bound to know. Now I reckon I'll saddle up and ride, before trouble hits this ranch on my account. It won't do you any good to have it known that the Rio Kid has bedded down here."

"Dog-gone you!" growled the Old Man. "You ain't riding: I don't care a pesky continental red cent what you was in the Frio country; I know you've been a white man hyer in San Pedro, and you're my pardner. You ain't riding—you're sticking to this hyer ranch, Kid."

"The sheriff——"

"Dog-gone the sheriff!" roared Old Man Sampson. "If he wants to get busy, I reckon he can root out that gang of cow-thieves and boot-leggers down at San Pedro. There ain't a man in the bunch that won't stand by you, Kid, and see you through."

The Kid stood silent.

"You're staying," said the Old Man. "You're my pardner, and you're not goin' to quit. I guess it will have to be squared somehow—money talks. You ain't in the Frio country now. I tell you——"

The Kid, standing silent, was looking away across the prairie. What he had long expected to see, he saw at last. Far across the plains appeared a bunch of Stetson hats, bobbing over a group of horsemen.

The Kid breathed hard and deep.

He had shrunk from telling the old man—he had hesitated too long. And now the sheriff was coming.

"You hear me?" hooted Old Man Sampson. "I tell you——" He broke off, as he followed the Kid's glance and started at the sight of the bunch of horsemen spurring towards the ranch. His face changed. "Kid—you reckon the——"

"They want me!" said the Kid.

The Old Man leaped from the rocker.

"Let 'em come! You ain't quitting! I tell you, this bunch will wipe that crowd out to the last galoot, afore they shall lay a finger on my pardner. Thunder! You pack a gun, don't you?"

"I tell you it means bad trouble for the ranch!" muttered the Kid huskily. "I tell you, I ain't bringing trouble on you and the bunch."

"Shucks!" snapped the Old Man.

He roared from the porch.

"Hyer, you Jeff Barstow!"

The foreman came striding up.

Old Man Sampson pointed to the horsemen, sparring across the prairie, and rapidly approaching the ranch.

"That crowd's coming from Nuce, for the Kid," he said. "I've got a six-gun hyer what says they ain't laying a finger on my pardner. Who's going to stand by me and my pardner?"

"Every galoot in the bunch, I reckon," answered Jeff; and he strode away to the bunk-house.

The Kid made a movement; and the Old Man's iron grip caught his arm.

"Stand where you are!" he snapped.

"Let me go!" muttered the Kid. "Dog-gone it, I should have ridden afore, and saved this! Let me go afore trouble hits this ranch, sir!"

"Forget it!" snapped the Old Man.

There was a rush of the punchers towards the ranch-house. Every man who was not out on the range gathered there, and every man had a gun in his hand. A dozen excited cowmen stood waiting for the Nuce posse to arrive. Santa Fe Sam gave the Kid a cheery grin.

"Don't you worry, Kid!" he called out. "This hyer bunch is seeing you through!"

But the Kid's face was clouded.

With a clatter of hoofs the sheriff's posse arrived at the gate. The gate flew open, and the horsemen—ten armed men—rode up to the ranch-house. They came to a halt before the porch, the burly sheriff of Nuce pushing out before the rest. Old Man Sampson glared at him under his grizzled brows.

"Waal, what's this hyer fandango, sheriff!" he rapped out.

The sheriff did not even glance at the bunch of punchers standing, gun in hand. His eyes lingered for a moment on the handsome Kid, and then fixed on the rancher.

"I guess we're told that that fire-bug from Frio, the Rio Kid, is hiding on this ranch, Mr. Sampson," he answered. "I've sure come for him—if he's here."

There was a buzz among the punchers.

"You're sure loco, sheriff," said Jeff Barstow, with a stare, "there ain't any pesky outlaw hiding in this outfit?"

"He's known here as Kid Carfax."

"Thunder!"

THE CONFESSION! "I'm the Kid—the Rio Kid!" said the young outlaw bitterly. "Wanted in my own country for half the hold-ups!" It was out now! Old Man Sampson sat as if frozen in his rocker, his eyes fixed on the Kid's troubled face. *(See Chapter 2.)*

The sheriff's hand rose and pointed at at the Kid.

"Kid Carfax, if that's your name, I've got your description and your picture, since the information was handed over to me, and I guess there ain't any mistake. I ain't saying you're the Rio Kid, if you deny it, but I got to arrest you on suspicion. Hand over your guns."

"Tell him he's lying, Kid, and let daylight through him!" yelled Santa Fe Sam.

The Kid's lips quivered.

"But he ain't lying, old feller," he answered.

"Gee-whiz!"

"I guess I'm the Rio Kid, same as he allows!" said the Kid. "Put up your guns, you-uns! You ain't pulling on the sheriff for an outlaw's sake. I'm your prisoner, sheriff!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Word of an Outlaw!

"OUTLAW!"

The word passed from mouth to mouth in tones of amazement and consternation.

The Sampson bunch were taken utterly by surprise.

"You're loco, Kid!" gasped Santa Fe Sam.

"Plumb loco," growled Long Bill. "What you giving us, Kid?"

But the Kid's pale, set face carried conviction. A silence fell on the group of punchers.

The Rio Kid drew his guns quietly from their holsters, and, taking them by the barrels, held them out towards the sheriff of Nuce, butts foremost. It was the sign of surrender.

The sheriff pushed his horse a little nearer, and leaned down to take the guns. There was relief, as well as satisfaction, in the sheriff's bearded face. He was pleased at his luck in rounding up so celebrated an outlaw as the Rio Kid; but he was deeply relieved to find him in a surrendering mood. Now that he was certain that Kid Carfax, of the Sampson ranch, was the Rio Kid of Frio, he knew only too well what damage those walnut-butted guns might do, with the Kid's fingers on the triggers.

But the sheriff's triumph was not to be so easy as it seemed. The Kid was ready to surrender, to save trouble to his friends; but his friends were not ready to see him taken, outlaw or not. As the sheriff reached for the guns Jeff Barstow struck his horse with a quirt, and the animal reared and backed, the sheriff almost falling from the saddle. He gripped the reins and recovered himself, but out of reach of the extended guns. Jeff pushed the Kid angrily back.

"Freeze on to them guns, you dog-goned geck!" he snapped. "You ain't going to Nuce along with the sheriff."

"He sure ain't!" said Long Bill.

Old Man Sampson had pulled a gun now. His finger was on the trigger, and his eyes gleaming over the barrel.

"Stand back, Kid!" he snapped. "Now, then, sheriff, you want to hit the trail. You ain't touching Kid Carfax."

The sheriff gritted his teeth.

"I tell you he's the Rio Kid, wanted for a dozen hold-ups and shootings, and there's a reward of a thousand dollars on him. I'm taking him dead or alive."

Old Man Sampson snorted contempt.

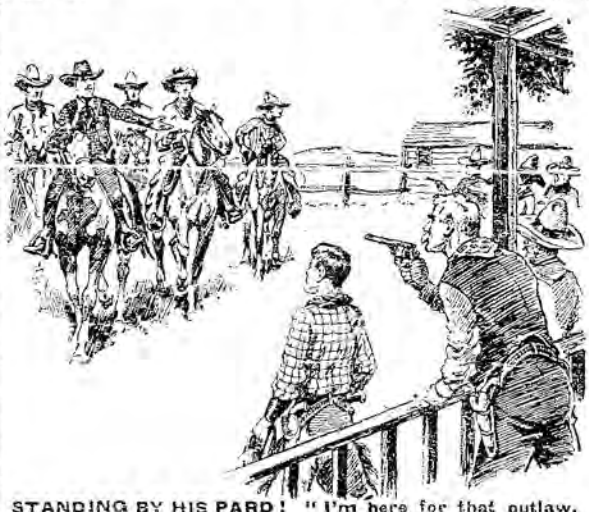
"You ain't taking him at all, sheriff. Ride while you're alive, man—I'm telling you. This hyer outfit don't stand for it."

"Not any!" roared Santa Fe Sam. "Outlaw or no outlaw, we're standing by the Kid."

"All the way!" said Long Bill.

"Fellers," exclaimed the Kid, in great distress, "I guess I ain't wanting you to pull a gun against the law——"

"Oh, shucks!" exclaimed Old Man Sampson. "There ain't a man hyer that won't spill hot lead to keep you safe, Kid!"



STANDING BY HIS PARD! "I'm here for that outlaw, and I'm getting him," said the sheriff. "I give you a minute to surrender and save bloodshed, Kid!" "We sure ain't letting him!" said Old Man Sampson. And from the porch, his revolver covered the sheriff. "Stand where you are!" *(See Chapter 3.)*

"You bet!" roared the punchers.

"Hang on to them guns, Kid," said Jeff. "You want to take a hand when the gun-play begins, I guess."

The Kid breathed hard.

If there was going to be shooting, undoubtedly he wanted to join in on the side of his friends. He reversed the guns, the butts in his hands now. Gladly he would have seen the bunch stand aside, leaving him to take his chance with the posse from Nuce. But that, he knew, they would never do.

Weapons were rising on all sides now. The sheriff's face was dark with anger, his eyes gleaming. The men who rode with him were resolute men, accustomed to hard fighting. But no man was in haste to fire the first shot, which would have been followed instantly by fierce shooting, and falling men on both sides. But there was no sign of yielding in the sheriff's face. He had come there to do his duty.

"I guess you-uns better think twice," he said, at last. "I got to take that outlaw."

"Forget it, sheriff," said Jeff. "I guess if you don't ride, there won't be a man of your crowd ever see Nuce again."

The sheriff set his lips.

"That's as it may be," he answered. "I'm here for that outlaw, and I'm getting him, dead or alive. I give you a chance to surrender and save bloodshed, Kid."

"We sure ain't letting him," said Old Man Sampson. From the porch his revolver covered the sheriff. "You lay a finger that-a-way, sheriff, and you're as dead as Christopher Columbus the next minute."

"Hold your hosses!" said the Kid, in a strained voice. "Sheriff, I guess we can fix this without gun-play. If you know anything about the Rio Kid, you know he's a man of his word."

"I guess that's so," said the sheriff of Nuce.

"You hit the trail for Nuce, then, and wait there, and within two days I'll come in and surrender. I give you my word."

"The word of an outlaw!" jeered one of the posse. "A trick to get on a hoss and vamoose."

"Can that, durn you!" interrupted the sheriff.

The Kid looked at the man who had spoken.

"I guess if I wanted to vamoose, I've had time to hit the trail," he answered. "And I reckon if I'd let these galoots pull the trigger, you'uns would come out at the little end of the horn. You ain't got a dog's chance of getting me by force, and I reckon the sheriff knows it."

The sheriff nodded.

"I guess I'll take your word, Kid," he said slowly.

"I'll keep it," said the Kid simply. "I'd sure rather be taken back to Frio, roped on a hoss, than let one of these galoots get wiped out standing by me. It's a cinch, then?"

"Not much it ain't!" roared Old Man Sampson. "You ain't giving up, Kid, if I have to tie you to your bunk in the bunk-house."

The Kid smiled faintly.

"What I've said goes, sheriff," he said.

"It's a cinch," answered the sheriff.

He made his men a sign to ride.

The whole posse wheeled their horses and rode away to the trail. The punchers glared after them, with angry brows.

That the sheriff trusted to the outlaw's word was clear. And he knew that it was very doubtful whether he could have taken the Kid by force. The odds were on the Kid's side in a struggle, and every man in the bunch was a good man with a gun. Not until the bunch had been wiped out could he have seized the Kid—and few of the posse would have been likely to survive such a struggle, even if victorious. The sheriff of Nuce had a bunch that the boy outlaw would be as good as his word, and he rode away with his men—most of them glad enough to have avoided so fearful a conflict as had threatened.

There was silence at the ranch-house as the sheriff and his men galloped away over the prairie. They disappeared at last in the waving grass in the direction of Nuce.

Then the Old Man spoke.

"Kid, you meant that, I reckon?"

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

"Dog-gone you!"

The Kid smiled.

"I ain't letting this bunch get on the wrong side of the law on my account," he said. "You're too good a man to go up that-away, Mr. Sampson—and the bunch, too."

"I guess I meant what I said, too," said Old Man Sampson grimly. "You mean to surrender to that dog-goned sheriff—but I mean that you shan't! Jeff, you see that the Kid don't get near a hoss. You see him moseying along by the corral, you rope him in."

The foreman grinned.

"I guess I'll rope him in so fast it will make his head swim," he answered. "We ain't losing the Kid."

"And if he gits on a hoss," said Santa Fe Sam, "I'll sure drop that cayuse with a bullet in the laig."

"Ain't you a crowd of durned moss-heads?" said the Kid affectionately. "Why, you ginks, if I'd let you wipe out the sheriff and his posse they'd bring the soldiers here to handle you. I guess it wasn't good enough. If I'd had the sense of a gopher I'd have hit the trail afore this—but it's too late now. Now, I want you galoots to see sense, and let me ride to Nuce."

"Forget it!" said Jeff.

"You ain't saddling any horse on this ranch," said the Old Man. "You're sure staying where you are, Kid; and if the sheriff comes back for you he will have to be coming to his own funeral. That goes!"

And the punchers dispersed; and when, a little later, the Kid went to the corral the horse-wrangler met him at the gate with a grin and a shake of the head.

"No hoss for you, Kid!" he said. "Old Man's orders! You ain't backing a cayuse to ride to Nuce, you ain't, not even if you pull a gun on me."

And the Kid, with a smile, turned away.

He had given his word to the sheriff of Nuce, and he was going to keep it. But not if Old Man Sampson and the bunch could stop him, that was clear.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The Kid Keeps His Word!

SANTA FE SAM started and awoke and rubbed his eyes in the gloom. It was past midnight, and all was dark in the bunkhouse, the silence broken only by the steady breathing of many sleepers. Sam sat up in his bunk and listened. He had intended to remain awake that night to keep a friendly eye on the Kid, but he nodded off to sleep. And now he crawled out of his blankets and struck a match, and held it up to look at the Kid's bunk.

The next moment he gave a shout that awakened every man in the building.

"Hyer, you-uns! Wake up! The Kid's gone!"

"Thunder!"

Every man turned out of his bunk. There was a buzz of excited and angry voices.

"Vamoosed!" exclaimed Jeff Barstow, in disgust, staring at the empty bunk. "He's took his saddle, too. Hump it along to the corral!"

Santa Fe Sam threw open the door, and the punchers rushed out. In the dimness of the starlight they raced across to the gate of the corral. It was closed, but there was a sound of movement among the horses.

"The Kid's there!"

"There he is!" shouted Long Bill, pointing to a mounted figure that showed in the dim corral.

"I guess we're in time to stop him!" grinned Jeff.

And the punchers clustered at the gate, ready to grasp the Kid if he sought to ride out. There was a clatter of hoofs in the corral.

"Look out! He's sure coming!" grinned Santa Fe Sam.

"Thunder! He ain't!" yelled Jeff. "He's taking the wall!"

"Great gophers!"

In the distance, dim in the starlight, the punchers glimpsed the figure of a rider leaping the corral wall at the farther end. The Kid, mounted on the black-muzzled mustang, had cleared the high wooden fence, and was gone.

"After him!" yelled Jeff.

The punchers rushed for their horses, saddled up in hot haste, and dashed out on the starlit prairie in pursuit of the Kid. The shouting had awakened Old Man Sampson in the ranch-house, and he was in the saddle as soon as the rest. The Old Man's face was furious as he spurred on his horse, and rode with a dozen punchers clattering and thudding round him.

"Rope the pesky young cuss in!" shouted the Old Man. "And if you can't rope him, shoot the hoss!"

"You bet, boss!"

And five or six revolvers blazed out after the figure of a shadowy rider that loomed in the starlight ahead.

Gallop, gallop, gallop!

The thudding of hoofs came back.

A BIRTHDAY GIFT?

Why, all you chaps! And you can have one, too! The POPULAR Birthday Gift Club will be starting again in two weeks' time, and a long list of valuable presents will be given away to readers.

Next Week—Full Particulars!

This Week—Tell Your Pals!

echoing from the night. In a few minutes the rider was lost in the shadows.

Thud, thud, thud!

The bunch galloped on fiercely. But the black-muzzled mustang was the fastest cayuse on the ranch, and they realised that the Kid would beat them in a race. The Old Man swore furiously.

"I'll get him, if I have to ride into Nuce for him!" he roared. And he spurred on his horse.

Once or twice in the glint of the stars the Kid was sighted again. He was not riding in the direction of Nuce. Nuce lay to the south-west; and it was north-west that the Kid was riding. Fast on his track rode the Sampson bunch, headed by the Old Man; but fast as they rode, the black-muzzled mustang vanished into the dim distance. The Old Man savagely called a halt at last.

"I guess he aims to circle round to Nuce after dropping us," he growled. "Durn that mustang of his'n! We've lost him!"

"Hark!" exclaimed Jeff.

There was a sound of thudding hoofs in the silence of the prairie. The sound was approaching the halted horsemen.

"He's coming back!" breathed Old Man Sampson.

All eyes were turned in the direction of the hoof-beats. A horse—grey, with a black muzzle—came in sight—with empty saddle. Jeff Barstow's *riata* flew, and the mustang was swiftly roped in. The riderless horse puzzled the punchers; the Kid was not the man to have fallen from his saddle. But as the sweating mustang was pulled in and they looked at it they knew what had happened. The leather holsters, with the two walnut-butted guns in them, were slung on the saddle, and to the saddle a paper was pinned with a yucca thorn. Old Man Sampson, with a trembling hand, jerked it off. It was written on in pencil.

"I'm sending the cayuse back to the ranch. Take care of him. Adios!

"THE RIO KID."

Old Man Sampson read that brief farewell in the light of a flickering match. He crunched the paper in his hand and stared through the dim starlight under wrinkled brows.

The Kid was gone! Night on the vast prairie had swallowed him up, and search was hopeless. The Old Man's eyes were dim, and there was a shake in his voice as he spoke after long silence.

"Dog-gone him, he's given us the slip! I reckon he's keeping his word to the sheriff—but they ain't got him back to Frio yet."

And the Old Man's grizzled brows were wrinkled in deep thought as he rode back to the ranch with the bunch, Jeff leading the Kid's mustang.

* * * * * *

Weary from a long tramp on foot on the prairie, the Rio Kid walked into the town of Nuce under the morning sun. Dismounted, unarmed, the Kid had come—to keep his word. He sauntered coolly along the main street of Nuce, and called out to a lounging puncher to inquire the way to the sheriff's office. And the way being pointed out to him, the Kid walked in that direction, whistling.

The sheriff's door stood open; the sheriff and several men were within. The Kid stopped in coolly.

All eyes were turned on him as he entered.

"'Mornin'!" said the Kid.

"The Rio Kid!"

The sheriff strode forward. Two or three of his men had pulled guns—a proceeding that made the Kid smile.

"Forget it, fellers!" he said cheerily. "I ain't come a-shooting; I've sure left my guns at home. I guess you want me, sheriff! Here I am—and the sooner you get me out of Nuce, feller, the better it will be for your health—before the bunch get cavorting around and raising Cain!"

"You've said it!" said the sheriff grimly. "You're going back to Frio, Kid—and you're going pronto!"

And within fifteen minutes the Rio Kid, with his feet tied under a broncho, was riding out of Nuce to the west, surrounded by armed men.

THE END.

(Now what's going to happen? How can the Kid escape from the sheriff's clutches? See: "THE KID WINS THROUGH!" next Tuesday's roaring Western yarn.)