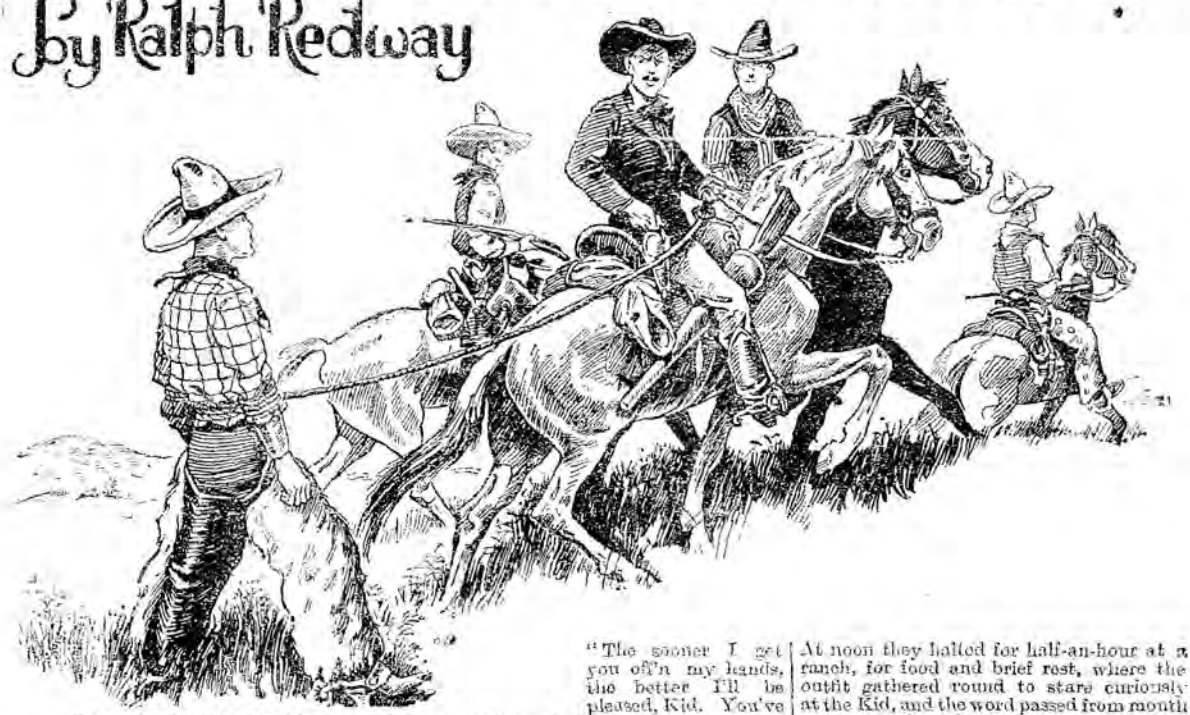
THE KID IS TAKEN AT LAST!

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

The KID WINS THROUGH!

By Ralph Redway



THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Taking a Chance!

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

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

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

"Hump it, Kid," said McCoy, gruffly.

The Kid looked at him, with a smile, as he rode on.

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

"You've said it," answered the deputy. "The sooner I get you off'n my hands, the better I'll be pleased, Kid. You've been roped in afore, and got away; but I guess you ain't getting away this time. And them galoots at the Sampson ranch ain't going to help you none. I guess that was what you was looking for."

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

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

"Oh, sho!" said the Kid, good-humouredly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Crack! crack! crack!

They were firing now.

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

Crack! crack!

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

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

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

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

Crack!

The rifle rang at last.

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

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Prisoner!

THE Kid lay dazed.

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

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

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

But the Kid was in no state to resist.

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

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

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

The Kid panted.

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

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

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

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

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

The Kid shrugged his shoulders.

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

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

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

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

But there was one thing that pleased the Kid, tired as he soon was of tramping. The deputies rode as fast as was possible with a man on foot to keep pace. They forced the Kid to walk very fast, the rope dragging him savagely when he lagged. Nevertheless, the pace was very slow compared with that of the morning, for at his fastest the Kid could not proceed fast enough for the horses to trot, let alone to gallop. And painful as his progress was now, the Kid was glad, for it postponed the arrival at the railroad depot; and the Kid was well aware that, if he was to escape, it would have to be before he reached the railroad. Unless the deputies picked up a new horse for their prisoner, they surely would not hit the railroad by scheduled time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Git up, durn you!"

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

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

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

For a moment the Kid's eyes sparkled. He had gained that much at least; a camp on the solitary plains, five miles from the cow-town, allowed him still to hope. There would have been little hope for a prisoner locked in the calaboose at Lone Ford.

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

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

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

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

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Kid's Chance!

"THAT fixes you, I reckon!"

Jas McCoy spoke with bitter emphasis.

The night was black, a keen wind howled over the prairie, and the rain fell steadily, persistently. There was shelter under the trees of the motte, but the rain soaked in, forming pools in all the hollows of the rugged ground, and every branch was weeping and dripping. The camp fire sputtered and smoked. The Nuce deputies had eaten their supper and handed the Kid a share, loosening one of his hands that he might eat. But when he had eaten, both his hands were tied behind his back with a rawhide thong, wound round and round and knotted with meticulous care and so tightly that the grip almost arrested the circulation. His feet were bound together in the same way, and, for additional security, the riata was knotted round him and the loose end tied to McCoy's belt. McCoy bent over the Kid, examining the rawhide ropes to make all sure, his face dark and surly.

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

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

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

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

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

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

"He's sure safe, Jas," said one of the other deputies with a laugh. "You don't reckon he can bite through that rawhide?"

McCoy grinned.

"Nope! But he's sure a slippery cuss. You galoots camp round him, and if you hear him stirring, plug him."

"You bet."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not as that knowledge dawned on the Kid, his eyes sparkling in the darkness with renewed hope.

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

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

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

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

He listened intently.

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

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

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

The fire no longer burned; only a dim smoke ascended; and the darkness was thick. The horses were tethered under the trees at a little distance. If he could reach them——

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

"Thunder! Who——"

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

The Rio Kid leaped away in the darkness.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Fallen Among Friends!

CRACK! crack!

Flashes lit up the darkness under the cottonwoods.

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

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

"How the thunder——" gasped another voice.

"After him! Plug him!" roared McCoy.

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

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

Crack! crack! crack! crack!

Rifles and revolvers were ringing behind him as he leaped away; and the Kid plunged down on his face in the wet thicket of mesquite, and let the screaming lead whiz over him. He was not six yards from the deputies, but the darkness covered him like a cloak. The bullets tore through the mesquite, tearing bough and twig, as the Kid lay motionless. But the fire stopped at last, and McCoy shouted hoarsely:

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

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

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

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

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

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

"This way!" roared McCoy.

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

Thud! thud! thud!

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

One of the deputies—the man whose horse was injured—remained in the timber island. He was building up the fire; and the light blazed far in the night. The other three rode hither and thither, searching in the baffling darkness for the outlaw who had given them the slip; knowing that all the time he might be only a few yards away, though hidden from their sight. The Kid lay silent. It was not liberty now that was at stake, but life; for he would have been shot at sight could the deputies have caught a glimpse of him. But the blackness of the night favoured the Kid, and the hunt went on unsuccessfully.

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

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

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

McCoy spat out an oath.

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

"You bet."

The horsemen rode back into the timber.

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

The Kid did not linger now.

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

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

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

Gallop! gallop! gallop!

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

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
The Rio Kid Rides!

"THE KID!"

"Great snakes! It's the Kid!" Jeff Barstow threw himself from his broncho, and grasped the Kid's hand, and wrung it. Santa Fe Sam slapped him wildly on the back.

The Kid gazed at them dumbfounded.

"You-uns!" he gasped.

"You bet!" chuckled Jeff, "and we've sure found you, Kid! Looks like you got away from them Nuce scallawags."

"It sure does!" chuckled Santa Fe Sam. "I guess we'd have found you, Kid, if we'd had to ride all the way to Frio."

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

Jeff grinned.

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

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

Santa Fe Sam chuckled.

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

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

His eyes danced as one of the punchers led the big grey mustang to him. Weary as he was, the Kid vaulted into the saddle with the lightness of a bird. The sight of the walnut-butted guns in the holsters gladdened his heart. If the Nuce deputies hit his trail now, they were not likely to rope in the Rio Kid again.

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

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

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

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

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

"We sure will!" said Jeff.

The Kid shook his head.

"Why, you durned mossheads, do you reckon you could hold an outlaw, at the ranch, agin all Texas?" he asked, smiling. "I sure don't want to lose you boys—but I got to hit the trail pronto, and I ask you to ride back without burning powder. You've saved me, and that's all you can do—you ain't drawing a bead on them jaspers from Nuce; you want to remember that they're standing for the law. Shake—and beat it."

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

The Rio Kid rode fast and far that day.

Whether the Nuce deputies picked up his trail and followed, he never knew. The big grey mustang carried him swiftly on the way, and before the sun went down that day, the Rio Kid was far from pursuit.

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

THE END.

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

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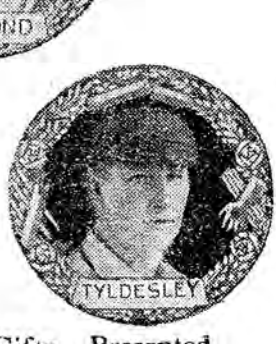

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