YARNS THAT ARE THRILLING THE WORLD!

Adventure, to the Rio Kid, is the spice of life; and the more reckless and desperate it is, the better the young outlaw likes it!

THE RIO KID!

by—RALPH REDWAY

This Week "THE TRAIL OF DEATH!"

ANOTHER ROARING TALE OF WESTERN ADVENTURE, STARRING THE AMAZING HOT OUTLAW, THE RIO KID!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Kid Arrives!

FOR years the nesters—otherwise the settlers—had been coming up the Alamito.

Fences, detestable to the cowboy, barbed wire, more hateful still, stretched for mile on mile, where once a puncher could have ridden sixty miles without pulling rein.

Sheep—worst of all—nuzzled in every hollow and ate the plains bare.

All along the Alamito, from the Pecos right up to the Huecas, the ranchers cursed the smoke of every fresh homestead as it rose to blacken the clear sky.

Within the memory of men still young, the Alamito had been a cow country pure and simple, where vast herds of cattle found ample feed, and the ranchers reigned supreme.

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But the "nester" had been bound to come at last, and with the nester came tall fences and barbed wire and devouring sheep, and the threat of the end of the long dominion of the cattle lords.

Every rancher, every cattleman, looked on the nester as his natural enemy. Burnt fences, cut wire, dead sheep testified to their hatred. But burnt fences were rebuilt, cut wire mended, and the sheep multiplied. There were valleys along the Alamito that were a sea of woolly backs. That the settlers were making the country, that cultivated homesteads were better than vast tracts given up to beef the ranchers could not and would not see, and they resisted the invasion by every means, lawful or lawless, all the more exasperated because it was growing clear that they were fighting a losing fight.

The Rio Kid—a cowboy to his fingerends—cursed the fences as heartily as any rancher as he rode towards the Alamo Ranch under the hot Texas sun.

Certainly he could have ridden by the regular trail, where no fences or barbed wire barred the way of a rider. But certainly he never thought of putting so many extra miles on his ride. On the wide plains, without a track to guide him, the Kid found his way as easily as a city-dweller follows a paved street. Across the trackless plain he would have ridden without a halt but for the fences and the wire. When he had to dismount and find a gate, or kick a passage through a fence, the Kid's remarks were picturesque and emphatic. The Rio Kid was in a new country now, and the ways of the nesters were a new experience for him; but on the spot he conceived for them a whole-hearted hatred, and no longer wondered at the tales he had heard in

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cattle camps of homesteads that had been burnt out and nesters that had been shot at from behind trees.

"Dog-gone their hides!" exclaimed the Kid, in great exasperation as he dismounted for the tenth time at a wire fence. "I guess if I could locate the galoot that put up this durned wire I'd fill him with so many holes he could be used for a colander. Dog-gone him!"

"Say, mister!"

A voice hailed the Kid from the other side of the wire.

The Kid swung round, his hand dropping on the walnut butt of a gun in a low-slung holster.

A raw-boned man, in blue jeans and a Stetson hat, stared at him aggressively through the wire.

"Say, what are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Riding," answered the Kid—"riding, when these dog-goned fences don't get in a galoot's way!"

"You're on private land hyer."

"What!" roared the Kid.

"Don't you know what a fence means, you galoot?" demanded the nester. "Keep to the trails. What are the trails for?"

"Not for me," answered the Kid. "I guess there's nowhere in this hyer State of Texas where a cowboy can't ride if he chooses. You nesters are ruining the country for cattle with your dog-goned fences and your gol-darned sheep!"

"You're trespassing!" roared the nester.

"Trespassing!"

The Rio Kid laughed loud and long.

The man on the other side of the fence glared at him surlily.

"Say, feller," drawled the Kid, "I guess you're the galoot that's run up this durned fence?"

"Yep."

"Then this is for you!" said the Kid.

The nester jumped back as the muzzle of a .45 looked him in the face.

Bang!

The Stetson spun from the settler's head, lifted by the bullet. The man gave a wild yell and started to run.

Bang, bang!

The bullets knocked up the dust round the racing feet of the nester as he fled wildly.

He disappeared, panting, behind a knoll, no doubt in the belief that he had had a series of narrow escapes, so close had the bullets gone. As a matter of fact, the Kid had only been amusing himself. The bullets would not have missed had he wanted them to hit.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Kid, as the terrified nester disappeared from sight.

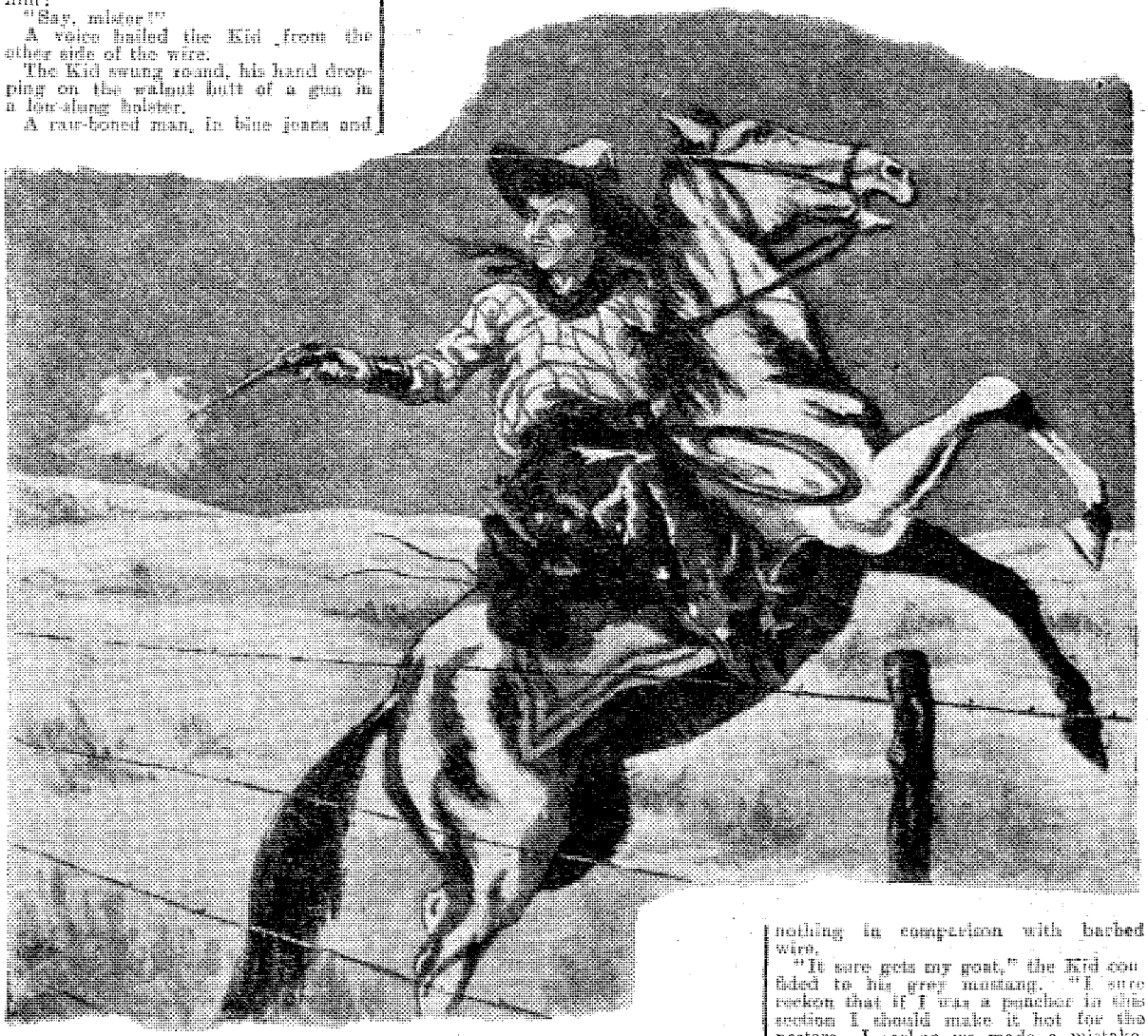
Apparently enlivened and cheered by the episode, the Kid led his horse along the fence till he found an outlet. Then he remounted and rode on his way.

Once he looked back, and saw a white face staring after him and an angry fist shaken in the air.

He laughed as he rode onward.

The wrath of the nester was only amusing to the Kid, who had faced sheriff's men and desperate gunmen with a careless smile on his handsome face.

But his amusement faded as he came on another fence and another. He was glad to get out into the beaten trail at last. Half a dozen extra miles were nothing in comparison with barbed wire.



"It sure gets my goat," the Kid confided to his grey mustang. "I sure reckon that if I was a puncher in this section I should make it hot for the nesters. I reckon we made a mistake, old hoss, in hittin' the trail for this country. But now we're here we'll see what the boss of the Alamo wants."

The Kid rode up to the Alamo Ranch.

It was a low building in the Mexican style, like many of the ranch-houses in the south-west of Texas, square built with a patio in the centre.

The Kid rode through into the patio, and called to a dusky half-breed.

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

"Si, senor."

"Tell him the Rio Kid has called."

The Mexican started and stared at him. Evidently the name and fame of the Rio Kid were known on the Alamito.

"I guess you've heard of me, Diego!" grinned the Kid.

"Si, senor," faltered the Mexican.

"Then get a move on, Pedro, and put your boss wise."

"Si, senor."

The man, with a backward, uneasy glance at the Rio Kid, hurried up the steps of the veranda. The Kid sat his horse in the patio, waiting, his handsome face breaking into a smile as he saw, from a dozen different corners, a dozen faces peering for a glimpse of the man who was wanted by every sheriff and town marshal from the Pecos to the Rio Grande.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Not for the Kid!

"BRING the feller here!"

The Kid heard the rough, gruff voice of Seth Lewson, the boss of the Alamo Ranch.

The rancher was smoking a cigar in a cane rocker on the veranda. The Mexican came back down the veranda steps and begged the senor to ascend.

"Look after my hoss, Felipe," said the Kid as he dismounted.

With a light step the Kid mounted the rough wooden stairway to the gleaming white veranda, decorated with tubs of palms and plants, amid which Seth Lewson sprawled in the rocker and smoked.

The Kid swung off his Stetson in polite salute, eyeing as he did so the boss of Alamo. Seth Lewson was the richest rancher in the valley of the Alamito, boss of the cattle "ring," and the fiercest and most ruthless adversary of the nesters who were slowly but surely spreading up the valley, stripping the plains of cattle-feed with their flocks of sheep, fencing, and growing crops where only bunch-grass had grown before.

Once on a time—and not so long ago—the rancher, from his veranda, could have seen nothing but rolling prairie dotted with his countless herds. Now, as he sat in the rocking-chair, he could discern the smoke from six or seven homesteads in various directions—and every chimney meant fences that barred off his cattle. With his own thousands of acres, he had had undisputed sway over thousands of other acres that belonged to nobody in particular—technically to the State—but used by the ranchers as if the land was their own property, till the nesters came taking up grants and settling and building. Vast as the Alamo domain was, within its own proper confines it could not have fed half its swarming herds. And month by month, year by year, the encroaching settlements were confining the herds more and more within the actual ranch limits.

Lewson looked at the Kid with a keen glance from under his beetling grey brows. He looked a hard man and an imperious man, a man at whose frown his dependents were wont to tremble. But haughty looks and a frowning brow were not likely to daunt the Rio Kid. He gave the grim-featured rancher a pleasant nod and a smile.

"Boss Lewson?" he asked.

"Sure! You're the Rio Kid?"

"That very cuss," agreed the Kid.

"I reckoned you was older."

"So I shall be some day, if a sheriff's rope or a gunman's bullet don't stop me," answered the Kid cheerfully. "I guess I'm old enough, anyhow, to have woke up most of the hornets in Texas. That's why I was glad to get your word—I reckoned it was time I got out of the Frio country for a spell. I've left a lot of galoots gunning after me along the Rio Frio."

The rancher eyed him dubiously.

This handsome, careless fellow, little more than a boy in years, was evidently not what he had expected to see when he had sent for the Rio Kid.

"Well, here I am, feller," went on the Kid. "I guess I don't tumble to what you want with me, but I figured it out that I'd come. You sure ain't offering me a job at punching on your ranch."

"No!" said Lewson.

"Muy bien!" grinned the Kid. "I guess I shouldn't jump at a job in this country. Too many fences and nesters to suit me."

The rancher's eyes gleamed.

"I reckon you've noticed the nesters," he said.

Couldn't ride a mile without noticing the dog-goned galoots!" answered the Kid. "I guess I happened on one hombre who told me I was trespassing, and I shot his hat off to teach him manners."

The rancher smiled grimly.

"I guess I'd be more pleased to hear that you'd shot his head off!" he grunted. "From what I've heard of you, you're sure handy with a gun."

"Heap handy," assented the Kid.

"That's what I want."

The Kid looked at him.

From Galveston to the Staked Plain, there was no man in Texas handier with a gun than the Rio Kid. But if the boss of Alamo had sent for him supposing him to be a gunman, a fellow who would shoot for pay, he had made a very considerable mistake.

"You don't want to shoot it out," went on Lewson gruffly. "You've let all the ranch know now that the Rio Kid is here. I guess you needn't have mentioned your name."

"I guess I'm not ashamed of my name, though they put a few compliments to it in all the towns in Texas," answered the Kid. "Every galoot up and down the Alamito is welcome to know that the Rio Kid is here."

The rancher knitted his brows.

"But spill it," urged the Kid. "I'm waiting to hear what you want, rancher. You asked me to come, and I hit the trail for the Alamito. It suited me to get out of Frio, and that's why. But here I am."

Lewson took the cigar from his mouth and waved it round in indication of the distant smoke of the scattered homesteads.

"They're all nesters!" he snapped.

"Pizen!" agreed the Kid. "I don't love 'em any more than you do. But I guess you didn't ask me to come here to tell me about the nesters."

"Just that!"

Again the Kid eyed him.

"Spill it!" he said.

"You're not the only gunman I've called in," said Lewson. "I've sent for Long Jim Sanders, and I expect him along to-day. You've heard of him?"

The Kid winced.

He had heard of Long Jim, the gunman, a desperado who was what the punchers called a "killer." For the boss of Alamo and his opinion the Kid did not care a straw; but he disliked the idea of being bracketed with a ruffian like Long Jim in any man's mind.

"Can it, boss!" he said quietly. "If you've sent for Long Jim Sanders, the job is not one that will suit me. I reckon I'll get."

"Stand where you are," said Lewson coldly. "The pay will be good, and worth your while. I'm going to drive the nesters off my land."

"Your land?" queried the Kid.

"The land I've used as my own, at any rate!" snarled Lewson. "Nesters are not wanted on the Alamito. I guess I've got half a dozen lawsuits going on now—about burned fences and sheep that have fallen over bluffs, and stacks that have caught fire in the night. But you can burn their fences and fire their stacks, and they still spread! In a few years' time there won't be feed for a third of my cattle on the Alamito. They've got to go."

He leaned forward, his keen eyes on the Kid.

"There's one way of ridding the country of nesters," he said. "I guess this won't be the first section it's been tried in. Drop a man at the plough with a bullet through his cabeza, and I reckon the next galoot won't be in a hurry to drive a plough in the cattle country. You get me?"

A glint of fire came into the Kid's blue eyes.

"I get you," he said.

"That's where my punchers have to stop short," said Lewson. "There's a shindy these days if a man is picked up along the Alamito with the back blown out of his head. You can't get away with it these days—and the punchers ain't the men for it, anyway. It's your job."

"Mine?" said the Kid.

"That's why I've sent for you and Long Jim Sanders—to put holy terror into the nesters," said Lewson coolly. "You'll keep clear of the ranch, and nobody's to know there's any connection, of course. I reckon the nesters will guess; but if they can't prove anything, let them guess what they like. You claim a hundred dollars for every durned nester you leave for the coyotes and the buzzards. Sabe?"

"That's the game, is it?" said the Kid.

"That's it."

"You durned rascal!"

"What?" roared the rancher.

The Kid's eyes blazed at him.

"I guess I don't love the nesters any more'n any other cattleman," he said. "I sure hate the sight of them and their sheep and their fences, turning the cow country into a farmer's country. But I reckon they're within their rights; and as for shooting a man down from behind a tree, like a Mexican brave, only a durned black-hearted scoundrel would figure on such a stunt—and that's your description, Seth Lewson!"

The rancher half-rose from the rocker, his bearded face ablaze with rage, reaching for his gun as he rose.

"Go slow, rancher," the Kid warned. His gun was looking the rancher in the face before Lewson knew that he had touched it—the Kid was lightning on the draw. "Think twice, feller, or it won't be a nester that's found with his cabeza blown off; it will be the biggest rancher and the biggest scoundrel in the Alamito country, and that's you, feller."

Seth Lewson sank back into his chair. His fingers quitted the pistol they had touched, as quickly as if the butt had become red-hot.

The Kid grinned at him cheerfully over the levelled Colt.

"You've sure got hold of the wrong cayuse, feller," he said, laughing. "Leave your gun where it is; it'll be healthier for you."

"You durned ornery young cuss!" exclaimed Lewson, his voice thick with rage. "You—who's wanted for a dozen hold-ups all over the State—you who's hunted by every sheriff from the Pecos to the Grande——"

"Correct!" The Kid nodded. "But I guess I shall never be hunted for doing your dirty work, rancher."

"Vamoose the ranch!" snarled Lewson. "Mount your cayuse and ride, Kid, and the faster you ride the better for your health."

The Kid laughed [illegible]ously.

THE GUNMAN TURNS TAIL! Bending low in the saddle, groaning with the pain of his injured arm, Long Jim Sanders, the gunman, rode madly, heading for the Alamo ranch; and behind him came the Rio Kid! (*See Chapter* 4.)

"I guess I'll mind that gun for you, rancher," he drawled. "You might take me for a nester when my back's turned, and let loose a bullet at the back of my head."

Lewson gritted his teeth as his gun was jerked away.

"Sit where you are," said the Kid quietly. "Show your face over the parapet of this varanda before I've lit out, rancher, and I'll show you that I'm handier with a gun than you ever heard of. Sit where you are, you durned skunk, and be glad I don't spread your brains over your rocker before I vamoose."

And, turning his back disdainfully on the enraged cattle-lord, the Kid swung carelessly down the steps to the ground.

"My hoss, Juan!" he called out to the Mexican.

"Si, senor."

The Kid mounted the grey mustang and rode out of the patio. A horseman, riding in, passed him and gave him a look in passing.

The Kid returned the look with interest.

The horseman was a powerful, black-bearded fellow, with a face as hard as tanned leather, and only one eye, that glittered like steel. In five or six places his hard face was scarred. Any sheriff in the south of Texas would have known the man; and the Kid knew him. It was Long Jim Sanders, the gunman; the most ruthless desperado on the border. Long Jim Sanders, the "killer."

As if divining hostility in the handsome face of the Kid, the gunman slid his hand towards a holster.

"Don't touch it, feller," smiled the Kid. "It's sudden death if you do." He checked his mustang. "Say, bo, you're Long Jim Sanders?"

"Correct!" said the gunman briefly.

"You're here to see Boss Lewson?"

"Yep."

"Take my advice and hit the trail," said the Kid. with a touch of earnestness. "What's wanted here is too dirty for even you to touch, though I guess your record would make an Apache blush."

Sanders laughed.

"Run away to your schoolmarm, sonny," he answered, and he rode on into the patio.

The Kid gave a shrug of the shoulders and rode away from the Alamo Ranch at a gallop.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Kid Takes a Hand!

"KID, you're a durned fool!"

The Rio Kid's handsome face was half amused, half angry as he thus apostrophised himself.

It was some days since his call at the Alamo Ranch, but the Kid was still in the Alamito country.

He had ridden away from the Alamo with the intention of hitting the trail without the least delay, and getting out of that country of nesters, fences, sheep, and other things hateful to the cowman's soul.

But he had not hit the trail.

For days the Kid had camped along the Alamito, and his motive was one that made him grin at his own weakness.

From where he stood now, watching the black-muzzled mustang drink at the margin of the Alamito, he could see the smoke of homesteads rising in a dozen different directions. Woolly backs dotted the plain within his sight. Blackened stumps of trees, burned down by the settlers to clear the ground, rose from the grass that was cropped low by the devouring sheep. All things that he saw were hateful to the eyes of the Rio Kid, bred a cowboy, bred to hostility to the nester. And yet he lingered in the Alamito country, though every instinct urged him to ride.

"You're a durned fool, Kid!" he repeated. "You can't mind your own business, you can't! What's the nesters to you, you doggoned gink? What do you want to butt in for, and hunt for trouble with the durndest fire-bug in the Lone Star State?"

The Kid sighed.

He was anxious to go; to find himself riding once more on boundless plains, with never a fence, and with the grass rising over his chaps as he rode. And yet he did not think of going.

Somehow, he could not. He loathed the nesters and all their works; but the thought of Long Jim Sanders stalking

the settlers hung in his mind. That desperate scheme of Boss Lewson's was nothing new on the border, and it was no business of the Kid's, as he told himself a hundred times. Where the settlers came, they came like locusts, and the cattlemen were driven out, as their fathers had driven out the Redskins from their hunting-grounds. But it was the law of progress, as the Kid was intelligent enough to see, with all his cowman's prejudices. The Red man's hunting-grounds had changed into cattle-ranges, and the cattle-ranges in the course of time must give way to cultivation—cattle driven out by wheat. All that he knew, all that he loved, must change and vanish; and it was not surprising that ranchers who had lorded it so long over the great prairies should adopt desperate measures to check the invasion. The Kid sympathised with all his heart, so far as that went. But there was a limit. To shoot a man with a gun in his hand and the light of battle in his eyes, was one thing; to shoot an unarmed man from cover was quite another, and it got the Kid's goat to think of it.

But he laughed at himself, and wondered what his old comrades of the Double Bar would have thought of the Kid championing the nesters against Boss Lewson's gunman.

Crack!

The sudden ring of a firearm interrupted the Kid's meditations.

He glanced round.

Far away from the river-bank a faint curl of smoke rose for a moment from a fringe of pecans.

"That was a Winchester!" murmured the Kid. "I reckon the nesters don't handle Winchester rifles; shotguns are their sort. I reckon Long Jim has been earning his first hundred dollars."

The report of the rifle was followed by silence.

The Kid frowned.

Somewhere between him and the fringe of pecans, he knew, a man lay with a bullet in him; if it was Long Jim Sanders that had pulled trigger, he had not missed the mark. The Kid pondered and scowled. The nesters were nothing to him—he loathed the invaders who were ruining the cattle country. But he whistled to his horse to follow him, and tramped up the grassy bank of the Alamito.

Faintly the thud of a horse's hoofs came to his ears. Beyond the distant fringe of pecans, where he had seen the curl of smoke, a horseman was riding away at a gallop. The hoofbeats died into silence; the assassin was gone.

The Kid tramped on, the mustang following obediently. Somewhere in the grass a man lay dead or wounded, he knew. The Kid was going to help him; and he knew that that was why he had lingered in the Alamito country—to stand between the gunman and his intended victims.

A groan came to the Kid's ears.

He came suddenly on the gunman's victim. The man was stretched in the grass on a hollow of the plain.

"Gee!" ejaculated the Kid.

He had seen the man before. It was the nester who had spoken to him at the wire fence days ago, on his way to the Alamo Ranch—the man at whom the Kid had fired in sardonic fun. The big, raw-boned man lay on his back, groaning, in a pool of blood. His haggard eyes looked up at the Kid, and there was terror in them. Evidently he recognised the Kid, too.

The Kid looked down at him, and his eyes glinted. At that moment the Kid knew why he really had stayed on the Alamito; he knew that he was staying till he could "get" Long Jim Sanders. If this was the first hundred dollars that the gunman had earned, it should also be the last.

"Say, feller, don't be scared," said the Kid quietly. "I guess I'm here to help. Amigo, hombre—amigo!"

He dropped on his knees beside the man.

The nester, half conscious, watched him dully. He was unable to stir; he was helpless in the Kid's hands. The gunman had shot him down and fled; and had not the Kid been on hand he would have died there. Already the clear blue sky was darkened by the shadow of the buzzards.

"I guess you're hard hit, hombre," said the Kid, as he looked at the wound. "I reckon if Long Jim had put it half an inch lower, feller, you'd have got yours for keeps. There'd have been one durned nester the less in this hyer country."

The man muttered, and the Kid bent low to catch his words. One word he caught.

"Wife!" repeated the Kid. The man had a wife, then, doubtless awaiting his return at his shack. The flame of wrath burned more fiercely in the Kid's breast.

"Courage, hombre," said the Kid softly. "I'm helping you, and I guess I can pull you through and take you home."

With quick, light fingers the Kid worked. His life on the plains had taught him rough surgery. He staunched the flow of blood and bound up the wound. The man watched him with dulled, amazed eyes. He could not speak, but his look testified his gratitude.

"I reckon you'll pull up with nursing, fellow," said the Kid. "Once I get you home you'll do. Do you figure it out you can guide me if I put you on my cayuse?"

The man nodded.

He was a heavy weight, but the supple Kid lifted him into the saddle with ease. The nester held on to the high saddle with both hands for support; the Kid took the bridle and walked by the horse.

He was half-smiling as he walked, leading the grey mustang. This was the Rio Kid, hunted for his life out of the Frio country, whose name was a terror along the Rio Grande del Norte, and he was playing the Good Samaritan—to a nester, loathed of all cattle-men. The situation was amusing to the Kid.

But he led the mustang on, over mile and mile of rugged prairie. Like all cowboys, the Kid hated walking. Of his own will he would never have travelled a hundred yards out of the saddle. But he walked now contentedly, leading his horse—and did not curse the fences that stopped him and made him go round. He came at last to the lumber farm-house with its sheepfolds. A hard-faced woman came to the door, but the hard face melted into fear and tenderness at the sight of the wounded man.

"I guess your man's been hurt, ma'am," said the Kid, sweeping off his Stetson. "But you ain't any call to be scared, ma'am; he'll pull through. I reckon if you'll get him to bed I'll mosey along to Alamito town for the doc."

Five minutes later the Kid was riding for the town, joyous to find himself in the saddle again after that weary tramp afoot, and urging on the mustang to wild speed.

He rode into Alamito like a whirlwind.

Five or six men on the street saw him and knew him, and there was a shout:

"It's the Kid—the Rio Kid!"

The Kid rode on, laughing, up the rugged street. He stopped at the doc's frame house and shouted his message, and rode out of the town, leaving the street in a buzz behind him.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Run to Earth!

THE death-hunt was long and weary.

The Rio Kid tired of it long before it was over, but the Kid did not give up because he tired. When he tired, it was his way to set his teeth and keep on with more resolution than ever. He had taken on a rough proposition, and he knew it. There were sheriffs, and bold men, too, who, when they looked for Long Jim, hoped that they would not find him. The Kid hoped that he would find him, though he knew that when he found him he would be nearer to death than he had ever been in his wild and wayward life.

Exactly when it dawned upon Sanders that the Kid was trailing him the Kid did not know; but he knew that the gunman had become aware of it. The Kid was cool and cautious. He stalked his man like an Apache; but he was stalking a man who knew every move in the deadly game. For three days he hunted the gunman, and then he learned that the gunman was hunting him. A bullet that tore the Stetson from his head was a warning—the first but not the last. Camping one night in a grove of pecans, the Kid wakened to find the pecans in a blaze round him. Only once he sighted his enemy, and then it was a nester's wire fence that checked the pursuit and saved the gunman. But the Kid was keeping on, his determination growing harder and more deadly with every day of toil under a burning sun, every night of watchful peril. Death lurked in every shadow—from every bush the death-shot might ring at an unguarded moment. But the Rio Kid's unguarded moments were few.

And then, suddenly, he knew that he was no longer hunted. The gunman was on the run again. The Kid laughed when he realised it. His own nerve had hardened as he played the desperate game; but the gun-man, bully and desperado and murderer, was not made of the same stuff. Long Jim Sanders, with more deaths to his account than he had fingers and toes, was "rattled." Seven days of incessant peril had shaken the "killer's" nerve.

And so it came to pass that one hot afternoon, as the gunman lay panting in the cover of a thicket beside his weary horse, dreading at every moment to hear the footsteps of the deadly tracker, the sight of a Stetson hat with a band of silver nuggets made his heart leap. It was the Rio Kid's hat showing through the foliage. And Long Jim Sanders, throbbing with fear and hate, grasped his Winchester and blazed away.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Three bullets pumped from the repeating-rifle in fewer seconds, and crashed through the hat before it could fall. A yell of triumph broke from the gunman.

"I've got you at last, Kid!"

A low laugh answered him, but it did not come from the direction of the hat that had spun down through the leaves.

The gunman knew that he had been tricked—tricked by an old device—and he spun round, and even as he spun the bullet came.

Crack!

It was the bark of the Rio Kid's six-gun, and Long Jim Sanders staggered and fell across his resting horse, the Winchester dropping into the grass

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from an arm that was broken by the bullet.

The Rio Kid laughed again.

"You've sure damaged my hat, hombre!" came his voice, though he was still unseen in the pecans.

The gunman heard him groping for his hat, through which ran three bullet-holes close together. He dragged at his horse, threw himself upon it, grasping the reins in his left hand, his right arm hanging like a broken stick, and dashed madly out of the thickets to the plain. The cover had not saved him; the cover had delivered him into the hands of his keener enemy. Driven by terror, the gunman galloped wildly; and behind him, as he galloped, he heard the beat of the hoofs of the black-muzzled mustang.

Bending low in the saddle, groaning with the pain of his injured arm, Long Jim Sanders rode madly, heading for the Alamo ranch. That was his only refuge now—if he could reach it. But miles of sun-baked prairie lay between him and the ranch, and he knew that the Rio Kid never missed. Why did not the Kid fire again and drop him from the saddle? Every instant he expected the death-shot as he rode madly; but still the Rio Kid did not fire. Perhaps he would not fire on a fleeing man—Long Jim had heard such things of the Kid. But close behind the fleeing man came the persistent tattoo of the black-muzzled mustang's hoofs. The Kid was not shooting, but he was riding his enemy hard.

The ranch at last, and Long Jim panted with relief to see the gateway into the patio open. Once inside the ranch buildings, that young demon would never dare to follow him in—into the stronghold of the cattle boss. But he did not yet know the Kid.

Startled looks and startled shouts greeted the gunman as he thundered into the patio. He rolled from his horse, and stood panting, reeling against the steps of the veranda. Seth Lewson came striding up to him with a black brow. The strictest orders had been given to the assassin to keep clear of the ranch. For his neck's sake the ranch boss did not dare to let his connection with the hired killer become known.

"You durned hobo, what you doing here?" thundered Lewson.

The gunman panted.

"The Kid's got me, boss!"

"The Kid!"

"And he's coming!"

There was a crash of hoofs as the Rio Kid rode recklessly into the patio, stared at by a score of eyes. Seth Lewson dragged at his gun, and the Kid's Colt rang, and the rancher's gun spun from his hand, and two of his fingers along with it.

"That for you, rancher!" said the Kid grimly. "Put 'em up, or it's you for the long trail!"

White with rage and the pain of his wound, the rancher raised his hands above his head, one of them streaming blood.

"Let up, Kid!" panted the gunman. "Let up! I allow you've got me, and I'm hitting the trail! Let up!"

The Kid's look was grim, and his look struck terror to the very soul of the gunman. But he nodded.

"I guess you won't use a gun again in a hurry, Long Jim," said the Kid lightly. "And you, rancher, you'll think twice before you bring another gunman into the Alamito country. You've got what was coming to you, and I'm letting you off; but you want to remember that if you keep on this game you haven't finished with the Rio Kid."

A score of men of the Alamo Ranch had gathered—there was a weapon in every hand. The Rio Kid's cool eyes swept round at the circling faces. In either hand he gripped a walnut-butted gun.

"Say, you 'uns, who wants trouble with the Rio Kid?" he called.

Not a voice answered, not a hand was raised, as the Kid backed his horse through the gateway. On the open plain he wheeled his mustang and rode.

. . . . . .

The nesters on the Alamito had cause to be glad that the Rio Kid had ridden that way, though they never knew. Many of their voices joined in the roar of wrath and condemnation at the story of the reckless outlaw who had ridden into the Alamo Ranch and shot up the ranch boss under the eyes of his outfit.

But little cared the Kid. Far from the Alamito, in a country where nesters and wire fences were unknown, hunted for good deeds as well as bad, the Rio Kid rode gaily, with a light heart.

THE END.

(You'll find another roaring tale of the Rio Kid in next week's issue, entitled: "THE KID'S VENTURE!")

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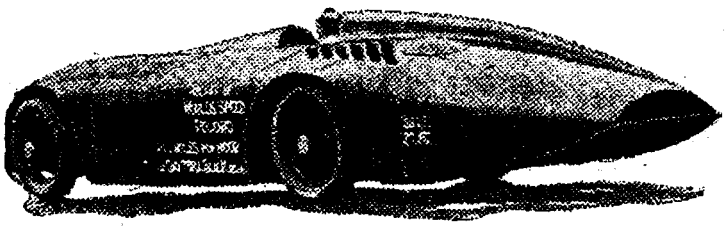

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by Ralph Redway

This Week:
"THE KID'S VENTURE!"

A ROARING TALE OF ADVENTURE IN SOUTHERN TEXAS, FEATURING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Kid Chips In!

THE *proclamation* had been read, or taken as read, and for the hundredth or the thousandth time bare-legged patriots had turned out to fight enthusiastically in the sacred cause of liberty and loot.

Mexico was in the throes of one more revolution, and the tide of conflict swept along the southern shore of the Rio Grande—spent bullets dropped like hailstones on the Texan side of the river. The Rio Kid, camped on a grassy bluff that overlooked the border stream, found a cynical amusement in watching the scene that unrolled before his eyes.

The fighting had been going on all day. From early morning, when the Kid had broken camp, till the hot noontide when he camped on the bluff by the river, he had heard the roll of firing. Now he could see all that was to be seen, and he sat idly with his back propped against a cottonwood trunk, while his mustang lay at ease in the thick grass, and watched. Smoke blurred the clear sky from the incessant firing; wild horsemen charged and charged again. Often their fierce yelling reached the ears of the Kid, borne on the wind. The battle was great, but the casualities were not in proportion; it was the semi-pantomimic warfare of the Latin race, not the stern death-grip of the Anglo-Saxon.

Such as it was, the Government troops seemed to be getting the upper hand—the Kid judged that they were the Government troops, because a few were in tattered uniforms, and the rest a trifle less ragged than their opponents. The firing slackened as the hot afternoon wore on, the conflict drifted away from the river; wounded men, sprawling in the grass, were being despatched by thrusts of rusty bayonets. The rebels were in retreat. The Kid yawned. The show was nearly over, and he began to think of saddling his mustang and riding. Then his attention became fixed on a little scene that was being enacted by the gleaming river that *coiled between him and Mexico.*

A little bunch of fugitives had rushed down to the river, with the evident intention of escaping across the Rio Grande *into Texas.* Across the border they could not be pursued, and only the river lay between them and safety. Five or six of them rushed into the shallow water, which was spattered by bullets round them; but only two reached the middle of the stream. The Kid, his attention arrested, watched them with interest. For men escaping from death he could not help feeling some sympathy, and he was tempted to intervene.

A horseman—an officer of rank by his gaudy uniform—had dashed into the stream after them, his *horse sabre* glittering in the sun. The two remaining fugitives plunged and scrambled on desperately to reach the Texan side, but the Mexican capitano was close behind on his powerful horse.

The Rio Kid's hand dropped on his gun. But he shook his head. He had no call to chip into a shindy on the other side of the border—for both parties, loyalists and patriots, he had the same profound contempt. For hundreds of miles the richest soil in the world lay uncultivated, while the hands that should have laboured there were engaged in imbecile warfare. His hand was on his gun, but he did not draw it—only he rose to his feet under the big cottonwood, and stood watching.

Dripping, panting, smeared with mud, the two Mexican rebels staggered from the water and reeled into the thick *grass on the safe side.*

The Kid was relieved. He was glad to see them safe; and he looked with some amusement at the pursuer, expecting to see him wheel his horse and ride back.

But the Mexican capitano did not wheel his horse.

He came right on, and rode up the bank on Texan soil, and his sword flashed in circles over the two wretched figures that lay exhausted in the grass.

A blaze came into the Kid's eyes.

With the fighting on the Mexican side he had nothing to do; no feeling except one of scorn for the whole mob of Greasers, who could find nothing better to do for their country than to

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squabble and fight like a swarm of wild-cats. But when the matter was transferred to Texan soil there was a big difference. On Texan soil the fugitives were under the protection of the Lone Star flag, had anyone been there to enforce its protection. The Rio Kid was there. The law had eager hands stretched out to seize the Rio Kid; but the Kid could stand for the law when the spirit moved him to do so, and it moved him now.

The gun leaped from his belt.

The roar of the Colt was followed by the dropping of the Mexican capitano's sword-arm, broken at the elbow by the bullet.

"Caramba!"

The Mexican's yell of pain and surprise rang loudly, as the Kid strolled down the grassy bluff towards him, the gun still in his hand.

"Beat it, feller!" called out the Kid cheerily. "You want to hit the other side of the river as fast as you know how!"

He made a motion with the revolver; and the Mexican, with a glare of rage, plunged his horse into the river again, and rode for the southern side.

The Kid stood looking after him, with a smiling face, and replaced his spent cartridge with another.

"Gracias, senor!"

It was one of the fugitives that spoke.

They were on their feet now, panting, dripping with water. The Kid glanced round at them and nodded.

"I guess you were getting yours, senor," he remarked.

"A thousand thanks, senorito!"

"One's enough," remarked the Kid. "I guess I wasn't going to let that bulldozer spill your vinegar on Texan soil. You'd sure better levant before they get you with a gun."

The advice was good. From the Mexican side several rifles had begun to ring, and bullets whizzed across the shining water. The Kid, as coolly as if he was unaware that firing was going on, walked back to where he had left his horse under the cottonwood, and the two Mexicans hurried after him. The big trunk of the cottonwood gave them ample cover.

"I guess they haven't learned to shoot yet," the Kid remarked contemptuously, as a bullet whizzed by a couple of yards from the tree. "I could sure pot a bunch of them from here with a six-gun, if they were worth the cartridges, which they ain't."

He looked rather curiously at the two Mexicans he had rescued.

They did not look such ragged scarecrows as most of the rebels. The man who had spoken in English was fat and prosperous-looking, dressed like a well-to-do haciendero; the Kid judged him to be a Mexican ranchero, and the other man, who had no English, something of the same sort. Both of them seemed full of gratitude for the service the Kid had rendered them, and expressed it with Spanish effusiveness. The Kid hardly heeded them, as he stood under the cottonwood looking across the river.

The sun was sinking now behind the soaring peaks of the Sierra Madre; the firing had ceased, though every now and then the crackle of shooting burst out faintly from afar, showing that the pursuit of the rebels was still going on in a desultory way. The Kid did not care much for the company he found himself in; he did not like Greasers. But he had saved their lives, and they were fugitives, and the Kid's manners could be irreproachable.

"I reckon I'm bedding down hyer for the night," he told them. "If you two guys can't do better, you're sure welcome to a share of the fire and the bully beef. Say!"

And with many "gracias," the Mexicans accepted the offer, and camped with the Kid; while, far away on the other side of the river, as the sun vanished behind the Sierras, twinkling watch-fires gleamed like stars through the velvety night.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
A Desperate Venture!

DON RICARDO VELASQUEZ talked freely by the smouldering camp-fire in the dark shadow of the cottonwood, in English to the Kid, in Spanish to his companion Sanchez. He was not, the Kid learned, with amusement, a rebel from choice or conviction. His scorn was equally divided between the Ladrones who governed his country and levied heavy taxes upon him, and the other Ladrones who sought to govern it and levy heavier taxes upon him. He had joined the revolution, like many others, for the excellent reason that it had broken out in his province, and it was the only way to save his home from being burnt out by the patriots. Three years, he told the Kid, had passed since the last revolutionary fighting in his province, and in that space of time his ranch had prospered, and he had many herds; but now—— Don Ricardo shrugged his plump shoulders up to his ears.

If the revolution was a success, he could carry on till the next one broke out, at least. But it looked like being a failure, which meant confiscation of his estates and his herds, and for himself, being placed against a blank wall and shot, if he was found on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande. There had been fierce fighting for days, he told the Kid; and the one-time puncher of the Double Bar listened without betraying his amusement.

So far as the Kid had seen, some two or three thousand Government troops had been engaged with twice their number of ragged rebels, in the conflict he had watched from afar. With the punchers from half a dozen ranches along the river to back him up, the Kid would have undertaken to wipe out both parties, showing them in the process what fighting really was like. But he was too courteous to tell the Mexican so, and he listened with only polite comments.

It appeared further from the senor's discourse that, although he had saved his ranch from being burnt out by the rebels, by joining in the revolution, he had not exactly trusted his comrades in the cause of Liberty. He possessed a herd of five hundred cows, bred from imported Texan stock, which would have been an irresistible temptation to the hungry patriots, had they been able to lay thievish hands on them.

Prudently the senor had had them

driven into a secret valley in a distant part of his estates, under the care of a couple of faithful half-breeds, to lie hidden there till the fighting was over, or till it drifted away into another district. He had hoped to find an opportunity of driving them across into Texas, his ranch being fortunately so near the border; but he had not found an opportunity; for, once seen, his bunch of cows would have been in equal danger from the troops and from the patriots.

So they were still hidden, feeding in the secret valley, while he, Don Ricardo, was a fugitive from his native land, and dared not venture back across the river for his life, at least, until matters settled down again. The revolution might be successful, though matters looked black at present. If it proved to be a failure he would have to make his peace by bribery. In the meantime, he would lose his cows. Sooner or later they would be found and taken, by one party or the other—or the faithful half-breeds, seeing that he did not return, might take possession of them themselves and drive them away.

He himself, the senor continued, could not venture across the river. He was known, and a marked man. But the valley where the cattle were hidden was not many miles from the Rio Grande. The trails were lonely, and it would not be a long drive to get the beasts into Texas. Under cover of a starry night it was possible for an experienced cowpuncher, who might be able to elude both patriots and troops, and who, at all events, as belonging to neither side, would be safe in making the venture. Don Ricardo talked volubly in this strain, his black eyes watching the Kid's sunburnt face intently, the other man, Sanchez, listening and watching also.

The Rio Kid listened with more interest now.

Cutting out a bunch of cows on the Mexican side of the border, facing danger from both fugitive patriots and victorious troops, was a desperate venture, desperate even in the eyes of the Rio Kid, who thought nothing of setting his life upon a cast.

But the idea appealed to him all the same; all the more, perhaps, because it was so desperate.

The Mexican's words did not delude him. He knew that belonging to neither party would not help him. It would simply give him two sets of enemies instead of one. At every step of the way he would carry his life in his hand. But the Kid was used to that.

He understood the Mexican's view perfectly.

If this reckless puncher undertook the task he would succeed, or he would fail. If he succeeded, so much the better. If he failed, he would be killed; but Don Ricardo would still be on the safe side of the river, so no harm would have been done. Don Ricardo Velasquez, flowing with gratitude and effusive Spanish courtesy, was thinking only of one person—Don Ricardo Velasquez. The Kid was well aware of that, and quite well aware that if he crossed the border on such a desperate errand, the Mexican would hope, but would not expect, to see him alive again. That knowledge, however, only brought a grim smile to the Kid's handsome face.

Don Ricardo, eyeing the Kid through the smoke of a thick, black Mexican cigar, spoke out more plainly at last. His young friend, the senorito who had so gallantly rescued him, was evidently a puncher, and used to cows; evidently a brave man, the bravest of the brave; evidently the man to succeed where a hundred others might fail. Would he care to undertake the task, for a due reward, of course?

"Now you're spilling it," agreed the Kid.

"The young senor is not rich—richissimo?" asked Don Ricardo. And the Kid laughed and shook his head.

"Bring me my herd across the river, and twenty cows shall be your reward."

The Kid laughed again.

"Forget it," he answered.

"A hundred!" said Don Ricardo.

The Kid reflected.

It was madness to make the venture, he knew that. He knew that Don Ricardo and his companion would not have made it for a fortune. But what a greaser dared or dared not mattered little to the Kid. The man was willing to send him to death, on the barest chance of recovering his herd, but the Kid did not resent that. His life had lain on hard paths, and he expected little of his fellow-men. The Kid had left the Frio country behind him. The valley of the Rio Frio had grown too hot to hold him at last. But a man had to live, and the Kid was seeking his fortune.

He spoke at last.

"I guess it's a cinch," he said.

The Mexican hacendero beamed with satisfaction. He spoke to his companion in Spanish and Sanchez beamed also. The Kid had learned that the two were partners in cattle-raising, equally ruined by the revolution and the turn it had taken.

"Muy bien, muy bien, senorito," said Sanchez.

The Kid gave him a wooden look. It did not suit him to let the Mexicans know that he understood Spanish.

"Spill it in Gringo," he said.

Don Ricardo smiled.

"Sanchez, he says that it is very good," he explained.

"It's a cinch, senor," said the Kid, "on terms. I guess I'm not throwing away my life for the fun of the thing. You figure out that there's five hundred cows hidden in that arroyo?"

"Si, senor!"

"I guess I'll cut out that bunch, and drive them across, if a bullet don't stop me," said the Kid. "I take half the herd, and I hand over the other half to you-uns. That's fair."

"That is much to ask, senor," said Don Ricardo.

"I guess not. You lose the whole bunch, or you give half to touch the other half," said the Kid coolly. "I take all the risk. I'm not asking you to come across the river with me."

"Justo!"

The senor assented with a smile.

"Better fix it with your partner, senor," said the Kid, with a yawn. "I reckon if I'm going, I'll hit the trail before the night's much older."

Don Ricardo turned to his companion. The Kid's face was wooden and expressionless, as he heard them talk in Spanish. Sanchez scowled at first, but his scowl gave place to a dark smile as Don Ricardo proceeded. The Kid, examining his revolvers ready for his venture, gave them no heed—the talk apparently conveyed no meaning to his ears.

Neither of the Mexicans dreamed that Spanish was a second tongue to the Rio Kid. Surely if he had understood he would have given sign when Don Ricardo explained the matter to his partner. This dog of a Gringo, the rancher explained in Spanish, claimed half the cows if he succeeded in driving them to safety on the Texan side. Why not agree?

A thousand chances to one, the accursed Gringo would be killed before he had ridden score of yards from the border on the Mexican side. But if he came back with the cows, the thrust of a cuchillo in his ribs would settle the matter of the division. Twenty cows the don would have given in good faith; but if the Gringo claimed half

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the herd for his pains, a knife-thrust would settle the matter cheaply when the time of settlement came. And Sanchez grinned and nodded.

"Muy bein, muy bien!" he assented.

"It is agreed, senorito," said Don Ricardo, breaking into English again as he turned to the Rio Kid. "To my brave young friend I can refuse nothing. Moreover, it is, as you say, fair. Half the herd if you save it for me and drive it here."

"It's a cinch!" said the Kid.

He rose from the camp-fire and stretched himself. Then, with quiet attention, he listened while the Mexican gave him explicit directions—the exact location of the valley, the names of the faithful half-breeds, and what he was to say to them — infinite and multiplied instructions, for the don was exceedingly anxious that his brave young friend should be successful. And the Rio Kid, having absorbed all the knowledge that the Mexican could give him, saddled his mustang and rode away into the night.

The two Mexicans smiled as they sat and smoked over the dying camp-fire The Rio Kid, as he rode away in the darkness, smiled, too.

THE CATTLE-DRIVE AT NIGHT! The Kid's cracking whip drove back the cows that sought to wander from the herd, and the two half-breeds helped him, though their eyes were continually wandering for a sign of danger. (See Chapter 4.)

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Across the Border!

THE grey mustang trod softly through the wide stretch of oozing mud on the Mexican side of the river. The southern night was alive with stars. Far away twinkled the watch-fires of the Mexican soldiers, and the Kid gave those twinkling lights a wide berth. They faded into the night as he pursued his way.

The senor's instructions had been explicit, and the Rio Kid had a keen sense of direction. It was but seldom, if ever, he was at a loss. In the bright starlight he picked up landmark after landmark that had been minutely described to him. He found himself at last on the beaten trail that led to the deserted ranch, and there he rode at a greater speed. A half-burnt house, with a famished dog howling among the charred ruins, loomed up in the starlight. Further on, a scattered group, of wrecked adobe huts, what remained of a village swept out of existence by the tide of warfare.

A jingle of harness, a clatter of hoofs, a shout in Spanish, and the Kid's way was suddenly blocked by horsemen. He had ridden fairly into a detachment returning from pursuit of the rebels. The shout came accompanied by the crack of a rifle and the whir of a bullet that passed within a foot of the Kid's Stetson hat.

There were a dozen horsemen on the trail before him, but the Rio Kid did not halt. His way lay onward.

He gave his mustang the spur.

He rode with his knees gripping his horse, a gun in either hand, his handsome face cool, his eyes like cold steel. In a second he was in the midst of the horsemen drawn up across the road, and wild shouts and cracking shots made pandemonium round him. The Kid's guns spat fire on either side as he drove his way furiously through. Three seconds more and he was galloping wildly up the trail, with the Mexicans yelling behind. Crack on crack rang behind him as he galloped, bending low in the saddle, and as the firing ceased he heard the thudding of pursuing hoofs.

He smiled grimly as he galloped on.

The Kid had not expected to reach the ranch without falling among foes, and he had fallen among them soon enough. Nine or ten riders were galloping behind him, loosing off shots from time to time, no doubt in the belief that they had fallen upon some unusually daring fugitive from the defeated rebel forces. There might be other patrols on the trail, the Kid knew. No wonder Don Ricardo had told his companion, in Spanish, that the Gringo would probably be killed before he had left the river far behind. But the Rio Kid was not easy to kill.

He halted at last, dismounted, and drew his mustang into the cover of a grove of trees by the roadside.

In the blackness of the trees, he stood silent, his hand on the mustang's muzzle.

Thud, thud, thud!

The thudding of hoofs, the jingle of harness, swept up and passed. The Kid listened. If the soldiers discovered that he had halted, he was prepared for a desperate affray in the blackness, with a grim faith in his six-guns and his shooting. But they swept by unknowing, and the thudding of the hoofs died into silence in the distance.

The Kid laughed softly.

He had come through a death-trap alive, and, the danger past, he did not waste another thought of it.

He waited till the last sound had died, and then led his mustang from the pecans and remounted.

But he did not follow the road farther. Open pasture lands lay on either side of the beaten trail, and the Kid trusted himself to the plains. Many times, in the distance, he caught the sounds of hoofs—once he sighted a camp of ragged ruffians, of which party he could not tell, in the light of a burning rancho. More than once he stopped to take cover in a thicket, and waited while riders—whether fugitives or pursuers he knew not—passed him unseeing.

The Kid had hoped to reach the ranch before midnight, for it was not more than six or seven miles across the border; but he found that he had to give up that hope, and that he would be lucky if he reached it alive before morning. For every mile that lay on his way the Kid had to cover many miles, in finding his way through unknown country and eluding incessant foes.

The stars were paling when the Kid sighted, in the distance, the white-walled building of the Velasquez house, and sighted, too, a bivouac of Mexican troopers close by the ranch-house. He did not need to approach the buildings more closely; he had his bearings now for the hidden valley where the bunch of cattle lay, concealed from troops and rebels alike. The landmarks the don had given him—a tall cottonwood, a shoulder-shaped mess, a wayside cross, a ruined fountain, and other signs—he

remembered them every one, and picked them up one after another.

From the pasture lands he entered a tract of low, barren hills, dry and arid, where no one would have thought of seeking cattle. There was no feed for a rabbit for long, barren miles. But the Kid knew that he was on the right track, unless Don Ricardo had been romancing, and he rode on at a trot, while the stars faded and died out, and a faint flush came into the eastern sky.

Dawn was at hand now; and if the day came and found the Kid riding in the open, he knew that he would be seen, and those who saw him were not likely to ask many questions before they pulled trigger. But he was close to his destination at last.

He rode into a narrow, rocky canyon, which looked, from the stony plain he had left, like an arid split in the earth, and nothing more. He was soon riding with his hat below the level of the surrounding plain, secure from observation. So arid and forbidding were his surroundings now that he almost began to doubt the existence of the fertile valley the don had described to him, though he had followed the indications faithfully thus far. He came on it suddenly—a deep, wide ravine, sunk in the low hills, with a stream running through it, and a belt of rich vegetation on either side of the stream.

The sight of water and green grass was gladdening to the eyes of the Kid; it was like an oasis in the midst of the desert. The hiding-place of the herd had been well chosen. Only a cowman well acquainted with the country could have known anything of that hidden fertile spot in the heart of the barren lands. There was feed for several weeks for five hundred head of cattle in the green valley. The Kid could see the cows stretched in the grass as he rode in under the shadow of circling rocks—shadow that was clearing as the sun rose higher. The bunch of cattle was there, safe, so far, from the contending mobs that were plundering all the surrounding ranches. And in the little stone hut that stood close by the rocky wall of the valley, the Kid guessed that he would find the two faithful half-breeds in charge of the herd.

He rode up to the hut. It was a mere shed of hard clay bricks, without a window, and with a low doorway but no door. He heard startled exclamations within; the thud of his mustang's hoofs aroused the sleepers. Two dark, wild faces looked out from the doorway of the hut—the faces of the half-breeds. They stared in astonishment and alarm at the Gringo, and the Kid grinned.

"Amigo!" he called out. "Yo soy amigo, caballeros."

On the other side of the river, for his own reasons, the Kid had spoken no Spanish, but he was speaking Spanish now.

The dark eyes glared at him suspiciously, and the dusky hands were grasping machetes. The Kid's guns looked the breeds in the face.

"Amigo!" he repeated. "One of you speaks English, from what Don Ricardo let on. Which of you is Diego?"

"Soy Diego."

"Good!" said the Kid. "Drop that digger, nombre, or you will go out so quick you won't know what happened to you—sabe?"

The machetes dropped on the mud floor of the hut. At an imperious gesture from the Kid, the two men came out, staring at him wonderingly and suspiciously. In a mixture of English and Spanish the Kid explained why he had come.

They understood, but they shrugged their shoulders.

"No can," said Diego. "The cattle will be taken when they are driven out to the plains. But if it is the order of the senor——"

"His order and mine," said the Kid cheerfully.

"Muy bien, senor," answered Diego. "But the cattle will be taken, and the young senor will be shot."

"I guess that's likely enough," assented the Kid. "All the same, we start at nightfall; and if the young senor is shot, I guess there will be plenty of dry eyes in Mexico and Texas. I reckon I'm bedding down till sunset."

"The young senor is welcome to our shelter," said Diego.

"And the fleas?" said the Kid. "Gracias, but I guess I've got my bed-roll, and I'll find a camp."

And the Kid led his horse up the valley to a shady spot under a cottonwood, by the stream, where he camped.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The Cattle-Drive!

THE long, hot day wore to a close. The grey mustang fed and rested, and the Kid slept for hours in the shadow of the tree. He slept as peacefully as ever he had slumbered in the bunkhouse at the old Double Bar. It was nothing to the Kid that he was in a hostile country, encompassed by foes, with a task before him that might have shaken nerves of steel. Late in the torrid afternoon he clambered to the top of the rocky valley, climbed a high rock, and scanned the surrounding plains. Not a human being, not an animal, was in sight, save a skulking coyote creeping among the rocks. Far in the distance dim smoke rose against the azure of the sky, and he guessed that the Velasquez ranch was burning. No echo of firing reached his ears on the wind; it was likely enough that the fighting was over in that quarter. The troops had won a victory, as the rebels had chanced to be the first to run. The Kid did not doubt that he could have ridden back to the border unchallenged, but with a herd of cattle it was quite a different matter; the puncher knew the slow pace of a cattle-drive. His brow was thoughtful as he returned to the valley.

The sun sank behind the Sierra Madre, night wrapped the Mexican uplands.

"I guess it's time we hit the trail, Diego!" the Kid drawled.

"Si, senor."

The half-breeds did not venture to dispute his orders, but the Kid knew well that they would vanish like rabbits at the first sign of danger. But he did not expect more than that of them. The Kid's Texan quirt, and the long whips of the 'breeds cracked like pistol-shots, and the unwilling cattle were got into motion. The herd tramped slowly out of the green valley, by way of the rocky canyon to the upper plain, under the stars, that were coming out in the velvety sky like handfuls of diamonds.

It was but six miles to the river, but the way the Kid had mapped out in his mind covered more than twenty. The cattle-drive wound away to the westward, making a wide sweep to avoid the battle-ground of the previous day. The Kid was as handy a puncher as any man on the Texas ranches, and his mustang was used to the work. His cracking quirt drove back cows that sought to wander from the herd, and the two 'breeds helped him in the drive, though their black, scintillating eyes were continually wandering for a sign of danger as they sat the wiry little Indian ponies and gashed their flanks with the long, cruel Mexican spurs.

Hour after hour the drive went on under the stars. With whip and voice the Kid and the Mexicans urged on the slow, unwilling cattle. Twice or thrice dusky 'breeds were seen, who stared at

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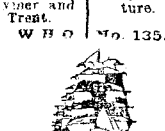

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the passing herd, but did not offer to interfere.

The Kid was heading for a crossing a dozen miles farther up the Rio Grande, and his hopes grew higher as the night wore on. He had taken the most desperate of chances, but he looked like getting away with it. And if he succeeded two hundred and fifty cows were to be his reward—a welcome accession of fortune to the Kid, who had ridden out of the Frio country with little more than his guns and his horse to call his own. By dim trails and shadowy plains the drive went on. Here and there a cow, or half a dozen cows, escaped from the herd, in spite of the Kid's vigilance and unceasing activity, but the main herd rumbled and thudded on. The Kid was far enough now from the scene of the fighting he had watched the previous day, and following a beaten trail he knew, for this was not the first time that the Rio Kid had ridden across the border. And when the first flush of another dawn was in the sky he saw the welcome waters of the Rio Grande rolling in the distance before him.

"I guess that's the ford, hombres," he called out cheerily to the Mexicans.

"Si, senor!"

The cattle-drove thudded on to the river.

"Los soldados!"

It was a sudden yell of alarm from the Mexicans.

The Kid gritted his teeth.

The drive had reached the muddy, swampy banks, and the Kid's quirt was driving the unwilling leaders into the shallow waters. Where the leading cows went the rest would follow; but they were reluctant to take the water. The Kid stared round, his eyes glittering under the brim of his Stetson. He had felt that his luck was too good to hold. What he saw might have daunted any heart. A mounted patrol was coming up the river at a trot, doubtless guarding the river against rebel fugitives seeking to escape into Texas.

At the sight of the herd they put spurs to their horses and came on at a gallop. With the same glance the Kid saw the two half-breeds spurring their ponies in the opposite direction, and they were gone from his sight in a few seconds.

Only that one glance the Kid gave, and then his attention was grimly fixed on the herd again. He shouted, and lashed, and drove on the cows, and innumerable hoofs splashed up muddy water. In the midst of the snorting herd the solitary puncher laboured, driving like one possessed, doing the work of a dozen men. The Mexican carabineers were coming up at a gallop, and the Kid knew that he would never save all the herd. But he stuck doggedly to his task, even when bullets began to whistle through the air, and the soldiers were so close that he could hear their shouting. Sweating, dripping, spattered with mud, the Kid rode out of the shallow water on the northern side, driving before him a big bunch of cows. He looked back, and saw that the carabineers had halted on the southern side, and he wondered whether they would venture to pursue him across the border. It would have been easy enough at the lonely ford, a score of miles from a frontier post. But the soldiers contented themselves with blazing away with their carbines across the river and gathering in the cows—a third of the herd—that the Kid had been compelled to abandon. A fold of the prairie soon hid him from their sight.

The Kid pushed back his Stetson and wiped his streaming forehead.

"I guess that was a close call," he confided to the grey mustang. "I sure reckon it was the tightest corner we ever got out of, old hoss!"

And the Kid halted to rest his weary limbs and his weary horse, and to count the cows that he had saved. And the tale was three hundred.

A RIDE FOR LIFE! The Kid rode with his knees gripping his horse, and a gun in either hand. In a second he was in the midst of the horsemen, firing right and left as he sped past. (*See Chapter 3.*)

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Kid's Way!

"POR todos los santos! He comes!"

It was no wonder that Don Ricardo Velasquez invoked all the saints, in his astonishment, as he beheld the Rio Kid. For a night and a day, and a night and most of the day again, Don Ricardo and Sanchez had waited at the camp, under the cottonwood, hoping, but far from expecting, to see the puncher and the cows. And now they saw.

They saw a bunch of a hundred and fifty cows, with the Rio Kid riding hard.

They watched him as he came. The Kid rode up to the cottonwood, and drew rein, and saluted the Mexicans.

"You have returned, senorito," said Don Ricardo.

"I guess so. And I've brought your cows, senor," answered the Rio Kid as he dismounted. "I guess I didn't undertake to save the whole herd. Three hundred was all I drove across the Rio Grande."

"Three hundred!" repeated Don Ricardo.

"Yep."

"But here"—the Mexican's eyes roved over the bunch—"but here there are but half so many, senorito."

The Kid smiled.

"I guess half the cows I saved belong to me, senor. Wasn't that the terms?"

"But where are they?"

"I reckon I've left them where I can pick them up," said the Kid. "Here's your half of the herd, and you're mighty lucky to see a single cow of the bunch."

The two Mexicans exchanged glances.

"Ah! You have lost some of my cows, senorito," said Don Ricardo softly. "For your reward, little senor, you shall have the cows you have left in Mexico—if you can find them. Will that satisfy you?"

"I guess not," said the Kid, laughing. "I have taken my reward, senor—a hundred and fifty cows, that I've left where I can pick them up. Don't worry about my reward, senor. Yo lo, tongo."

Don Ricardo gave a start as the Kid spoke in Spanish.

"Sabe?" grinned the Kid.

The Mexican "savvied" well enough, and his hand was on his knife.

The Kid's hands rested on his guns in his low-hung holsters. There was an amused smile on his face.

"Keep your cuchillo where it is, senor," he advised.

Bang!

The Mexican's knife was in his hand. He did not even see the Kid draw his gun. The Rio Kid was lightning on the draw. He felt the shock that jarred through his arm from wrist to shoulder as the cuchillo was torn from his hand by a bullet. He gave a cry, and Sanchez, who had half-drawn a knife, jammed it back into his belt and threw his hands above his head. The Kid laughed loud and long.

"Muy bien, senores, muy bien!" he chuckled. "You dog-goned Greasers, what's to stop me from letting daylight through you and roping in the whole bunch?"

"Senor——" stammered the Mexican rancher.

"Can it!" interrupted the Kid. "I guess I'm a man of my word. There's your cows—half the bunch. Adios, senores!"

The Rio Kid jumped on his mustang and rode away, and, with a clatter of hoofs and a cloud of dust, he was gone.

THE END.

(You'll all enjoy reading: "A Deal In Cows!"—next week's stirring long complete tale of the RIO KID, the boy outlaw of Texas. Tell all your pals about this wonderful series of stories!)

ADVENTURE IN SOUTHERN TEXAS! McCann, the cattle-dealer, had imagined it to be a simple matter to double-cross the Rio Kid. But there he made the greatest mistake of his life!

The Rio Kid!

By Ralph Redway

OUR POPULAR WESTERN TALES, STARRING AN AMAZING CHARACTER, THE RIO KID!

THIS WEEK: "A DEAL IN COWS!"

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Cows to Sell!

"MAVERICKS*?" asked McCann, eyeing the Kid dubiously.

The Rio Kid laughed.

"Do I look like a maverick-hunter?" he queried banteringly.

"Well, I guess not," the cattle-dealer admitted. "But you sure tell me that you didn't rustle them cows."

"I've never rustled a cow, feller," said the Rio Kid, in his quiet, drawling tones, but with a glint in his eyes.

McCann, who knew the tales that were told of the Rio Kid all the way from the Gulf to the Staked Plain, did not suppose that the Kid was sensitive on the topic of rustling cows. He did not want to hurt the Kid's feelings. A fellow who packed two guns, and was like lightning when he drew them, was not a fellow to be lightly offended. But in point of fact, the Kid was very sensitive to such a suggestion. He was a cowman, born and bred, and whatever else he might have done—and he had done many things—he would not have rustled a cow from his bitterest enemy.

*Term given to cattle that have been stolen.

McCann drummed on the bare wooden desk.

"Well, whose cows are they, Kid?" asked McCann bluntly.

"Mine," said the Kid.

He laughed again.

"I guess you're welcome to know how I came by that bunch," he said. "You won't believe me, but I'll tell you. I got them out of Mexico. They belonged to a feller who had to get out for his health in such a hurry that he left his cows behind. I cut out the bunch for him and got them across the border, and we divided the bunch—half to the Greaser, half to me, for my trouble. Savvy?"

McCann gave him an admiring look.

"You sure cap the stack, Kid," he said. "I've heard every kind of a yarn from galoots that come to Blue Pine to sell me cows. Mostly they're mavericks, but they give you every kind of a yarn. But I've never heard that one before."

The Rio Kid smiled grimly.

He had told McCann the simple truth. He had come honestly by that bunch of cows, risking his life a score of times in getting them across the Rio Grande. But he did not expect McCann to believe him. It was seldom or never that a man who honestly owned his cows came to Blue Pine to sell them to Hank McCann. McCann's prices were low because he asked few questions.

"It's true, feller," said the Kid lightly. "But let it go. Do you want to buy the bunch?"

"I sure do, if they're like your description," answered McCann. "But a galoot has to be careful. If they don't carry the brand of any ranch within ten miles of Blue Pine——"

"They carry a Mexican brand."

"Then they're from over the border?"

"Haven't I told you so, you galoot?" McCann laughed.

"Sure you've told me so. I've been told a heap of things in this office, Kid. Look here, I'd rather know how you got hold of that bunch. Did you rustle them from some Mexican ranchero who drove them across to sell them in Texas, or what?"

He broke off suddenly with a yell.

"Hyer, what's the game, Kid?"

A six-gun was looking the cattle-dealer in the face, and the Kid's blue eyes glinted over it.

McCann stared at him in terror.

The slightest pressure of the Kid's finger, and the most unscrupulous cow-thief and brand-blotter in Texas would have reached a sudden end of his rascally career.

A gun lay on the desk before the cattle dealer; he always kept a gun handy when he was dealing with men who came to sell him bunches of cows, mysteriously acquired.

But he did not venture to touch the gun.

His fingers were within an inch of the butt; but the inch might as well have been a mile. Before his fingers could have gripped the gun the Kid would have riddled him with lead.

He glared at the Kid in rage and terror.

"By Jerusalem!" he panted hoarsely. "Is this a hold-up? You durned young galoot, you'll never get away with it. There's twenty men on the street that

will blow holes through you if you burn powder in this office."

"It's not a hold-up," drawled the Kid. "But if it were, feller, I reckon I'd make you hand over your roll and get away, for all that Blue Pine could do to stop me. I'm asking you ten dollars a cow for that bunch—that's fifteen hundred dollars for the bunch—and dirt cheap, as you know better than I do. But I want you to believe that I never rustled the cows, feller."

McCann was a good deal of a gunman himself, as had been discovered by more than one rustler who had sought to bulldoze him in his own office. But he did not claim to equal the Rio Kid in that line; and the steady gun in the Kid's hand sent a cold shiver down his spine. But his terror was not so deep as his rage. McCann was a power in Blue Pine. A score or more of rough and reckless cattlemen were ready to carry out his lightest order, even to shooting. To be held up in his own office, to have the fear of death put into the very marrow of his bones by this fellow, who was little more than a boy, evoked his deepest fury. Almost he was tempted to clutch at the gun that lay on the desk before him and try his chance at gun-play with the Rio Kid.

"Now, stop chewing the rag and listen to a galoot," went on the Kid quietly. "I got that bunch from a Greaser, honest, for saving his cows for him. I'm selling them to you for next to nothing because the Rio Kid can't walk into a cattle market with cows to sell. I guess there would be gun-play the minute I showed up in any town that wasn't a camp of cattle-thieves and brand-blotters, like Blue Pine. I'm selling them to you because you're a durned rogue, Mister McCann, and that's the sort of hombre that I can't help but deal with. All the same, feller, I never rustled that bunch, and I've never rustled a cow since I was hoofed off the Double Bar, in the Frio country. You want to believe that, Mister McCann. You get me?"

The cattle-dealer stared at him with glinting eyes.

"You're sure touchy, Kid," he grated. "You—that's wanted for half the hold-ups in the State."

The Kid laughed.

"I'm sure wanted for a heap of hold-ups that I never heard about," he answered.

"You, that's wanted for shooting up Boss Lewson on his own ranch on the Alamito," said McCann venomously.

"You've got hold of that?" smiled the Kid. "I reckon you'll be shot up worse'n Boss Lewson if you call me a rustler, Mr. McCann."

"Put that gun away and talk business, Kid."

"I want you to believe that I never rustled that bunch," said the Kid coolly. "No galoot is goin' to call me a rustler and tell his friends about it afterwards. And I'm getting tired of holding this gun, feller."

McCann's teeth showed in a snarl. Again he was tempted to clutch at his gun and yell to his men, who were loafing about the corrals.

But he dared not. The cattle-boss of Blue Pine had never backed down before, but he had to back down now, and he knew it.

He forced a laugh.

"Forget it, Kid," he said, as lightly as he could. "I guess I never knew you was so touchy. I take it back."

"You believe I came by that bunch honest?" persisted the Kid.

"I sure do."

"That's the talk, Mister McCann," said the Kid amiably, and his gun disappeared into the holster at his belt.

McCann almost trembled with eagerness to grasp his gun and try his luck now that he was no longer covered. But he knew that the Rio Kid was lightning on the draw, and he dared not venture. And there were other ways, he told himself savagely.

"Well, is it a cinch, feller?" asked the Kid, apparently dismissing that little dispute from his mind as amicably settled. "You're used to buying cows that have been rustled off Texas ranches and blotting out the brands before you can get rid of them again. Now you're offered a bunch that belongs honest to the galoot that's selling them, and I guess they're none the worse for that. Is it a cinch?"

"Sure!" said McCann. "But I want to see the cows before I buy. Where are they?"

"Justo, as the greaser said, when I asked him for half the bunch," smiled the Kid. "You want to see the cows, and that's O.K. But I reckon I'm not letting on exactly where they are, feller; some of your men might drive them off by mistake before you'd handed over the dust. I reckon such things have happened in Blue Pine."

"I'm giving you a square deal, Kid."

"I'm seeing that you are," agreed the Kid. "If you want to see the cows, hombre, call for your hoss, and take a little paseo with me. I guess it's not a long ride."

The cattle-boss of Blue Pine eyed him narrowly.

"I've sure got other business this afternoon, Kid. I can't leave my office yet."

"Take your own time," said the Kid obligingly. "I'll wait, if you say so."

"Not here," said McCann. "I guess I don't want it shouted out, even in Blue Pine, that I'm doing business with the Rio Kid. No offence, Kid; if you ain't rustled cows, you've done a heap of things!"

The Kid chuckled.

"You've said it," he agreed. "And I guess I'm not gone on hanging about a frame shack. You'll find me on the lower trail when you want me, any time till sundown."

"It's a cinch!"

LED INTO THE KID'S SECRET LAIR! "I guess I'll have to blindfold you now, pardner!" said the Kid. "I guess I expected that," said the cattle-dealer. The Kid tied a silken scarf round McCann's eyes, and then led his horse through the pines. (*See Chapter* 2.)

And the Kid lounged out of the office into the blazing sun of the single street of Blue Pine, and mounted his mustang.

Many staring eyes were turned on the Rio Kid as he rode through Blue Pine. Few were the towns or camps in Texas where the Rio Kid could have ridden in broad daylight without dire peril. But in that lawless camp, where Hank McCann, the dealer in stolen cattle, was town marshal, the cow-thieves and brand-blotters and gunmen, who loafed on the shady side of the street, had only admiring glances for the handsome Kid, and no man wanted trouble with him. His name passed from mouth to mouth, and that was all, as the Kid, with a smile on his face, cantered down the street, and rode out on the prairie trail.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Double-Crossing the Kid!

McCANN leaped from his chair when the Kid had gone, his hands clenched and his teeth gritting. Never before had the cattle-boss of Blue Pine been roused

to such deadly rage. He had been defied in his own office—contemptuously defied by a mere boy, and the boy had got away with it.

McCann was glad that no eyes had witnessed the scene; his prestige would have been lost among the gang of ruffians he ruled.

For several minutes the cattle-boss raged, cursing the Kid with an extensive vocabulary of "cuss-words." But he calmed down at last, and jangled the raucous bell on his pinewood desk. A half-breed Mexican looked in with a scared face.

"Send Dave Tutt hyer!" snapped McCann.

The half-breed disappeared.

A few minutes later the man who had been sent for arrived—a burly, bearded tough, whose low-slung guns proclaimed the "gunman."

"The Kid's been hyer, boss," he remarked curiously.

"You saw him?"

"I guess I saw him ride away," answered Tutt. "Some feller, the Kid!"

The gunman's tone was admiring.

McCann scowled.

"The Kid has the devil's own luck!" he said. "There's hardly a sheriff in Texas that hasn't tried to get him, and he's still riding the trails. He came here to sell me cows."

The gunman raised his eyebrows.

"The Kid? I sure reckoned that the Kid never touched rustling," he said. "I guess it's the only thing he hasn't touched."

"He's got a bunch of cows hidden somewhere on the prairie!" snapped McCann. "I'm going to ride with him and look at them. He's not let on where they're hidden."

"I guess the Kid knows his way about!" grinned Tutt.

"This camp has got a bad name, Dave," said McCann, changing the subject abruptly.

"It sure has, boss!"

"The ranchers make out that we're not much better than a camp of rustlers, and it's common talk among the punchers that half the cows that are missing from the ranches might be found here, with their brands changed," went on McCann.

Tutt stared at him.

"They ain't fur wrong, boss," he said. "What are you giving me now?"

"They make out that any rustler or gunman who's made his home town too hot for him can always bed down in Blue Pine and find friends."

"They sure do!"

"Well, we're going to give an answer to all that," said McCann. "We're going to let all the ranchers and punchers know that we stand for law and order in this camp, as much as any camp in Texas!"

"Aw! What're you giving me?" exclaimed Dave Tutt, in astonishment.

"And we're going to make that clear by handing over the Rio Kid to justice," said McCann.

"Oh, I get you, boss!"

"The Kid's badly wanted all the way from the Pecos to the Rio Grande," said McCann. "I guess I'm town marshal in this hyer burg, and it's my duty to see that the law has its due. It will do the camp good; it will show all those hombres that a fire-bug like the Kid can't bed down safe in Blue Pine. It will give the lie to all they say of this camp, when the feller that's most badly wanted in all Texas is roped in here and toted to the county gaol! You get me?"

Tutt grinned broadly.

"I get you, boss," he answered. "The Kid has sure rubbed you the wrong way. But you want to be careful; the Kid's a bad man to crowd!"

"He sure is; but I guess there are enough galoots in Blue Pine to crowd him dead to rights!" said McCann venomously.

"He won't be taken alive."

"That cuts no ice. There's five hundred dollars offered for him in Frio, alive or dead."

The gunman nodded, but his face was grave. It was evident that he did not wholly relish the task of getting the Kid, even with the whole rough crowd of Blue Pine to help.

"I'm riding out to join him on the trail, to look at his bunch of cows," went on McCann. "You'll follow on and keep out of sight. I guess you know how to follow a trail without showing your cabeza?"

"I guess the Kid won't see hide nor hair of me!" said Tutt emphatically. "He's too mighty sudden on the shoot fur me to let him see me trailing him!"

"He won't let me know where the cows are hidden—it will be blindfolding, or some such stunt. But you'll trail us both and get wise to it."

"Sure!"

"Once we know where to lay hands on the cows it's all O.K.! It's a prize bunch, from what the Kid told me, and I don't want to lose it. But I guess he won't touch any fifteen hundred dollars for it!" said McCann, with a sour grin. "I'll fix up a place to meet him and hand over the dust, and when he keeps the appointment he won't find me there with the dollars—he will find a dozen galoots ready to fill him with lead if he doesn't put up his paws pronto!"

"I guess I wouldn't give him a chance to put up his paws. Shooting on sight is the only way to get the Kid!"

McCann nodded.

"That's it! He will sure be sorry he horned the Blue Pine and gave me chin-wag in my own office!" he said. "I'm meeting the Kid on the lower trail. You want to be there first, Dave. And keep in deep cover!"

"You bet!"

After a few more words, the gunman lounged out of the office.

It was half an hour later that McCann mounted his horse and rode down the street of Blue Pine.

He left the camp behind him, and cantered out on the lower trail, his eyes open for the Rio Kid.

At a little distance from the town he sighted him.

The grey mustang was cropping the prairie grass, and the Kid sat under a big cottonwood, with his back to the wide trunk. His manner was careless, but where he sat no enemy could have reached him without coming out into the open trail.

He rose to his feet, and nodded cheerily as the cattle-dealer drew rein.

"I guess I'm ready to see that bunch," said McCann.

"We'll ride, then," drawled the Kid.

He leaped lightly on his mustang. McCann glanced sharply about him as he rode down the trail by the Kid's side. The trail ran through plains of bunch-grass, dotted with trees and patches of scrub. There was no sign to be seen of Dave Tutt. But McCann knew his henchman, and he had no

doubt that in deep cover the gunman was watching.

The Kid seemed to have no suspicion of trickery.

He chatted cheerily with his companion as he rode on down the trail for several miles, accommodating his pace to McCann's. The cattle boss preferred to ride at a moderate pace, and the Kid did not seem to mind. Once or twice McCann glanced at his face and saw that it was open and careless and obviously unsuspicious; the Kid certainly did not look like a man who suspected that his companion was deliberately delaying in order to make it easy for a secret spy to keep them in sight.

They turned from the trail into a deep pine-wood at last on the broken slopes of a low range of hills.

The Rio Kid halted.

"I guess I'll have to ask you to go it blind now, pardner," he said apologetically. "I sure don't want to give it away where those cows are till we've made a sale."

McCann smiled.

"That's fair play," he agreed.

If he wanted any proof that the Kid suspected nothing he had it now. The Kid would not have troubled to blindfold him had he known that a spy was following.

"No objection, feller?" asked the Kid.

"Nix! I guess I expected that."

With a silken neck-scarf the Kid blindfolded his companion. Then, taking McCann's bridle, he led him on through the pines.

In what direction they went McCann did not know. He brushed continually against trees and through thickets, and there were many windings and turnings. Wheresoever the Kid had hidden that bunch of cows, he had hidden it well. But there was a sudden halt, and the neck-scarf was jerked from the cattle boss' eyes.

"Look! See?" drawled the Kid.

McCann looked.

The horsemen had entered a grassy glade in the very heart of the forest. In the grass were sprawled the cows that McCann had come to see.

His eyes gleamed as he looked at them.

There were a hundred and fifty, by the tale; and McCann's experienced eyes told him at a glance that every one was a valuable beast.

The Kid watched his expression, with an amused smile.

"What do you say, Mister McCann?" he asked.

"I guess they're worth my trouble, Kid," answered McCann. "It's a cinch. Ten dollars a cow."

"And dirt-cheap!"

"You ain't fixed to sell cattle dear, Kid," grinned McCann.

"I guess that's why I'm dealing with you, feller. If you've brought the dollars with you, I guess it's a trade on the spot; and I'll sure help you drive your cows into Blue Pine."

"When I travel with the Rio Kid I don't travel with hundreds of dollars in my rags," answered McCann. "No offence, Kid; but they sure tell about hold-ups where you weren't far away."

"They sure do," assented the Kid, without moving a muscle. "But I reckon I'm here to sell cows, not to hold-up a cattle boss. You don't touch these cows till you've handed over the roll—and I guess you know the Rio Kid is a man of his word!"

"You bet!"

"Then what's the programme?" drawled the Kid.

"I'm buying them cows," said McCann. "I'll have the dollars ready at my office to-morrow."

"To-morrow does it," assented the Kid.

And McCann was blindfolded again, and led away once more through the wilderness of pines.

* * * * * * *

The Kid and the cattle boss parted on the trail, and McCann rode away for Blue Pine, the Rio Kid sitting his horse in the trail and watching him go, with a smile on his face. And as soon as the cattle boss was gone from sight the Kid turned from the trail and disappeared into the chaparral.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Upper Hand!

DAVE TUTT stopped and stared round him suspiciously in the thickets.

The gunman was feeling vaguely uneasy.

He had carried out McCann's instructions faithfully, and the thing had gone without a hitch.

Tutt had been watching the trail from cover when the cattle boss joined the Rio Kid, and he had followed the two riders without a fault. Keeping in cover with the stealth of an Apache Indian, he had followed, always keeping the Kid's Stetson with its band of silver nuggets in view—sometimes running, sometimes creeping, always on the trail and always out of view. It was an old and familiar game to the gunman; but he was extremely careful and on his guard; for he knew what to expect if a fellow like the Rio Kid discovered that he was being double-crossed.

Through the pine forest he had followed; in the hidden glade he had seen the bunch of Mexican cows in cover, not twenty yards from the Kid and McCann. The Kid's secret was his now, and he had only to return to Blue Pine and report to his boss. When the horsemen rode away once more Dave Tutt took his way back to camp, with a grin on his face.

He had a long tramp before him; for he had followed, of course, on foot—a horseman could not have kept in cover. Like most cattlemen, he was a bad walker, and he was tired and savage in mood long before he had covered half the distance back. He was still a good two miles out of Blue Pine when his keen senses, rather than any actual observation, warned him of danger. Many a sharp, suspicious glance he threw round him; but the scrubs gave no sign, and he tramped on faster than before with growing uneasiness. The snapping of a twig, the murmur of the wind in the pendant masses of Spaniard's beard, sufficed to alarm him; yet he had seen nothing, heard nothing definite. But the conviction was growing in his mind that he was being hunted in the chaparral, and he was intensely anxious to find himself back in the open trail again.

He stopped at last and glared round him, his hand on his gun.

Was there danger? Or were his nerves playing him false?

No sound came to him, no movement.

For several minutes he waited, his head bent to listen, his breath coming thick and fast.

But there was nothing—nothing. And yet the silence and the stillness seemed threatening to the tautened nerves of the gunman.

He plunged on again, his gun drawn in his hand now, his eyes watchful as a cat's. He was close to the open trail now; and once out of the scrubs he would at least be able to see an enemy if enemy there was. He gripped his gun hard and hurried on.

"Drop it, feller!"

Dave Tutt started almost convulsively as the quiet, pleasant voice broke on his ears.

He did not raise the gun that was gripped in his hand; for a levelled Colt was looking at him through the thick foliage, and the Rio Kid's smiling eyes looked at him over the Colt.

Dave Tutt stared at the Kid, his heart thumping. He was mentally calculating his chances of taking a pot-shot; and a glint came into the Kid's eyes over the levelled Colt.

"I guess I said drop it, feller!" said the Kid.

The gun crashed from Tutt's hand into the undergrowth. The Kid gave him a cheery nod.

"That's sense!" he said approvingly. "What's the good of asking for hot lead, feller? I guess it ain't my business to save a sheriff the trouble of hanging you some day."

"What's this game, Kid?" asked Dave Tutt huskily. "You've no call to pull a gun on me."

"I guess I want your company for a little paseo, feller," smiled the Kid. "Leave your gun where it is and walk!"

"Where?" hissed Tutt.

"I opine you know the way. You're walking with me to the place where my cows are feeding."

Tutt felt a shiver run through his burly form.

"I guess I don't know anything about your cows, Kid," he said. "Never knew you had any cows. I don't get you."

"I'll tell a man!" smiled the Kid. "Perhaps I'm making a mistake. I guess we all make mistakes at times, hombre. But I sure figured it out that you know where my cows are."

"Not a hide, not a hair of them, Kid. I never knew you had any cows."

"My mistake!" said the Kid. "I sure reckoned you was dodging behind all the time I was riding so friendly with McCann."

The gunman trembled.

"I sure reckoned it was a game to double-cross me, and get my cows for nothing," grinned the Kid. "I sure fancied that I piped the track of your number elevens a dozen times in the bush, riding back with McCann to the trail. I sure allowed that if an Apache Injun was pickin' up your trail, he'd pick it up from Blue Pine camp to my cows, and back again from my cows to this hyer spot. You allow I'm making a mistake?"

His tone was bantering, but the gun in his steady hand never faltered. The gunman breathed hard.

He knew that it was useless to deny further; he knew that the Rio Kid had been wise to the game from the beginning.

"Why, you dog-goned gink!" exclaimed the Kid derisively. "Did you reckon you could pull the wool over my eyes? I knew you was watching me before McCann came along from the camp. You want to learn trailing before you trail a man that's got his eye-teeth cut. Why, you hobo, you startled a blue jay out of the pecans when you settled down to watch me. I was wise to it all the time, and I let you run on. I knew I'd have heaps of time to get you after parting with your boss. Now I've got you, sabe?"

"Let up, Kid," muttered the gunman hoarsely. "I'm sure sorry I took a hand agin you; I might have knowed you was too cute."

"You might," agreed the Kid. "You know it now, feller, and the knowledge may come in useful if you live to put it to use."

"Let up, Kid."

"Who's hurting you?" drawled the Kid. "I've told you I want you to take a little paseo with me. Walk, feller, walk. I'm following you, back to where you saw my cows. Get a move on, feller."

The gunman turned in his tracks in silence, and tramped.

The Kid followed him.

Neither spoke as they tramped through the clinging scrubs, but once or twice the gunman heard the Kid chuckle softly, as if at entertaining thoughts.

With mingled feelings of rage and fear and hate, Dave Tutt tramped wearily on, retracing the miles he had already covered on foot.

Not for a moment did he think of dodging into the thickets and running. Swift as he might have been, he knew that a bullet from the Kid's gun would have been swifter.

The Kid was sparing his life. Why, the gunman could hardly guess; he had expected the Rio Kid to burn powder at once if he discovered treachery. But Dave Tutt knew that his life would not be spared if he attempted trickery now.

He tramped on, the Kid behind him.

Weary mile after mile dragged under his feet, till he tramped at last into the glade where the bunch lay.

"Halt, feller!" drawled the Kid.

Dave Tutt stopped.

"Back against that tree."

The gunman obeyed.

Taking a length of trail-rope in his left hand, the Kid ran it round the gunman and the tree, and knotted it securely. In a few minutes Dave Tutt was bound to the trunk, a helpless prisoner.

"You ain't leaving me here, Kid," he muttered.

"You're sure so keen on my cows, feller, I reckon I'll leave you with them," said the Kid. "I guess you'll be let loose after I'm through with your boss."

"Let up, Kid," said Tutt hoarsely. "Keep clear of Blue Pine. You horn into Blue Pine agin, and you'll never come back here to let me loose." His rugged, bearded face was white with apprehension. "You won't leave a galoot to be chawed up by coyotes, tied to a tree."

"I sure reckon I shall come back safe from Blue Pine," smiled the Kid.

"Forget it, Kid! I'm giving you the straight goods," panted the gunman. "It's you for the long trail if you show up in Blue Pine. I tell you that when you drop into McCann's office to collect your dollars you'll be riddled with lead afore you can say no sugar in mine."

The Kid laughed.

"That's the game, is it?" he asked. "I figured it out that it was. All same, I'm going back to Blue Pine to collect the dollars for my bunch, and I reckon the price has gone up now; this bunch will cost McCann three thousand. I want to be paid for my trouble as well as my cows."

"I keep on telling you you're a dead man if you butt into Blue Pine agin," panted Tutt.

"Search me!" said the Kid, cheerfully.

And he turned and disappeared into the pine-woods, leaving Dave Tutt staring after him with black despair in his face.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Pony Up!

McCANN stared out of his doorway for the last time, and scowled, and shut the door.

The hour was late, the naphtha lamps of the Blue Pine saloon had been extinguished; the camp was mostly sleeping. McCann, as usual, had spent his evening at the saloon, where he had expected Dave Tutt to come in with his report; but the gunman had not come. Neither was Tutt at his framehouse when he came back there, and McCann, as he closed and barred his door, wondered what had become of the spy. Tutt should have been back long since, unless he had fallen foul of the Rio Kid or some other enemy. But he had not come, and the cattle boss gave up expectation of seeing him that night.

McCann gritted his teeth as he reflected that the Rio Kid might have been more wideawake than he supposed. If he had spotted the spy in the thickets and shot him, McCann had lost one of his best men, and in that case the Kid was probably wise to his treacherous scheme, and would not come to the office on the morrow; he would drive his cows elsewhere for another market. But he should not get away with them, McCann swore through his teeth. The Kid on his mustang was rapid and elusive; a ride of sixty miles only made him smile; he knew a hundred hidden retreats where he could lie safe when the hunt was up; but a cattle-drive was a different matter. The Kid could not save himself from the cattle boss' vengeance without leaving his cows behind. If Tutt had only been delayed, or in trouble with other enemies, the scheme held good—the Kid would come to the office on the morrow for his dollars, and would be taken dead or alive, and handed over to the sheriff of Frio by the marshal of Blue Pine. But if Tutt had fallen at the Kid's hand, if the Kid did not come, then the hunt would be up—a hundred toughs would be searching the country for the Kid's bunch. McCann would get the bunch, that was certain; and if he got the Kid, too, so much the better.

McCann took a last glance round his office, and then went into his sleeping-room which was behind it. He closed his bed-room door and locked it after him, and set down his candle. His face was grim and angry; he was sure of the bunch of cows, whatever turn the affair took; but he wanted to get the Kid, and it seemed doubtful now whether the Kid would fall into his snare.

It was more doubtful than the cattle-boss supposed.

Having set down the candle on a bench, he was turning, when a cold rim of steel touched his neck.

"Put 'em up, boss!" said a pleasant voice.

A shudder ran through McCann from head to foot. He was so utterly taken aback that for a moment he did not obey the injunction. Then his hands rose slowly over his head, and in the flickering candle-light his staring eyes fixed on the face of the Rio Kid.

The Kid nodded and smiled.

"You sure look surprised, boss," he drawled, "I'll tell the world!"

"You—here!" McCann barely uttered the words.

"Too early for you, boss?" asked the Kid apologetically. "We fixed it for to-morrow, when you saw the cows; and it's sure to-morrow now—more'n half-past twelve, feller. Is it too early?"

McCann could not speak; he could only glare at the cool, self-possessed Kid, and the six-gun that was almost touching him, with the Kid's finger on the trigger. The Kid was smiling, but there was a deadly menace in his eyes.

"It's sure early, boss," the Kid said banteringly. "But I allow I'm rather in a hurry; I've got a bunch that the quicker I get out of the Blue Pine country the better it will be for my health. I know that an early call like this spoils the little surprise-party you had ready for me—just a few. Are you still buying them cows? The price has gone up now. That bunch will cost you three thousand dollars. Are you buying?"

"No!" hissed McCann.

"I'm real sorry for that," sighed the Kid. "Any prayers to say, feller?" The smile left his lips, and the grim look that came over the sunburnt face sent a cold shudder down the cattle-dealer's spine. "You dog-goned cow-thief, you figured out you'd double-cross me and get that bunch for nothing. You've got one minute—and if you try to touch a gun, not so much as that."

McCann gasped.

"I'm buying!" he panted.

"At three thousand?"

"Sure!"

"It's a trade," said the Kid cheerily. "Sort out the dust, feller. I'll mind your gun while you're sorting it out!"

He lifted the gun from the cattle-boss' belt.

"Pronto!" he snapped.

Without a word, trembling with rage, but with the fear of death in his heart, McCann unlocked an iron box that was hidden under his pillow. In bitter silence he counted out a roll and handed it to the Kid, who took it with his left hand and slipped it into a pocket.

"That lets you out, boss," smiled the Kid. "The bunch is yours, and I guess your man will drive them in later."

McCann stared at him blankly; he had not expected that the Kid would keep faith with him. The Kid understood the look and laughed contemptuously.

"You're sure a dog-goned thief, McCann," he said. "You've bought the bunch and its yours. I reckon you'd have done better to make a fair trade when I moseyed in; but you've got the bunch cheap, all the same. Now, I reckon all you can do for me is to keep quiet for a spell while I slide out. Put your paws together, feller!"

Under the threatening gun, the Kid bound the cattle-boss hand and foot and stuffed his own neckscarf into his mouth. He blew out the candle. McCann, sprawling bound and helpless, gagged and silent, on the bed, watched him with glittering eyes. He heard a soft laugh, and the sound of a door opening and closing. The Rio Kid was gone, and the cattle-boss of Blue Pine, writhing helplessly in his bonds, waited furiously for morning and release, knowing that long before morning the Rio Kid would be far away.

* * * * *

In the first gleam of dawn a smiling face looked at Dave Tutt from the shadows, and a knife slid through the trail-rope that bound him to a tree in the heart of the pine-woods. The gunman, stiff and sore, staggered away from the tree, panting with relief. No man in Texas had ever been so glad to see the Rio Kid alive and well.

The Kid waved his hand to the sleeping cows.

"You want to drive that bunch to Blue Pine, feller," he said. "Hank McCann's bought that bunch, and paid on the nail like a good little man. So-long, feller! Keep your eyes peeled next time you figure out to trail the Rio Kid!"

And the Rio Kid rode away through the scented pines.

THE END.

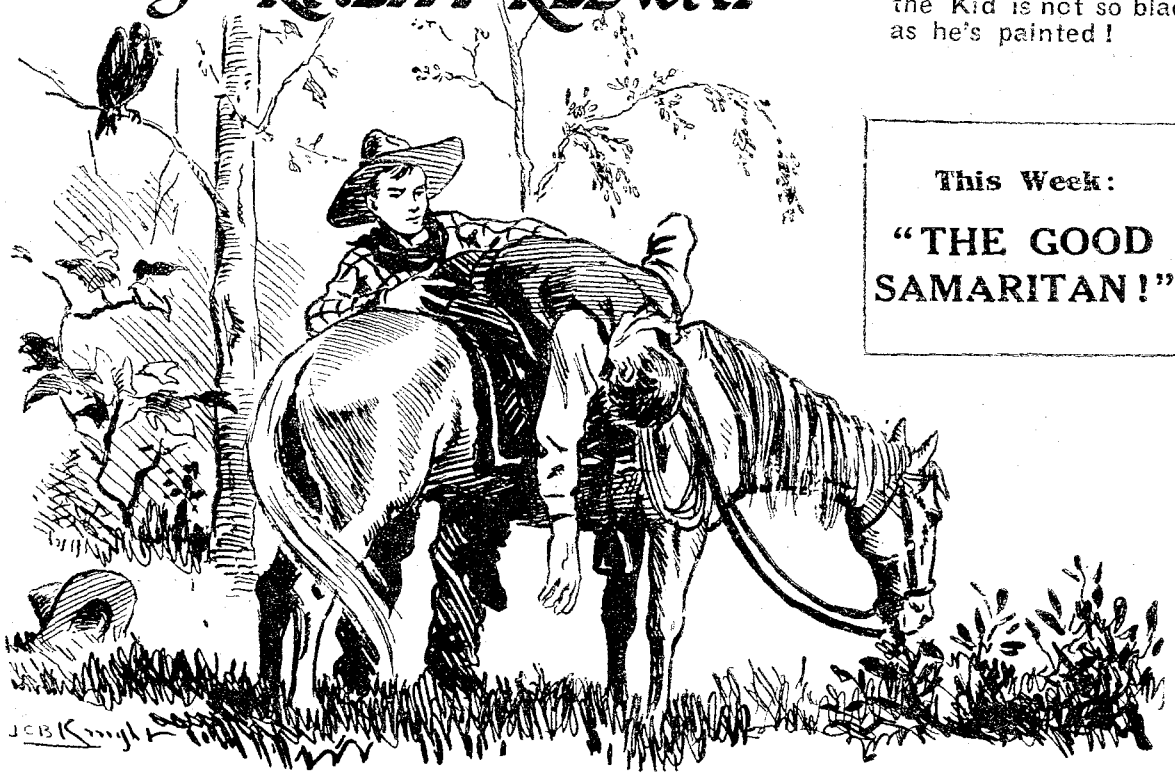
(You'll find another roaring long yarn of this amazing outlaw, the Rio Kid, in next week's issue. Look out for it!)

THE OUTLAW OF THE PLAINS!

The RIO KID!

by RALPH REDWAY

With such a terrible reputation as the Rio Kid has in Texas, it may seem strange that he should act the Good Samaritan to a wounded foe. But that's because the Kid is not so black as he's painted!



This Week:

"THE GOOD SAMARITAN!"

A RATTLING FINE YARN OF BREATHLESS ADVENTURE IN SOUTHERN TEXAS, FEATURING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
An Old Foe!

THE grey mustang shied, and the Rio Kid drew rein at once. Something in the thickets had startled his horse. The Kid's gun leaped into his hand. In the heart of the trackless stretch of scrubs he had not looked for a foe, but the Kid was never off his guard.

But there was no sound, no movement in the thick vegetation bordering the narrow path by which the Kid was riding.

Pecans and live oaks, laced with vines and thick masses of Spaniards' beard, rose like a wall beside him. Save for the buzzing insects there was no sign of life, till the Kid discerned a vulture sitting motionless on a branch, watching the thicket below. Like an image carved in ebony the vulture perched and watched, taking no heed of the passing horseman; and the Kid, as soon as he saw the black vulture, knew what had caused his mustang to shy. A man or a beast lay in the thicket, hurt—but not dead, or the carrion bird would have swooped. While a sign of life remained the vulture would not dare to touch his prey. With untiring patience the obscene bird waited, watching with untiring eyes.

The Kid shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

He was following an antelope path through the scrubs, seeking water. His horse was thirsty and his own water-bottle was empty. Whatever it was that lay hidden among the thickets, it was no business of his. If it was a man, there were few men in Texas who were not his foes. The Kid was tempted to ride on his way, leaving the black vulture to watch for the last spark of life to flicker out of his prey. Nevertheless, he dismounted and plunged into the thickets, the staring, fixed eyes of the hideous bird above him following his movements.

Had it been some wounded beast that lay helpless in the thicket, the Kid would have finished it with a merciful shot. But it was a man that lay stretched there, only a few feet from the trampled track the Kid had been following.

The Rio Kid looked down at him.

The man lay on his back, his eyes closed, his rugged, bearded, bronzed face turned upward towards the branches and the watching vulture. He looked like a dead man; but that he was not dead the Kid knew, because the obscene bird had not touched him. There were two guns in the holsters slung low to the insensible man's belt. One leg of his buckskin breeches was drenched in blood. The Kid did not need telling what had happened. The two-gun man, wounded in the leg, had fallen exhausted, and sunk into insensibility from fatigue and loss of blood—and, without help, it was unlikely that he would ever have opened his eyes again. The vulture had only to wait.

The Kid smiled grimly as he looked down at the hard, rugged, black-bearded face, with a sickly pallor showing through the bronze. The Kid had seen that face before, more than once. Two-gun Casey was well known on the border.

For some moments the Kid stood looking down at the gunman, undecided. He was again tempted to ride on his way. His glance fixed on a scar that ran across the gunman's rugged cheek from jaw to temple, a scar left by a bullet that had gone very close. Two-gun Casey had had a narrow escape on that occasion, as no one knew better than the Rio Kid, for it was the Kid who had fired the shot. Back into his mind, as he stood staring at the senseless man, came the scene—a cattle-camp on the Pecos, where Casey had claimed a horse on which a tenderfoot had ridden into camp, and pulled a gun to enforce his claim. The Kid, who, as he often told himself, never could mind his own business, had dropped Casey before he could pull trigger. The tenderfoot was nothing to him; he had never seen the fellow before, and never expected to see him again. But he had chipped in to save the fellow's life—and spoiled Casey's good looks for ever.

The man was a bad egg, a hard case, a bullying gunman with a long black record against him. If he died there

in the thickets there would be no one to mourn him; many, probably, to rejoice, if ever they learned that Two-gun Casey had gone over the range.

And yet——

The Kid gave another impatient shrug of the shoulders. There were a score of good reasons why he should ride on his way and dismiss the hapless wretch from his mind, but all the time the Kid knew that he would not do it. The fact that the man was wounded and helpless settled the matter for the Kid.

He dropped on his knees beside Casey.

First of all he removed the guns from the man's holsters, and from each of the six-guns he took the cartridges. Then he replaced the guns in the holsters—harmless. He was going to help the man—save his life if he could—but he knew better than to trust him. He searched Casey for cartridges and found a good supply, which he threw away among the thickets. Then he jerked the heavy bowie-knife from the man's belt, and tossed it away in the trees.

"I guess you're safer with your teeth drawn, feller," the Kid remarked pleasantly.

His attention was given next to Casey's wound.

A bullet had passed through the gunman's leg, and the loss of blood had been great—all the more because Casey had evidently exerted himself considerably since receiving the wound.

The Kid bound it up with care.

Casey showed no sign of recovering consciousness. He was a big and heavy man, but the Kid lifted him easily enough.

"Steady, old hoss!"

The grey mustang stood motionless while the Kid lifted the insensible man upon the saddle.

Holding him there with his strong arms the Kid pursued his way, a hoarse croak from the disappointed vulture following him.

For a good distance the Kid tramped beside his horse, pushing through the thickets, till he reached at last the little stream where the wild beasts came to drink, flowing and gurgling through the chaparral.

There he halted to camp.

He gave his horse a drink first of all. His mustang was always the Kid's first care.

But before he thought of his own needs, the Kid attended to the helpless man who had so strangely fallen upon his hands.

He made a bed of leaves, with his own blankets added, and laid Casey upon it, and then removed the bandage he had placed on the wound, washed it carefully with water from the stream, and bandaged it again. All that could be done for the man he did, smiling at himself meanwhile. He knew that he was saving Two-gun Casey's life—the man was hard and tough and would pull through under the Kid's care. He knew that had the case been reversed—had the gunman found him wounded—he would have laughed and ridden on. The Kid was quite well aware of that.

"You're a durned fool, Kid!" he drawled as he left the wounded man at last. "You always was a durned fool, Kid, and you always will be. Here you are in the Frio country again, where there's dollars on you, and Sheriff Watson would give twice as much for a sight of you taking this durned hobo on your hands. You'll sure end your days on a rope, Kid, strung up to a cottonwood—you sure will!"

And the Kid laughed and unpacked the frijoles for his lunch, and sat munching by the side of the insensible gunman, who, as every man on the Pecos knew, had sworn to "get" him. That did not worry the Kid. Many men had sworn to get the Rio Kid, but no one had got him yet.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
In Camp!

TWO-GUN CASEY opened his eyes.

The sun, sinking westward over the hills, glowed red on the trees and bushes. The stream ran under the trees like a streak of crimson. Shadows were darkening in the thickets. The grey mustang was contentedly cropping within the radius of the trail-rope. On a log near at hand the handsome Kid sat, whistling softly the merry tune of a Mexican fandango. Casey's blurred eyes turned on him, dazed, dizzy, amazed.

The Kid gave him a cheery nod.

"The Kid!" breathed Casey.

"Correct!"

The gunman's hand groped feebly down to his belt. The first thought in his dazed mind at the sight of the Kid was to get hold of a gun. The Kid watched him with an amused smile.

Casey groaned. He was too weak even to reach his gun, let alone to pull it.

"Let up, feller!" said the Kid, laughing. "You sure don't want your gun! You're in good hands, feller!"

Casey stared at him blankly.

He knew the Kid at once—the handsome, reckless, sunburnt face, the Stetson hat adorned by a band of shining silver nuggets.

He could not understand.

He lay silent for a time, and the Kid placed a pannikin of water to his lips. Casey drank eagerly.

"I guess I've got nothing better," said the Kid apologetically. "I'm sure on hard pan just now, Casey!"

"What's this game, Kid?" muttered Casey huskily. "How did I get here? And where did you spring from?"

"I reckon I picked you up way back in the thickets and brought you here to camp," answered the Kid.

"Why?"

"You've got me beat! Because I'm plumb loco, I guess!"

Casey glanced down at his bandaged leg, resting on a soft pallet of leaves.

"Am I going up?" he asked faintly.

"Not on your life!" answered the Kid cheerily. "You'll sure limp some, but you'll pull through! In a week from now you'll be O.K.!"

"A week!" muttered Casey.

He stared at the Kid.

"A galoot might as well go up! I shall sure peter out, left here in the scrubs!" he muttered.

"But you ain't left," said the Kid. "A little man about my size is riding herd over you, feller, till you get going."

"Why?" breathed Casey.

"You keep on asking a galoot riddles!" grinned the Kid. "I sure don't know why, except that I'm a pilgrim that never can mind his own business! Any galoot with hoss-sense would have left you to the pesky vulture that was watching you way back!"

Casey shuddered.

"You're not for Jordan this time!" assured the Kid. "You keep still and quiet, and I'm going to grub-stake you till you get on your pins again! You don't want to worry."

"I don't get you!" said Casey faintly.

"Forget it, then! Take a rest!"

Casey closed his eyes.

But he did not sleep. He was trying to puzzle out the strange situation. Here he was, wounded and helpless, at the mercy of the Kid whose life he had sworn to take. Why did not the Kid finish him with a bullet, or at least leave him to the vultures and the coyotes? Casey did not comprehend, and he was never likely to comprehend. Indeed, the Rio Kid hardly knew why he was taking trouble and running risk for a man who would gladly have shot him down at sight. He laughed at himself in the role of Good Samaritan.

But he did not falter in what he had undertaken.

The next day, and the next, he tended Two-gun Casey assiduously, and when the gunman was able to eat the Kid brought him food. The Kid was, as he had said, in hard case. He was back in the Frio country where he was known, and where he could not venture into town or camp. For food he had to depend on what he carried in his sack and what he could add to it by gunning in the bush.

But he kept the wounded man well supplied, and in a couple of days Casey was visibly stronger.

On the third day, when the Kid came into camp with an antelope over his shoulder, Casey was sitting up against a log, and he eyed the Kid strangely.

"Feeling better, feller?" asked the Kid cheerily.

Casey nodded.

"Look here, Kid, what's this game?" he asked once more. "You sure ain't keeping me hyer for nothing. But there isn't any price on my head like there is on yours."

"If you was worth five hundred dollars to the Sheriff of Frio like me, I reckon I shouldn't call on the sheriff to pony up, Casey!" said the Kid quietly. "Blood-money ain't in my line!"

He laughed.

"It's in yours, though, I reckon!" he said. "You'd sure hand me over to Sheriff Watson for the reward!"

"Not after what you've done for me, Kid!" protested Casey.

The Kid nodded, and turned away to build a fire to cook antelope meat. If he knew that Casey was sliding his hand to a gun in his belt he gave no sign.

Click!

The Kid turned.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he roared.

Casey, with a startled and sheepish face, sat there with a gun in his hand—and the Kid roared with laughter.

"You sure take me for a simple jasper!" roared the Kid. "Did you figure out that I left you with anything in your guns and turned my back on you? Ha, ha, ha!"

The Kid was genuinely entertained. The black treachery of the attempt did not seem to affect him; he expected nothing better from the wretch he had befriended.

Casey dropped the gun.

For a moment or two his face was convulsed with fury. The Kid did not draw on him, however, as he expected. He resumed building the fire.

"I guess I wasn't gunning at you, Kid," said Casey at last.

"Some lie!" said the Kid, without turning his head.

"I was jest trying the gun, Kid."

"Cut it out, Casey! I reckon if there had been a bullet in that gun, it would have been the long trail for me! What's the good of lying?" said the Kid good-humouredly.

Casey lay silent. But he broke out at last:

"Look here, Kid, you know I was

trying to get you—you know I swore I'd get you after you gave me this scar. What's your game?"

The Kid turned to him then.

"You'll never savvy," he said. "I picked you up when you was food for the buzzards, and I'm saving your life. As soon as you can walk I'm going to start you off, and I shall sure be glad to see the last of you! That's all. But chew on this, Mister Casey!" added the Kid, with a glint in his blue eyes. "Chew on this serious! You try once more to get me while I'm tending you, and you're a gone coon! I've let you off this time, after you've tried to shoot me in the back! That's the limit! You try on any gun-game with me after this, and you're a dead man—if you don't get away with it! You get me? Next time will be last time!"

"I'll sure remember that, Kid!" said Casey.

"You'd better!" said the Kid significantly.

And then he cooked the antelope meat, and gave Two-gun Casey his supper, dismissing the incident from his mind.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Punic Faith!

DAY followed day by the stream in the bush.

Each day Casey grew stronger.

At last he was able to limp about the camp with the help of a stick that the Kid cut for him.

Had he been armed the gunman would probably have repeated his attempt on the Kid. Gratitude had no place in the composition of Two-gun Casey. Indeed, he felt no call to gratitude, for his hard and savage nature was incapable of realising what the Rio Kid was doing for him. The Kid was playing some deep game that he could not comprehend was all that Two-gun Casey could believe. His hatred for the young puncher who had dropped him and left a scar across his face burned as fiercely as ever. The knowledge that he was helpless, at the Kid's mercy, added to his hatred. Not a gleam of compunction would he have felt had he been able to pull a gun on the Kid. But he remembered the warning he had received. He knew that the Kid had meant every word of it. If he tried again and failed, he was a dead man.

And Casey was very careful.

He made himself useful in camp; he tended the camp-fire, and cooked the antelope meat that the Kid brought in from the woods. Once, while the Kid was absent hunting, it crossed Casey's mind to steal the grey mustang and ride. But the Kid's mustang was not to be stolen; teeth and hoofs were ready for any rider but the Kid, as Casey discovered to his cost. Casey would gladly have shot the animal down in revenge had he had a gun with a cartridge in it.

Day followed day.

Casey limped about the lonely camp with his stick; but as his strength returned, and he felt capable of greater exertions, he did not tell the Kid so.

Whenever the Kid saw him, he was limping painfully when he moved.

The week was up; but Two-gun Casey was still, to all appearance, helpless. The Kid was patient.

"What are you doing here in the Frio country, Kid?" Casey asked him over the camp-fire one night. "It sure ain't a safe country for you."

The Kid shrugged his shoulders.

"I reckon I wanted a look at the country again," he answered. "I was raised here, on the Double-Bar ranch; I used to ride into Frio with the bunch. I guess I wanted to see the old show once more."

Casey grinned sarcastically. It was for a sentimental reason, then, that the Kid was back again in the country where a hundred guns were ready to leap from their holsters at the sight of him.

"And you?" said the Kid. "You was in the camps way down the Pecos when I saw you before."

Casey scowled.

"I was after a galoot," he said. "A man I wanted to get."

"And he got you?" grinned the Kid.

"He sure did," confessed Casey. "He laid for me on the trail, and the bullet that went through my leg killed my hoss. I'd have got him all the same, if he'd stayed after one shot. But he lit out and left me. I sure reckon I'd crawled miles before I pitched out in the chaparral—where you found me, Kid."

"With a buzzard watching you," said the Kid.

"Look here, Kid, you could sure rustle me a hoss," said Casey. "You've looked after me like a white man, I allow. I can't drag this leg very far, but if you could rustle me a hoss I could hit the trail and save you trouble."

The Kid's face hardened.

"I've never rustled a horse or a cow, Casey," he answered. "You don't want to talk that-a-way. But I reckon I might get you a cayuse somewheres. I made money on a deal in cows in the Blue Pine country, and I guess I'm heeled. Only it ain't easy for me to walk into a camp—in this country to buy a hoss——"

The Kid reflected.

"I guess I could ride to the breeds' camps up in the Huecas, and get you a critter," he said. "But that means leaving you here for a whole day."

Casey's eyes glittered.

"That will sure be O.K., Kid!" he exclaimed. "It will be weeks yet before I can get away on this leg. But with a cayuse——"

"I reckon I'll see about it."

The Kid rolled himself in a blanket beside his mustang to sleep. Two-gun Casey had his other blanket.

Several times, in the glimmer of the dying fire, Casey raised his head and glanced across at the Kid, his eyes glittering.

But he knew he dared not risk it.

The Kid would wake; and if he did not, the mustang surely would waken him, as a hostile move from the gun-man.

Once more Two-gun Casey swallowed his hatred and vengeance, and closed his eyes in sleep.

The next day the Kid, instead of going out to hunt for game as usual, prepared his horse for a ride.

"I'm leaving you heap grub for a day, feller," he said. "I reckon I can get back soon after sundown with a cayuse from the half-breeds camp in the Huecas. You sure reckon you'll be O.K. on your own till then?"

"Sure!" said Casey eagerly.

"It's a cinch, then."

And the Rio Kid mounted and rode.

Two-gun Casey watched him with glittering eyes as he disappeared into the tangled chaparral.

The Kid was gone—for a whole day! Keen as he was, said to be as wary as any man of twice his years on the border, Two-gun Casey had fooled him. He fancied that he had left a helpless limping man—a man who could not limp half a mile from camp. Casey showed his teeth in a savage grin. The Kid was making a mistake; and in dealing with Two-gun Casey, a man could not afford to make mistakes.

But the Rio Kid was not so easily fooled as the gun-man believed.

He rode away cheerily through the chaparral; but a mile from the camp by the stream he halted, and dismounted. Leaving his mustang tethered in a clump of pecans, the Kid retraced his way on foot.

The Rio Kid is g
But he can

AFTER NIGHTFALL! The sheriff of Frio leaped to his feet, his gun gripped hard in his hand. "Hands up, Kid!" he shouted. And as the figure did not stir, the sheriff opened fire, point blank. *(See Chapter 5.)*

There was a smile on his handsome face; but the glint in his eyes might have terrified Two-gun Casey had he seen it.

With the caution of an Apache on the war-path, the Rio Kid approached the camp by the solitary stream.

From the thickets he observed it for a time, before he came out into the open.

He knew that it was deserted; when at last he left cover, and came into the camp. The fire was dead; and there was no sign of Two-gun Casey.

The gun-man was gone.

By the dead fire lay the stick the Kid had cut for him to walk with. The gun-man no longer needed it.

The Kid laughed softly.

What he had suspected he knew now to be true. While he was absent on a day's ride, not to return till sundown, the gun-man was losing no time. He had left the camp—for what destination? The Kid could guess!

In a few minutes the Kid's keen eyes picked up the track left by the gun-man. One heavy foot-print, and one light—Casey was taking care of his damaged leg as he went. The trail wound away through the chaparral, and the direction was that of Frio.

The Kid laughed again.

He looked to his guns, to make sure they were in good order. Then, with a light step, he followed the trail of the gun-man.

dangerous enemy to have, make a great pal.

WHAT THE KID OVERHEARD! "You mosey along to the camp after nightfall, and you'll find the Kid sitting by the fire," said Two-gun Casey. "And you want to be sudden on the shoot, too, sheriff!" "Leave that to me," said Sheriff Watson grimly. (*See Chapter* 4.)

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Not the Kid!

SHERIFF WATSON, of Frio, dismounted at the charcoal-burner's shack on the edge of the chaparral. It was a miserable one-roomed shack, a mere jacal built of leaves and branches, standing amid uncleared thickets, shaded by a great cotton-wood tree. The sheriff of Frio hitched his horse to a tree, and stood staring towards the shack suspiciously, his hand on a six-gun. He had ridden in hot haste out of Frio town, and he had ridden alone; but he was on his guard, as he knew that he had need to be when he was taking the trail of the Rio Kid.

A black-bearded man with a scarred face limped out of the leafy jacal. He saluted the Frio sheriff with a nod.

"I guess you got my message, sheriff."

"That's why I'm here, Two-gun Casey," answered Watson tersely. "If this is a gun-game you want to watch out."

"It's a square deal, sheriff," said Casey. "I reckon I mean business, or I wouldn't have hopped miles through that gol-darned chaparral as far as this. I'll tell the world, I was dead beat when I got this far. I gave that Mexican greaser ten dollars to leave his charcoal-burning and carry my message to you, sheriff. I guess I couldn't have gone a yard further—but I remembered there was a charcoal-burner's shack hyerabouts, and hit it. It's a square deal, sheriff."

Sheriff Watson stared at the man's scarred, rugged face, worn now with exertion and fatigue and pain. Two-gun Casey was scarcely equal to the long tramp through the tangled chaparral that he had undertaken, though he was much more recovered than he had told the Rio Kid. Hate and vengeance had spurred him on to the effort, but he had reached the carbonero's jacal exhausted. In his hard, worn, tense face, the Frio sheriff read his earnestness.

"Spill it!" said Watson. "I reckon the name of the Rio Kid would make me mount and ride any time. I want that man, and I want him bad. I got your message by the greaser. You sure allowed that if I came out to see you here, you would put me wise to the Kid."

"Sure!"

"The Kid's back, in the Frio country, then?" asked the sheriff. "I last heard of him up in Blue Pine."

"He's back."

"You've seen him?" asked the sheriff eagerly.

"I left him this durned morning."

"Where?"

Watson's eyes gleamed, and he breathed hard. It was a sore point with Watson that he had never been able to rope in the Rio Kid—only once, when the Kid had slipped through his fingers again. Sheriff Watson would have given the fingers of one hand, to lay the other hand on the Kid.

"I sure reckoned you'd hustle when you heard that the Kid was around agin, sheriff!" said the gun-man, with a hard laugh. "But it's a trade, sheriff. There's five hundred dollars on the Kid. Do I touch it if I hand you the Kid?"

"You sure do," said the sheriff. "My word's good enough for you, I reckon."

"All the way," assented Two-gun Casey. "I guess your word is better'n the banker's at Frio. The Kid's yours, dead or alive. I guess I'd have handed him over dead if I'd a bullet to my gun. His camp's in the chaparral, not three miles from this shack."

"Glory be!" said Watson. "Give me the rest of it."

Two-gun Casey told his tale.

The sheriff listened in silence, without comment. What he thought of the desperado, who was selling the man who had saved his life, he did not say; his business was to rope in the Rio Kid, wanted by the laws of Texas on many counts.

He listened with deep attention while Casey described the camp by the stream in the chaparral, giving him the minutest details.

"I guess I shall hit that camp easy," said Watson. "And you say the Kid will be back soon arter sundown."

"Sure!" answered Casey. "You can get there with your men soon after nightfall, sheriff. There'll be a camp-fire to guide you besides. You don't want to get there before the Kid; he's spry enough to spot you and keep clear. You want to surround the camp when the Kid's there, and close in on him—and the Kid's your meat, sheriff."

Watson nodded.

"But if he misses you from the camp he will sure get wise to it that there's something on," he said.

"He won't miss me from the camp," answered Casey. "I reckon I shall be there. He would sure spot the racket in once if I was missing. He reckons that I can't totter a hundred yards, but he would get wise to it if he found me missing. I shall be there—in my blankets. If I wasn't there the Kid sure wouldn't be there. And I guess I'm not letting him get out of this." Two-gun Casey gritted his teeth and touched the deep scar on his cheek. "I swore I'd get him when he gave me this, and I reckon I want that five

hundred, too. You mosey along an hour after nightfall, and you'll find the Kid sitting cool and easy by the camp-fire—and you want to be sudden on the shoot, too, sheriff."

"I guess I'll give the Kid a chance to put up his hands," answered Watson. "But if he don't put them up instanter, he gets his. I reckon I know him too well to give him a chance to pull a gun."

"If he pulls a gun Frio will want a new sheriff," said Casey.

"Leave that to me!" snapped the sheriff. "I reckon this is a sure cinch, and the Rio Kid has got to the end of his trail at last."

There was a grim satisfaction in Sheriff Watson's face as he rode away to Frio after his interview with the gunman.

Two-gun Casey stood leaning on the wall of the hut, watching him till he was out of sight.

Then he turned away and limped into the chaparral, to make his way back to the camp by the stream. The Kid was not to know that he had left it—not to suspect for a moment that the gunman had betrayed him and sold him to his enemies.

After the gunman was swallowed by the tangled chaparral, another figure emerged from behind the hut into the sunlight.

The Rio Kid laughed lightly.

He glanced in the direction the sheriff had taken, towards Frio town. He was far out of sight. Then the Kid followed on Two-gun Casey's track into the dim chaparral.

There was a smile on his face as he went, a grim smile.

He trod without sound; but often, ahead of him, he heard the noises of crackling underbush, and a muttered curse from the gunman as he trailed his injured leg.

Two-gun Casey limped at last from the thickets into the camp by the stream and sank down on a log.

The sun was deep down now, and shadows were lengthening in the chaparral. The gunman rested for a time, and then he rebuilt the camp-fire and lighted it. When the Kid came back from his long ride he was to discern nothing amiss in the camp—nothing to put him wise. The gunman little dreamed how much the Kid already knew.

"Say, feller."

Casey started convulsively and spun round.

The Rio Kid stood almost at his side. His mustang was not to be seen, and there was a gun in his hand. He had come into camp on foot, and it was not yet sundown.

Casey pulled himself together.

"You sure startled me, Kid," he said. "Where's your cayuse?"

"I left him staked out way back," answered the Kid.

"You ain't been up to the hills?"

"Nope."

Casey repressed a tremor. There was a light in the Kid's eyes that scared him, and the gun in the Kid's hand surely meant that the Kid was suspicious. And why had he not been up to the hills?

"Where have you been, then, Kid?" asked the gunman, trying to speak casually.

"I sure took a little paseo on foot," answered the Kid carelessly. "I took a little rest by the charcoal-burner's shack."

Casey's hard face whitened.

He knew now!

"You dirty dog!" went on the Kid in measured tones. "I picked you up a dying man in the chaparral, with a buzzard watching you, and brought you here and nursed you. I warned you that if you tried to get me again it would be the last time. You dog-goned galoot, you thought you had fooled me—and you was plumb glad to get clear of me for a whole day. Why, you gink, I trailed you to the charcoal-burner's shack, and I was lying there in cover while you was talking to the sheriff of Frio."

Two-gun Casey set his teeth.

"Shoot, then, and be durned to you!" he hissed.

"I guess I'm not wasting powder and shot on a dirty coyote like you, Casey!" said the Kid disdainfully. "And I ain't shooting any man in cold blood, even if he's tried to sell me to Judge Lynch. You've sent for the sheriff of Frio, and, by the holy smoke, you can take your chance with the sheriff. You've warned him to be sudden on the shoot—and maybe he'll be a little too sudden to please you. Take your chance with what you've fixed up for me."

The Kid cut a length of trail-rope and bound the gunman's hands behind his back. Two-gun Casey sought to resist, but his resistance did not trouble the Kid.

With his hands bound behind him the gunman was forced into a sitting posture on a log and bound there securely, unable to move hand or foot.

His eyes burned at the Kid.

"Kid, what's this game?" he demanded hoarsely. "What are you fixing me up like this for?"

"For the Frio sheriff."

"You dog-goned galoot, the sheriff's got no trouble with me! I ain't wanted in Frio, like you!" hissed Casey.

The Kid's eyes glinted.

"You sure told Watson he would find the Kid sitting on a log by the fire," he answered. "I guess Watson's not going to be disappointed. Take your chance, you dog—and pray that Watson mayn't be so quick on the shoot as you asked him to be!"

The Kid was rolling a gag as he was speaking, and now he forced it into the gunman's mouth and bound it there with a cord about Casey's head. His eyes burning with rage and hatred, Two-gun Casey sat there, unable to move, unable to speak.

The Kid stirred the fire and threw on fresh logs.

Then he took the gunman's hat, and placed his own Stetson on the head of Two-gun Casey.

The band of silver nuggets, known wherever the Rio Kid was known, glistened and glimmered in the fire-light.

Then the gunman understood.

"I guess that's yours," said the Rio Kid. "Take your chance, hombre, as you meant me to take mine. I guess if the sheriff shoots too quick he will sure drill a worse galoot than he reckons."

A moment more and the thickening darkness of the trees had swallowed the Rio Kid from sight.

. . . . . .

Through the darkness Sheriff Watson and the men from Frio trod softly and cautiously.

The gleam of a camp-fire afar was a guide to them, if they had needed one. In deep cover, they paused at last on the border of the glade through which the rippling stream ran.

Sheriff Watson breathed hard.

Scarce twenty yards from him, as he stood hidden, gleamed and glowed the camp-fire by the stream.

Close by the fire a figure sat on a log.

It sat motionless, half-hidden by the shadow of a heavy-branched ceiba, the firelight playing on it in fits and starts.

Every time the flame gleamed up it shone on the silver band of silver nuggets on the Stetson hat of the man seated on the log.

The figure sat absolutely still, as still as a man bound. The face was deep in the shadow of the hat; but the Stetson hat, with its band of silver nuggets, was enough for the Frio men.

The sheriff's eyes gleamed.

"It's the Kid, sure!" he breathed.

His gun was in his hand, his finger on the trigger.

The Kid was taken off his guard for once; but the sheriff knew well how swift was the Kid on the draw. There were six men behind him, but once the Kid was up with a gun in his hand the game might yet go against the sheriff's posse from Frio.

"I'm giving him a chance!" breathed Watson. "But if his paws don't go up instanter, he gets his. You galoots watch out."

His teeth set, his gun gripped hard, the sheriff of Frio leaped out of cover.

His gun flashed to a level as he shouted:

"Hands up, Kid!"

The figure seemed to stir, but the sheriff's order was not obeyed. Watson did not hesitate a second.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

He fired and ran forward, firing again and again as he ran. Bullet after bullet crashed into the figure by the fire, yet no sound came from it and it did not fall—as if something invisible held it in the same posture. The sheriff reached him, but it was not till he had dragged aside the Stetson hat, with its band of silver nuggets, that he knew.

. . . . . .

Far away in the pine-woods the Rio Kid was riding, humming a Mexican fandango tune as he rode, while Sheriff Watson of Frio, his smoking gun in his hand, stood staring blankly at the body of Two-gun Casey, riddled with bullets.

THE END.

(You will find another breathlessly thrilling long complete tale of the Rio Kid in next week's issue, entitled: "SAVED BY AN OUTLAW!")

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