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2d

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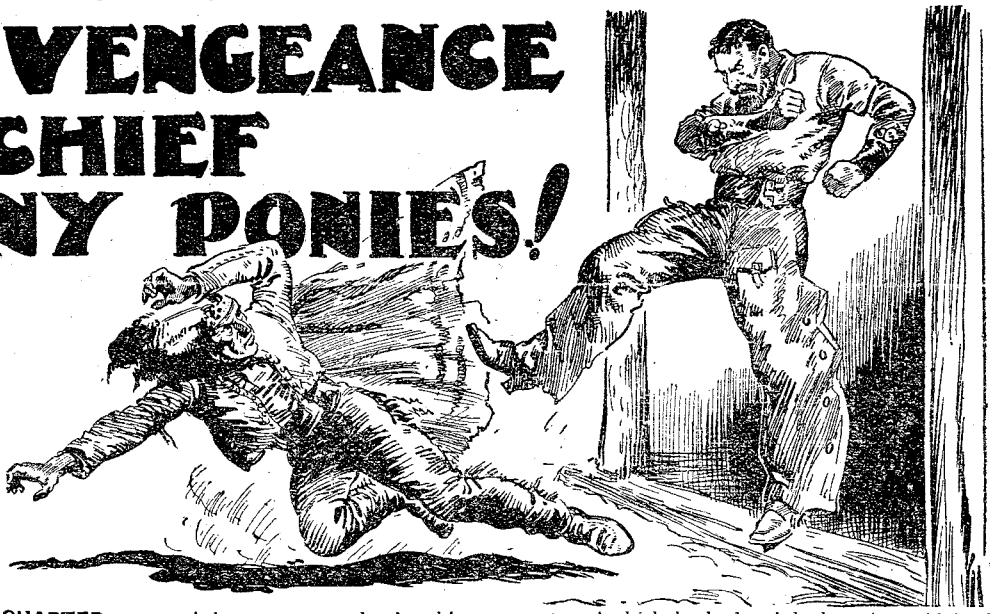
WESTERN THRILLS GALORE!

A kick starts all the trouble. Sheriff Watson kicks a Redskin Chief, with less compunction than he would a dog, and finds himself landed in a fearful danger!

THE VENGEANCE OF CHIEF MANY PONIES!



OUR ROARING TALE OF ADVENTURE IN THE WILD WEST, STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Chief Many Ponies Hits the Trail!

CHIEF MANY PONIES sat huddled under the porch of the sheriff's frame house on the plaza of Frio, his heavy eyes opening lazily to the glimmer of the morning sun. His ragged buckskin leggings, his tattered blanket, were thick with the alkali dust from the plains; his dark, coppery face was grimed with it, his thick, black hair matted with it. His eyes opened heavily after heavy sleep, and stared unseeingly across the dusty plaza towards the Red Dog Saloon, which was opposite the sheriff's house. The hour was early, and Frio was not yet astir, though here and there an early puncher rode down the street on a clattering broncho. Chief Many Ponies was not in a hurry to stir. He did not even know that it was the sheriff's porch under which he had roosted for the night; he had not been in a state to know anything clearly when, at midnight, he was booted out of the roughest joint in Frio, filled to the chin with the potent fire-water. Chief Many Ponies had lurched away with reeling brain and uncertain steps, to collapse and sleep under the porch; and now that his eyes opened to the rising sun, he still lay huddled inert.

There had been a time when the old Apache's name had accorded with his estate. A chief, and the son of a chief, he had owned many ponies, many buffalo-robes, and many braves had followed him on the war-trail. That time was long past. The old hunting-grounds of Chief Many Ponies were ranch-lands now. Where his braves had ridden in war-paint and feathers, the cow-punchers rode the range; long-horned cows grazed where once countless buffalo had roamed.

Chief Many Ponies did not own a single pony now; he owned nothing but his ragged buckskins and blanket, and trudged afoot in tattered moccasins. If ever, in these days, he had a horse, it was a horse that belonged to some pilgrim who had lost one overnight; and Chief Many Ponies never owned it longer than was necessary for its sale to some Mexican horse-dealer. By such means Chief Many Ponies sometimes had money, and his money always went the same way—buying him momentary forgetfulness, bitter headaches, and a racked, nervous system. For, in spite of prohibition laws, there was always "hooch" to be had for money, and the chief, who had once ridden the war-trail on a prancing mustang, lived on as a tattered loafer round saloon doors. In Frio and the other cow towns he was a well-known figure in his tattered Apache blanket, which in sober hours he still draped about him with something of the dignity of a chief.

But it was unfortunate for Chief Many Ponies that he had roosted under the porch of Sheriff Watson's house that night and did not stir from his roost when the sun shone down on Frio. When the sheriff's door opened and Jake Watson strode out, he almost tripped over the recumbent form of the Indian, and he stared down savagely at Chief Many Ponies.

Sheriff Watson was not a good-tempered man these days. The return of the Rio Kid to his old haunts, his cool defiance of the sheriff, the defeats and humiliations he had inflicted on him, had got the sheriff's goat. Men in Frio were beginning to deride the sheriff openly for his failure to bring the Rio Kid to account. The reward of a thousand dollars for the Kid, dead or alive, was posted outside the sheriff's door, but no man in the cow country had been able to earn it—least of all the sheriff himself. The Kid still rode the trails, and camped in the chaparral, free as air, and laughed at his hunters; and every day the sheriff's face grew grimmer, his temper more savage, till it was scarcely safe for his friends to mention the Kid to him. All Frio had roared with laughter when the sheriff had ridden into town tied backwards on his horse—a mocking jest of the Rio Kid's, a testimony that he feared the sheriff too little even to put a bullet through him. That laughter still rang in the ears of Jake Watson, and with fierce oaths he had sworn that he would take the Rio Kid, or die on the boy outlaw's trail. And still the Kid rode free and mocked him.

Last night, while Chief Many Ponies had been imbibing fire-water, Sheriff Watson had been riding long and hard, and riding in vain, on some false trail which he had vainly hoped would lead him to the elusive Kid. He had failed once more. He had ridden back into Frio at a late hour, with savage brow. He had turned out in the morning, determined to try again, though with little hope, and the certainty that all Frio would watch him ride away with mocking smiles. Ten to one had been offered in the Red Dog that Jake Watson would not rope in the Kid in six months, and had found no takers. And the sheriff's temper was now so black and bitter that he was liable to pull a gun at a jesting word.

In that mood, he stumbled over the tattered Indian sprawling in his porch, and fury blazed up in his bronzed face. He stopped, stared down at the Indian, drew back his heavy boot, and kicked. Chief Many Ponies, half-awake, awoke wide as the kick landed, and he rolled out of the porch into the dusty plaza.

"You dog-goned loafer!" roared the sheriff. "Git!"

And he followed the sprawling Apache, kicking and kicking again. Chief Many Ponies sprawled and howled, and Jake Watson, seeming to find solace in it, kicked and kicked, till the dazed Redskin wriggled out of his way and bounded to his feet.

Jake Watson raised his hand and pointed to the prairie.

"Git!" he roared. "You sure ain't wanted in this hyer burg, you dirty loafer! Hit the trail, or I'll have you ridden out of Frio on a rail! You hear me shout?"

"Wah!" grunted the Indian.

His black eyes gleamed ferociously at the sheriff.

Chief Many Ponies had been kicked out of many a joint and dive often enough when he was full of fire-water. But he was sober now, and when he was sober Chief Many Ponies remembered that he was a chief of the Apaches. And he had given no offence, save to roost in the sheriff's porch. Jake Watson was wreaking upon him the rage at which the Rio Kid laughed gay defiance. The Indian's bronzed hand groped under his ragged blanket for a knife.

Jake Watson glared at him, and grabbed a six-gun from his belt.

"Drop it!"

Chief Many Ponies dropped the knife, just in time to escape a bullet crashing through his brain. The knife clanged on the ground, and the sheriff stepped forward and kicked it into the porch. Then he swung the revolver at the Redskin's coppery face again.

"Git!" he snarled. "You'd draw a sticker on me, you durned thief of a Redskin! Hit the trail pronto, and keep clear of this hyer town! I give you one minute to get going!"

Chief Many Ponies gave him a long look, turned, and stalked away for the trail. There was too much dignity in his lofty stalk to please Jake Watson.

"Beat it!" roared the sheriff. "Run, you pesky Injun, run! Dog-gone you, I'll liven you up if you don't hop!"

Unregarding, the Apache stalked on.

Bang!

A bullet tore a rag from his moccasin, and the chief gave a jump.

Bang!

The second bullet took a strip of skin from his foot.

"Wah!" ejaculated Chief Many Ponies.

He had been "fanned" before by playful punchers, and knew what it was like. A bullet intended to graze might very easily crash through bone and sinew. Chief Many Ponies threw his dignity to the winds and ran for it. And the sheriff, standing on the plaza, emptied his six-gun after the fleeing Indian, fanning him with the bullets to keep him on the run. Chief Many Ponies suddenly staggered, and almost fell, but he recovered his balance and leaped on, and vanished out of the town of Frio, and the dusty plains swallowed him up.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Friend in Need!

"SHO!" ejaculated the Rio Kid. Deep in the chaparral, the Kid was riding a lonely trail. He rode with eyes and ears on the alert; for danger dogged the Kid by day and night, and at any hour a quick eye and a prompt gun might be wanted to save him. The black-muzzled mustang shied, and the Kid knew at once that there was something ahead of him on the winding trail, winding narrow and shadowy through pecan and post-oak and trailing Spaniard's-beard. He drew in the mustang and slipped from the saddle, his gun leaping automatically into his hand.

The scarce-marked trail wound round the trunk of a great cottonwood that reared mighty branches over the chaparral. The Kid trod forward softly, silently, to see what was beyond—what it was that had startled the grey mustang and caused him to give warning. His finger was on the trigger of his six-gun, his eye cool and alert.

But as he came round the big tree and saw what lay in the trail beyond, the Kid uttered an ejaculation, and grinned, and dropped the gun into his holster. Half-hidden by ferns in the trail lay a tattered Apache, whose black eyes turned silently on the boy puncher. The Kid knew him at a glance; many a time had he seen Chief Many Ponies hanging around the Red Dog in Frio, in the old days when he had ridden as a puncher in the Double-Bar bunch.

The Apache did not move; his black eyes watched the Kid like those of a snake. The copper face was hard and grim.

The Kid stopped and looked at him.

"Hurt?" he asked.

"Wah!" The Indian nodded. Chief Many Ponies was a man of few words;

and the pain of his wound had wrung no sound from his lips.

"What's the matter with Hanner?" asked the Kid cheerily. "You're a dog-goned old scallawag, Injun, and I guess you're some hoss-thief; but if you're hurt, I'm the antelope to lend you a hand. I guess we're in the same fix, though no galoot can say that the Rio Kid is a hoss-thief. Where have you got yours, Injun?"

The Apache silently indicated his leg.

"Some puncher been fanning you?" asked the Kid.

"Chief Watson."

The Kid whistled.

"The Frio sheriff! I guess fanning an Injun with a six-gun is a new game for Jake Watson—and him a sheriff! Anyhow, let's look at it, and I guess I'll fix you dead to rights."

The Indian eyed him curiously as he knelt in the thick ferns by his side. Contemptuous toleration was the utmost that Chief Many Ponies expected from a paleface. But the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande, hunted for his life by llano and chaparral, had a fellow-feeling for an outcast in distress; even a Redskin, a drunken loafer, and a horse-thief. And the Kid had always been a good-natured cuss.

Sheriff Watson, certainly, had not intended to wound the Indian. He had fanned him with bullets to scare him out of town; but one of the shots had gone closer than Watson had meant it to. Chief Many Ponies had limped long miles with a wounded leg, sinking down in the dark shadow of the chaparral at last, exhausted. There he might have perished, but for the passing of the boy outlaw.

The Kid stripped off the ragged legging, the Indian's set, grim face betraying no sign of the torture every movement gave him. There was a .45 ball embedded in the muscular calf; and a great deal of blood had flowed. The Kid drew his knife.

"It's going to hurt you some, Injun," he said. "But I guess I can get that pill out. It's your say-so."

The Apache nodded.

He made no movement, uttered no sound, under the Kid's kind but rough surgery. In a few minutes the ball lay in the Kid's palm, and he tossed it away into the post-oaks. Then, with water from his canteen, he washed the wound carefully, and bound it up with a handkerchief from his slicker pack.

"I guess that's fixed, Injun," said the Kid. "But you don't want to try to walk on that leg for two-three days. Savvy?"

"Wah!"

"You ain't fixed for camping in the chaparral," grinned the Kid. "I guess it ain't much use patching up your laig and leaving you to the coyotes. I reckon I got to take you a little pasear with me."

The Indian looked at him silently.

"This hyer is too near Frio for my health," explained the Kid. "But I guess I got a little caboose where I lie doggo when the trail's too hot, and I'm toting you there, Injun. Get on your sound laig, and I'll sure hump you on to my mustang."

"Wah!"

The Kid helped the Redskin to rise, and mounted him on the black-muzzled grey mustang. Walking beside the horse, the Kid led him along the trail. The Redskin spoke no word.

There was a derisive grin on the face of the Rio Kid—it told of derision of himself. The Kid hated walking; and now he was walking miles on a rough trail. He reckoned that Injuns were "pizen," and he was toting a wounded Indian to his secret lair in the heart of the chaparral.

The secret of that hiding-place might mean, some day, life or death to the boy outlaw; and he was trusting Chief Many Ponies with the secret.

"You're a sure dog-goned gink, Kid!" the boy outlaw told himself. "You can't keep from horning into other folks' troubles. You'll sure go up to a branch some day, you gol-darned geck!"

But though the Kid laughed at himself, his purpose did not waver. By dim trail and trackless thicket, he led on the horse, till he stopped at last at a dug-out in a hilly slope, screened from view by interlaced juniper and Spanish moss. Pushing aside the screen of vegetation, the Kid led his mustang into the dug-out, lifted the wounded Indian from the saddle, and laid him on a pile of skins.

"I guess you're all O.K. there, Injun!" he said cheerily; "and I'm the galoot that's going to attend you till you get spry again."

"Little paleface good to Injun."

The Kid chuckled.

"Good as they make 'em, Many Ponies. When you get spry enough to hop I reckon you ain't the kind to fetch the sheriff hyer, and earn a thousand dollars for my scalp. But I'm sure taking the risk."

For three days the Apache lay in the Kid's hidden dug-out, fed on the game that the Kid brought in from the chaparral, speaking hardly a word through the long hours. On the fourth day, when the Kid came in, he found Chief Many Ponies gone.

The Kid whistled.

"The dog-goned scallywag's made his get-away!" he told the black-muzzled mustang. "I sure wonder if he's coming back, old hoss."

Of the Kid's few belongings in the dug-out one article was missing. It was one of the walnut-butted six-guns which the Kid had left in the cave for the chief's use if coyotes should come around. Evidently Chief Many Ponies had taken the walnut-butted gun with him.

The Kid loved his guns; but he was not alarmed. He did not believe that the Apache would rob the man who had saved him and sheltered him. The fact that Chief Many Ponies had taken the gun was proof to the Kid that he would return; and he wondered when he would see Chief Many Ponies again.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Snaring the Sheriff!

ABE HARRIGAN stepped rather gingerly into the sheriff's office. Abe was the sheriff's most trusted man, fully in his confidence; but in these days he had to be wary.

The sheriff said little in words, but his looks said much. He looked blackly on the whole world, and his hard, tanned face never lighted. Men who rode hard at his orders and came in to report failure, received only curses for acknowledgment, and retired sulkily. Men who would have grinned on the street when the burly sheriff passed, checked the grin at sight of his set, savage face.

The sheriff of Frio had a permanent grouch these days, and with every passing day it grew blacker and blacker. The Rio Kid, his careless defiance and his elusiveness, haunted the sheriff's thoughts by night and day; and not till the Kid was roped in was the sheriff's grouch likely to pass.

Bitterest of all was the knowledge that no galoot in Frio, by this time, believed that he would ever rope in the Kid. Now, as he sat scowling in his office, a gloomy and dangerous man, Abe Harrigan trod warily on entering his presence. The sheriff of Frio, chief of law and order over a wide country, had to be treated as warily as an ornery gunman.

Jake Watson did not speak; he stared black and bitter inquiry at his man. He had almost given up expecting to hear any reliable news of the Rio Kid.

"There's an Injun wants to chew the rag, sheriff," said Abe. "He allows as he can put you wise to the Kid."

The sheriff shrugged. A few weeks before the news would have brought him hope; but now he had followed too many false scents, had listened to too many wild tales from men who wanted to pouch a thousand dollars.

"An Injun!" he repeated.

"Yep; that all-fired hooch-h'ister, Many Ponies."

Watson only scowled.

"I ran that red outer town, at the front of my gun, a week ago!" he growled. "I warned him not to hit this hyer burg agin."

"If he's got news of the Kid, sheriff——" hinted Abe.

"He sure ain't," said the sheriff sourly. "I guess it's only mush—he wants a dollar for hooch, I reckon."

"Shall I tell him to quit?"

"Nope! Turn him in."

Abe grinned when he was out of the room. Jake Watson expected nothing of the drunken Apache, and was as likely as not to boot him out of the office. But he was catching at straws. Abe had told his friends that Jake Watson would welcome the Evil One himself, in hoofs and horns and tail, if he came with news of the Rio Kid.

The Apache shuffled in.

Watson stared grimly at the tall figure in the tattered blanket. He noted without interest that the Indian limped. He remembered "fanning" the Apache out of town, and guessed that one pill might have gone too close. But winging a Redskin was not a matter for the sheriff to worry over, especially a worthless waster like Chief Many Ponies. There had been a time, not long ago, when Jake Watson was a good-tempered and kind-hearted man; but his bitter disappointments and defects had changed all that. He would have cared little if his fanning bullets had laid Chief Many Ponies dead in the dust of the trail.

"Waal, Injun?" growled Jake. "You allow you know suthin' about that dog-goned fire-bug, the Rio Kid. Spill it!"

"Injun know much!"

"Spill it!" snarled the sheriff.

From under his tattered blanket the Redskin drew a six-gun; a Colt, with a notched walnut butt. He held it up by the barrel.

Jake Watson bounded to his feet.

"Jumping gophers!" he gasped.

He knew the Kid's gun. It was proof positive of the Indian's statement that he had been in touch with the boy outlaw. The sheriff's eyes blazed, his breath came thick and fast. It was a clue at last—a true trail to follow after many failures. He stood and stared at the six-gun.

Chief Many Ponies stood like a statue, the gun in his hand. His dark copper face expressed nothing. Only in the deep black eyes was a gleam that might have told of thoughts deep and dark. But of what might be passing in the Redskin's mind, Jake Watson cared nothing. A Redskin was beneath his contempt; and that the Apache, whom he had kicked and fanned with bullets, might be dreaming of revenge on the sheriff of a white man's town, was not likely to occur to him. The Redskin wanted money and "hooch"; that was why he had come back to Frio. No other thought entered Watson's mind for a moment. Indeed, he was not thinking of the Indian. His attention was concentrated on the Kid's gun; he almost forgot that the silent, impassive savage was in the office at all.

"The Kid's gun!" The sheriff spoke at last hoarsely. "One of the Rio Kid's guns! Injun, where did you get that gun?" His attention returned to Chief Many Ponies at last.

"You've seen the Kid?"

Chief Many Ponies nodded.

"You savvy where to lay hands on him?"

Another nod.

"Oh, gee-whiz!" said the sheriff. Years seemed to have dropped from his lined face; his eyes were shining. "Injun, you put that fire-bug into my grip, and it's a thousand dollars to stow in your rags. I guess you'll get enough fire-water to send you to the happy hunting-grounds in short order. Spill it, Injun; where's the Kid?"

"Little chief hide in chaparral."

"I reckon I knew that much. Can you guide a posse to his lay-out?" demanded the sheriff.

"Guide Chief Watson. Show um," said the Indian. "No take many braves. Chief Watson go after with many braves, wah! Injun show camp in chaparral."

"You durned Redskin, if you can guide me there, you can sure guide my men!" said the sheriff.

SENT ADRIFT INTO THE DESERT! Without a word, but with ruthless malignity in his gleaming eyes, Chief Many Ponies struck the broncho with a cactus branch, and the horse, squealing and prancing, dashed away across the desert, carrying the helpless sheriff to a fearful doom! (*See Chapter 4.*)

Chief Many Ponies shook his head decidedly.

"No can," he answered. "Injun fear little chief. Little chief bad medicine."

The sheriff grinned faintly. He was not surprised to hear that Chief Many Ponies feared the Kid. The Rio Kid had proved "bad medicine" to many a foe.

He proceeded to question the Apache closely. In short, guttural sentences the Indian told his tale. He had discovered the Kid's camp in the heart of the chaparral, away towards the Staked Plain. It was well hidden; it would never be discovered by chance.

The Kid had picked up the chief, wounded, in the chaparral, and taken him to his camp to tend. He had left the six-gun with him to guard him against the wild animals of the chaparral while he was absent. He had gone on a trail saying that he would return in three days. Chief Many Ponies had come to Frio to put the sheriff wise, bringing the Kid's gun with him as proof.

Jake Watson listened with deep attention. That the Kid had befriended the Redskin, and that Chief Many Ponies was rewarding him with betrayal, mattered nothing to him. It was news of the Kid that he wanted, and that he was getting. Not a word of the story would he have believed,

but for the proof in the Redskin's hand. But the gun was proof. And the tale was in keeping with the Kid's well-known character. Well was it known all through the cow country that the Rio Kid was the galoot to help friend or foe, comrade or stranger, in the hour of need. And the six-gun was proof—for how else could it have fallen into the Redskin's hands? The copper-skinned loafer would no more have faced the Kid in fight, than he would have faced the sheriff's posse of Frio. And the Kid was not the man to have one of his guns thieved, even by a cunning Indian; the sheriff knew that. The Redskin's tale was true, and the six-gun in the bronzed hand proved that it was true.

Jake Watson breathed deep and hard. He knew that this Indian, if he chose, could guide him to the secret hiding-place of the Rio Kid—the hidden lair where he lay doggo when the hunt for him grew too hot. Defeat after defeat had fallen to the sheriff of Frio; but the long tale of defeat was to change now. The Rio Kid would be roped in at last.

"By the great horned toad!" breathed the sheriff. "I've sure got him; I've got the scalliwag for sure!"

But to guide the sheriff's posse to the spot the Indian positively refused. His reason seemed clear enough. The Kid was to be away three days; there was ample time for the sheriff, after being guided to the secret camp, to lay his plans for an ambush from which the Kid could never escape when he returned. But Chief Many Ponies desired his own part in the transaction to be kept an inviolate secret; at least, until the Kid was captured. For if the Kid, after all, escaped, Chief Many Ponies would be a dead Indian. He would guide the sheriff to the secret camp; but that was all he would do, and that under a promise of secrecy till after the Kid was roped in.

"Suits me fine!" said Jake Watson, with a grin.

That the chief might be leading him into a trap set by the Rio Kid was not possible. He had been in the Kid's hands if the Kid wanted him; and all the boy outlaw had done was to tie him backwards on his horse and send him trotting into Frio. And the Kid disdained trickery; not to save his life would he have plotted treachery with an Indian. If there was treachery, the Kid was no party to it.

But of treachery the sheriff had no fear. He would have laughed at the suggestion of danger to himself from the drunken outcast, Chief Many Ponies. He would go armed; the Apache unarmed. There were no warriors in these days to follow Chief Many Ponies; he was the last of his race to linger in the Frio country. The Redskin's motives were clear enough to the sheriff; greed for the reward and the fire-water it meant to him, and fear of the vengeance of the Kid if he, after all, escaped.

The sheriff moved to and fro in the office with an elastic step. The Indian had replaced the six-gun under his blanket and stood motionless, impassive, watching the sheriff; only that strange gleam in the depths of his black eyes telling that his thoughts were active. Jake Watson turned back to him.

"When did the Kid ride?"

"Morning."

"And he's away for three days?"

The Indian nodded.

"How long will it take you to guide me to the camp?"

The Indian reflected, and held up four fingers.

"Hours?"

"Chief Watson has spoken."

"Four hours—in the saddle or afoot?"

"Injun go afoot; Chief Watson ride."

"I reckoned he warn't fur from Frio," said the sheriff grimly. "I sure reckoned he warn't, durn his hide. Show me the place, and prove to me that it's the Kid's camp, and you'll fill your rags with dollars, Injun. Gee-whiz! The Kid's my meat at last!"

"No tell other paleface?" asked Chief Many Ponies anxiously. "Injun heap afraid little white chief."

The sheriff grinned.

"I guess I ain't spilling anything, Injun, not till I know for sure. That's a cinch."

A quarter of an hour later the sheriff was mounted on his black broncho, riding out of Frio, the Indian trotting by the side of the horseman with the tireless patience of his race, heedless of the limping leg. Abe Harrigan watched them go and shrugged his shoulders. Evidently the sheriff hoped to learn something from the Indian; but Abe opined that the drunken Apache was stringing him along, in the hope of touching him for the price of a drink. Sheriff Watson, in these days, enraged and exasperated by incessant defeat, was catching at straws; and Abe figured that he was catching at a straw now. But he, no more than the sheriff of Frio, guessed what was in the mind of the limping Apache as he guided Jake Watson into the dark shadows of untrodden chaparral.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Fearful Fate!

JAKE WATSON had let his broncho fall to a walking pace. High over the chaparral sailed the sun, and it was hot and close in the thickets. But thick branches shut off the light, and even at high noon the paths were dusky and shadowed. Dusky, winding paths, where the beasts of the chaparral crept and crawled, seldom or never trodden by human foot. On the edge of the cow country of Frio that vast tract of chaparral spread, uncleared, untrodden save by trappers; beyond it an arid, alkali plain, shut in by the barren, rugged bluffs of the Llano Estacado—the Staked Plain. It was just the lay-out that the Rio Kid would choose for his hiding-place; where all the sheriffs in Texas might have hunted him for weeks and months in vain. Through thickets and scrub, tangled ferns that grew as high as the horseman's head, interlacing branches and pendant moss, the Indian led the way, and the sheriff rode now with his gun in his hand.

Not that he doubted his guide. To him, Chief Many Ponies was a drunken, unscrupulous loafer who was biting the hand that had fed him, for the sake of fire-water. He had taken the Kid's gun from the Apache and slipped it into his own pocket, but merely from the habit of caution, and Chief Many Ponies had made no objection. He had brought the gun to Frio only as proof of his story, and had no further use for it.

Not a word was spoken by the Apache as he trotted patiently by the side of the horseman when there was space, and slipped ahead of him when the winding way was too narrow. Only when the sheriff spoke did he give a grunt of assent or dissent. He seemed tireless, though the sheriff might have noticed that he limped more as the long, rough miles faded under his feet. But the sheriff gave that no heed. He rode watchful and wary, lest the Rio Kid should be at hand, prepared to shoot at sight if he saw the handsome, reckless face of the boy outlaw amid the tangled branches and trailing moss. More than once the Rio Kid had spared him; but the sheriff of Frio would not spare the Kid if he got a bead on him. Fear was unknown to the sheriff of Frio; he would have been glad to meet the Kid, man to man, gun to gun, in the dark shades of the chaparral. But still more did he desire to locate the secret camp, to plan an ambush to trap the Kid when he returned to it, an ambush from which the boy outlaw could not possibly escape.

At a walking pace now he rode, the path too thickly tangled for more rapid riding.

Hours had passed; the sun, half-hidden by the thick boughs above, was sloping towards the Huecas.

The Indian halted at last, looked back, and signed to the sheriff to dismount.

"Getting close?" asked Jake.

Chief Many Ponies nodded.

Jake Watson slipped from the saddle and hooked his reins over a post-oak. The Indian waited stolidly, his bronze face expressionless. But the sheriff's back was turned to him for a moment as he hitched the horse. In that moment Chief Many Ponies sprang like the native jaguar of the chaparral. The sheriff of Frio, taken utterly by surprise, went crashing down into the underbrush, sprawling on his face, the Redskin on his back. Before he could twist over to grasp the Redskin, before he could lift the gun in his hand, a heavy blow on the back of his head scattered his senses.

Chief Many Ponies rose to his feet and dropped the stone which had stunned the sheriff of Frio.

Like a log Jake Watson lay in the tangled ferns and moss.

It was long before his senses came back.

When he stirred at last and strove to move, he found that he could not. Strong rope held his limbs. The sheriff stared blankly, wildly, hardly aware of what had happened to him.

It was deeper dusk in the chaparral now. The sun was sinking behind the distant Staked Plain. In the gloom the sheriff saw the impassive face of the Apache, dark, shadowy, malignant. He raised his head; it was the only part of him that he could move. His head had been resting against the neck of his broncho. He was stretched on the horses back, face up, his arms bound down over the broncho's shoulders, his legs tied and tied again, his feet on either side of the horse's tail. Spread-eagled on the bare back of the broncho, from which the Indian had removed saddle and girths and stirrups and bridle, the sheriff was bound with his own trail-rope and could not lift hand or foot. His amazement was as great as his rage. The Apache had treacherously attacked him in the heart of the solitary chaparral; but it was not to rob him, it was not to steal his horse, it was not to kill him.

A bitter grin wrinkled the copper face of the Apache as he met the wildly staring eyes of the sheriff. He made a gesture towards his injured leg.

Then Jake Watson understood; and yet he could not wholly understand. It was for revenge for that injury that the Redskin had trapped him; yet his tale of the Rio Kid must have been true, the six-gun proved it. Slowly it came into the sheriff's mind that the tale was true, but that the Apache had had no intention of betraying the Kid who had befriended him. He had used the Kid's name and the Kid's gun, and the sheriff's savage eagerness to track

down the boy outlaw, in a cunning scheme to get Jake Watson at his mercy, alone in the heart of the chaparral.

The Kid's gun had been taken from his pocket; he saw it stuck in the Redskin's girdle. His own gun lay in the grass. Lying back on the horse's neck, the sheriff of Frio stared long and blackly at the Apache.

"You durned thief of a Redskin!" he grated. "You'll hang for this! You'll go up to a branch as sure as shooting, dog-gone your red hide!"

"Chief Watson shoot Injun!" said the Apache gutturally. "Chief Many Ponies no forget. Chief Watson go ride in Staked Plain."

The sheriff's tanned face grew pale.

He knew now what his fate was to be. Bound to the back of the horse, he was to be driven into the desert, to find there a long and lingering death from hunger and thirst and the scorching rays of the sun. Like Mazeppa of the old tale, he was to ride and ride, bound to the horse's back, till death ended his sufferings, and the broncho wandered in the desert with a dead man on his back—a body to be picked to a skeleton by the buzzards. That was the revenge of Chief Many Ponies. That was the bitter vengeance planned by the Apache whom the sheriff had looked on as a drunken, cowardly loafer, too much despised to be feared.

The Redskin led the horse onward through the chaparral. As they went, the sheriff spoke hoarsely again and again—cursing, threatening, and at last pleading and promising. From the impassive Indian came not a word in reply. He led the horse onward till the chaparral thinned round them, and they emerged upon the alkali plain at last—arid, dry, barren, dusty in the last glimmer of the sinking sun.

Still without a word, the Apache gathered cactus and yucca thorns—for what purpose the sheriff did not need to ask. With a ruthless hand, Chief Many Ponies thrust the handful of thorns between the sheriff's bound body and the back of the horse. There was a squeal of pain from the black broncho. Under the weight of the bound rider the thorns scratched and tore the horse's skin, and as soon as the animal was in motion the pain would grow intense, maddening the horse into frantic excitement, spurring him on to mad galloping.

Without a word, but with ruthless malignity in his gleaming eyes, Chief Many Ponies struck the broncho with a cactus branch, and the horse, squealing and prancing, dashed away across the plain. He was in the desert that stretched to the bluffs of the Staked Plain, far from the cow country, in a land of alkali dust and sage and scrubby cactus, where no horseman rode if he could help it, where no living thing stirred, save the crawling rattlesnake and the wandering, howling coyote.

. . . . . .

The Rio Kid, cooking flapjacks by the fire in the dug-out, glanced up as Chief Many Ponies came through the screen of juniper and Spanish moss.

"I reckoned I'd see you again, Injun!" grinned the Kid.

Chief Many Ponies nodded gravely, drew the six-gun from under his tattered blanket, and handed it to the boy outlaw. The Kid slipped it into his holster.

"Chief Many Ponies go on war-path," said the Redskin.

"Sho!" said the Kid.

"Chief Watson, he never hunt my white brother again."

The Kid started.

"Shucks! You ain't been gunning after Sheriff Watson, Injun?" he exclaimed, staring at the Redskin.

Chief Many Ponies nodded.

"Chief Watson my little brother's enemy," he said. "He shoot Injun, he hunt for my little white brother. The coyotes and the buzzards of the Staked Plain will eat Chief Watson. I have spoken!"

The Kid looked at him grimly. The sheriff of Frio hunted him for his life; but colour was colour. Quietly, in low, guttural tones, the Apache told of his vengeance. The Rio Kid listened without a word, only his handsome face growing grimmer and grimmer.

He rose to his feet.

"Is my little white brother angry?" he asked. The savage mind of the Redskin did not understand.

The Kid drew a deep breath.

"I reckon you've done like an Injun," he said. "I guess I ain't blaming you for being what you are, you dog-goned Apache. Jake Watson sure asked for it, and if you'd gone gunning after him like a white man. I reckon it wouldn't have been my funeral. But——" He broke off, and called to his mustang.

Without a word more, or a look to Chief Many Ponies, the Rio Kid ran from the dug-out, leading his mustang through the thickets. The blackness of the chaparral swallowed him from the sight of the Apache.

In hot haste the Rio Kid rode through the tangled chaparral, on the trail to save his enemy.

THE END.

(Will the Kid be able to save the sheriff, or will he, too, find a resting-place in the terrible Staked Plain? See next week's roaring Western tale, entitled: "THE DEATH RIDE!")

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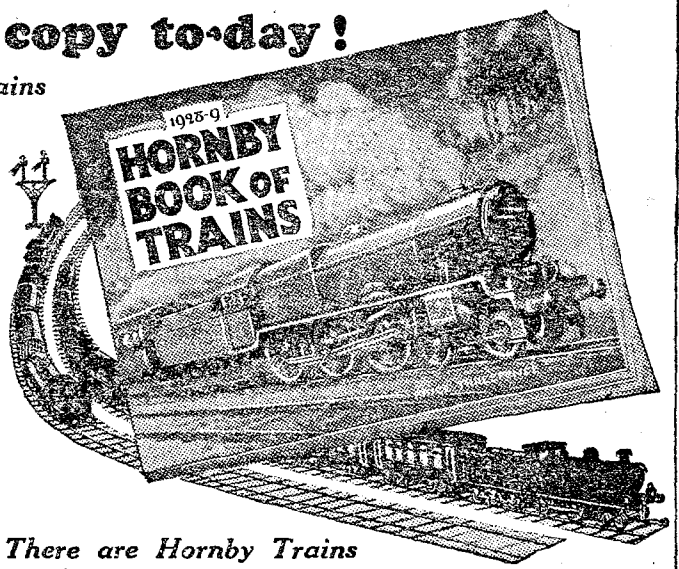

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Somewhere in the boundless Staked Plain gallops a maddened horse, on whose back is bound the Sheriff of Frio. And into the heart of that terrible desert rides the Rio Kid to the rescue of the helpless man!

The DEATH RIDE!

by RALPH REDWAY

OUR ROARING WESTERN YARN—WITH A THRILL IN EVERY CHAPTER—STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Kid's Way!

HIGH over the chaparral and the plain sailed the full round moon. The Rio Kid stood in the post-oaks on the edge of the chaparral, and stared out over the wide, dusty plain that stretched before his eyes in the moonlight. Grim by day, the sage desert was ghastly and ghostly by night. Barren earth and alkali dust, scrubby yuccas and skeleton cacti, sand and stones—mile on mile of it, backed in the far distance by the towering bluffs of the Staked Plain.

The Kid stood with his hand on the bridle of the grey mustang, and stared across the desert. His face was grim.

The Kid had set himself a task that few would have undertaken willingly, fewer able to carry out.

Tracking a lost horseman in the dry and arid desert might have taxed too far the trailing skill and endurance of an Apache or a Navaho. No man in Texas could beat the Kid on a trail; no man could exceed him in endurance and determination. But the Kid, as he looked across the dusty plain in the bright moonlight, knew that he was more likely to fail than to succeed, and that he might leave his bones to bleach there, where many bones had bleached.

But it was not that thought that made him hesitate. He had not yet found the trail he sought to follow. To follow a trail into the desert without a clue was to court failure. Every minute was precious if he was to save the life of the lone horseman, who rode far and unseen; but the Rio Kid knew the wisdom of making haste slowly.

As he stood there, looking out over the sage, there was a stealthy step behind him in the chaparral, and he turned his head to see the dark, coppery face and glittering black eyes of Chief Many Ponies.

Chief Many Ponies came silently to his side.

The Kid eyed him grimly.

He had saved and befriended the tattered Apache, and, knowing the Indian nature as he did, he hardly blamed him for the terrible vengeance he had taken on Jake Watson, sheriff of Frio. But it was the vengeance of Chief Many Ponies that he had to undo. It was the revengeful Redskin who had set the Kid the task that lay before him.

"Wah!" said Chief Many Ponies, in his guttural tones. "Is my little brother angry with his red brother?"

The Kid laughed shortly.

"Aw, forget it," he said. "I guess you don't know any better, Injun, and Jake Watson sure asked for trouble when he let drive a bullet through an Injun's leg, without putting one through his head afterwards. But I reckon I'm gunning after the galoot you've sent into the desert tied to his horse."

The Indian's keen eyes swept the moonlit desert for a moment.

"My little white brother will never find Chief Watson," he said. "Wah! Can my little white brother track the bird in the air, and the snake in the mesquite? He cannot! I have spoken!"

"It's some job," admitted the Kid, "and I guess it ain't any funeral of mine, seeing that Jake Watson is after my scalp, and will get me strung up in Frio if he can work the riffle. But I sure ain't leaving a white man to what you've stacked up against him, Injun."

"He is my little white brother's enemy?" said Chief Many Ponies.

"Sure!"

"Has the Great Spirit made my little brother mad that he will risk his life to save his enemy?"

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid. "Forget it, Injun. You won't savvy in a month of Sundays. A white man don't leave a white man to be picked up by the desert buzzards even if one is an outlaw and the other a sheriff. I guess I'm making this hyer my funeral, and talking won't buy me anything. I got to get on the trail. Quit chin-wag!"

"If my little white brother save the life of Chief Watson——"

"I guess I'm going to try."

"Then it will be known in Frio what Chief Many Ponies has done, and the white men will shoot him," said the Apache.

"I reckon you'd better beat it out of this country jest as fast as you know how," agreed the Kid. "It sure won't be healthy for you anywhere near Frio when the galoots know that you tied Jake Watson to his horse and drove him into the desert."

The Apache's hand was at his girdle. The Kid whipped out a six-gun.

"Leave that sticker alone, you pesky Injun!" he ripped out. "Do you figure on stopping me from taking the trail? By the great horned toad, I guess if you horn in I'll leave a dead Injun here in the chaparral when I start after Jake Watson."

For a second, black rage was in the dark face of the Apache, and his eyes scintillated at the Kid.

But his hand came away from the knife in his girdle.

He drew himself up, draping his tattered blanket round him with the dignity of a chief.

"It is not the little gun of my white brother that Chief Many Ponies fears," he said, "but my brother saved my life in the chaparral, and the hand of Chief Many Ponies will never be raised against him."

"Keep to that," said the Kid coolly. "Look here, Injun, I'm going after Jake Watson, and saving him, if I know how. If I get him safe he will see you hanged on a cottonwood branch for fixing him as you did. You want to beat it—and you want to beat it pronto. That's enough chewing the rag!"

And, leading his mustang, the Rio Kid moved away, leaving the Indian in the post-oaks, a dark statue.

To and fro on the moonlit plain the Kid moved, his mustang following him, seeking sign.

He had easily picked up the trail of the sheriff's horse through the tangled chaparral, and had found the spot where the black broncho, with its rider stretched bound on its back, had been driven into the desert. But in the sandy plain the track was not so easy to read.

The Apache watched him silently.

To the Redskin's savage mind it was inconceivable how the Kid, hunted hard by the sheriff of Frio, should plunge into the waterless desert in search of the doomed man to save him. But the Kid's resolution was clear to him, though he did not understand it. Something like a grim smile twisted the Indian's eagle features as he watched the Kid seeking sign. He did not believe that a white man could follow the trail of the black broncho into the sage.

His mouth tightened and his eyes glittered as he saw the Kid stoop, scan the earth keenly, and then leap into the saddle and ride. Once more the dusky hand of the Apache sought the knife in his girdle. Once more he relinquished it. The Kid had saved his life, and the Apache had called him brother, and from that hour the Kid's life was sacred to him, even if the boy outlaw robbed him of his vengeance.

Across the moonlit plain the Kid rode, dim and shadowy, casting a gigantic shadow in the moonlight across the sand and the sage. He disappeared in the dimness at last.

Chief Many Ponies drew a deep breath.

From the chaparral he strode out into the desert, his soft moccasins padding silently, taking a different route from that followed by the Kid—a route that led him the shortest way to the Staken Plain, refuge of hunted men, red and white. Chief Many Ponies had glutted his vengeance upon the man who had wounded him, and the vicinity of the white men's towns was no longer a place for him.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Death Ride!

SHERIFF WATSON'S eyes opened wearily to the morning sun.

He could hardly believe that he had slept, outstretched on the back of the galloping broncho, every limb savagely bound with strong rope, his aching head resting on the horse's neck.

But if he had not slept, he had been unconscious for a time, at least.

He awakened as if from a grim nightmare to a reality that was worse than the most evil dream.

The sun was up, and as he raised his head he could see round him on all sides the boundless desert.

He was far from the cow country: far from the green grasslands. Chief Many Ponies had taken care of that.

From the chaparral, the sage plain stretched, mile on mile, towards the Llano Estacado—arid, waterless, barren. Not a blade of grass showed in the barren soil. No wandering cow from the ranges ever came there—no cowpuncher ever rode by those dusty tracts. Rattlesnakes, cicadæ, howling coyotes, were the only tenants of the desert. If a horseman ever rode into that barren plain, it was some hunted outlaw seeking safety, or some outcast Redskin. And it was there that the black broncho careered, with Sheriff Watson bound to his back.

The horse was still at the gallop. The cactus thorns placed between the bound man and the horse's back spurred him on with ceaseless torment.

Sometimes a shrill squeal came from the broncho, sometimes a pitiful whinny. More than once, the animal reached round with his head, striving to get at the torment on his back with his teeth.

Sometimes he slackened into a walk, always to break into a wild gallop again.

The Frio sheriff stared round him with hopeless eyes.

The dust of the plain, spurred up by the broncho's hoofs, had settled on him thickly. It covered his face, choked his eyes and nose and mouth. He awoke to the torments of thirst.

Sage and sand, sand and sage. Silence of death, broken only by the clatter of thundering hoofs.

The sheriff groaned.

He knew that he was doomed: that there was no hope. Not a chance in a thousand that a horseman riding the desert would sight him. Not a chance in a thousand that even if a horseman rode by that deadly plain, he would be other than a hunted outlaw, a bitter enemy to the sheriff of Frio. The Rio Kid, perhaps——

At the thought of the Rio Kid the sheriff's eyes blazed with rage.

It was with a tale of guiding him to the Kid's hiding-place that the revengeful Apache had tricked him alone into the chaparral, and then struck him down and carried out his malignant plan of vengeance. It was his eagerness to catch at any straw to rope in the Kid that had led the Frio sheriff into the deadly trap.

The Rio Kid—who had escaped him, mocked him, humiliated and defeated him—the Rio Kid would ride the trails free and careless, as of old, while the bones of Jake Watson whitened in the desert. That thought was more bitter than death itself to the sheriff of Frio.

But for his eagerness to track down the Rio Kid he might never have fallen into this fearful trap. It was through the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande that he had come to this.

In his rage, the sheriff of Frio forgot, for a few minutes, the torment of thirst and aching limbs, the certainty that he was doomed. He muttered curses on the boy puncher who was the cause of his disaster.

But there was little comfort in that. His thoughts turned again to his situation. Once more he lifted his aching head, stared round at the barren flats, and saw only sage and sand, cactus and yucca, dusty and dreary in the strengthening blaze of the sun. Already the sun was hot; in a few hours it would be blazing down with fiery heat on the unprotected face that was turned towards the sky.

The broncho was still galloping. Horse, as well as rider, was tormented by thirst. Jake Watson noted that the broncho was heading in a definite direction, as if seeking some known spot. A hope sprung up in his breast that the animal was seeking home. But

between the sage desert and the cow country lay miles of tangled, impenetrable chaparral, as thick and wild as in the days before a white man's eye looked on the plains of Texas. No horse would seek to penetrate that wilderness of tangled branches and trailing creepers. And as he raised his head, the sheriff could see that the chaparral was not in sight: it had been left many a long mile behind by the galloping broncho. Yet the animal was plainly heading for some spot; and the sheriff guessed, at least, that its instinct told it where to find a water-hole.

At the thought of water, the craving to drink came over him like a burning pain. His throat caked with bitter dust ached for water.

But if the broncho found the water-hole it was seeking, there would be no drink for the man bound on its back. Bound and helpless, unable to move a limb, he could not reach it, if it flowed deep round the broncho.

He groaned again.

Gallop, gallop, gallop!

Mile on mile of desert and dust; till at last the broncho slackened and stopped. Jake Watson heard the squelching of hoofs in mud. He twisted his head to look down past the horse's neck, half-blinded by the rough mane of the broncho. The dusty, thirsting muzzle of the animal was thrust into the water-hole, and it was drinking in great gulps.

In the midst of the desert, from some hidden spring, the water gurgled in a thin, meagre stream. It flowed a few yards and sank into the sand again. Round it a pool had been worn, and the earth was trampled into mud by the feet of many animals of the desert that came to drink. A sound of yelping came to the bound man's ears. He knew the voice of the desert coyote. He stared round him, and caught the greenish gleam of three or four pairs of haggard eyes. The gaunt scavengers of the desert had been at the pool when the black broncho reached it, and they had scattered before the thundering hoofs: but they were gathering round again with yelping throats.

Even as the sheriff's glazed eyes stared, one of the gaunt brutes made a jump and narrowly missed him with snapping jaws.

The broncho started away with a squeal. Thirst had made it reckless of the hungry coyotes: but its thirst satisfied, terror of its natural enemies returned. The horse shied at the leaping brutes, and galloped on into the desert, fear of the snapping jaws driving it on more surely than the tormenting thorns on its back.

Sheriff Watson raised his head to look back.

Behind, leaping, racing, screeching, came the coyotes in full pursuit, with flaming eyes and hungry jaws. But the frantic speed of the terrified horse dropped the pursuit. When Watson raised his weary head to look again, the howling pack had vanished in the sage.

Gallop, gallop!

The sun was scorching his face now, blistering and burning. Suddenly, from the blankness of the desert, a horseman leaped into view. Where all had been bare and empty, arid and lifeless, a horseman suddenly rode, and the sheriff gazed at the figure in amazement. From his parched throat came an oath. For he knew the rider—he knew the handsome, sunburnt face, the Stetson hat, with its band of silver nuggets—he knew the Rio Kid. Straight towards him rode the Kid, as if bent on riding him down—straight at him, larger and clearer, till when it seemed that he was about to gallop down on the sheriff, he suddenly dissolved into blank space and vanished.

It was a mirage of the desert.

Jake Watson's aching eyes swept empty space, dust and sand and sage. No horseman rode within range of his sight.

It was a mirage! But the mirage told him that somewhere within the wide limits of the desert the Rio Kid was riding: a dozen miles away, perhaps; perhaps thirty miles or more, but shown to his eyes for those few moments by some strange trick of refraction.

The Kid! Hot rage welled in the breast of the doomed sheriff of Frio. If he could but have pulled a gun on the Rio Kid, he could have gone almost contentedly to his death in the desert.

Yet, as the galloping horse bore him on and on and on, he realised that in his hopelessness and despair, he drew some strange comfort from the knowledge that even his enemy was in the sage desert. In that dreary solitude of death, it was something that a human being was present, though distant—it was something that even a bitter foe was somewhere at hand. The hideous solitude did not seem so hideous after that phantom glimpse of the Rio Kid.

Clatter, clatter!

The broncho's hoofs were spurning stones. Round the dazed eyes of Jake Watson rose stony ridges, rocky boulders, bulging bluffs. He knew that the wandering horse had struck the edge of the Staked Plain—the great tableland that rose high and sheer from the lower plains—and was following the course of a rocky ravine from the lower plain to the upper. Clattering and scrambling among stones and rocks, the broncho plunged and scrambled on, till he reached the upper end of the ravine, and dashed on over the barren tableland. The sheriff's head sank back on the tossing neck. The wild steed had carried him into the waterless wastes of the Staked Plain—to die!

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
A Tough Trail!

"OLD hoss, we're beat!"

Under the blazing sun in the sage desert the Rio Kid spoke to the grey mustang in tones of discouragement.

To give up beat was not the way of the Rio Kid. But it looked as if the boy outlaw was beaten now.

Few men, white or red, could have picked up the trail so far as the Kid had followed it already. Mile after mile he had followed it, seeing sign where an eagle's eye might have missed it.

The slightest print in the barren soil—a trampled sage bush—a torn root—a broken yucca—the slightest sign was enough for the Kid. Sometimes at a walk, sometimes at a gallop, he had followed on the track of the broncho that was hours ahead of him. But here, in the heart of the desert, he was beaten. Not a sign—not a trace—though with keen eyes he scanned the earth and scanned again.

He stood beside the mustang, staring round him at the desert. Far in the distance, against the sky, rose the wild bluffs of the Staked Plain. But whether the broncho had headed for the Llano Estacado, or in any other direction, there was nothing to tell the Kid. Many times in following the trail he had found that the broncho had turned from its course, once even winding in a circle. Now the last trace had vanished in dust. For a mile or more the Kid had proceeded on foot, picking up a dim track which might have been left by some wandering animal days before, almost certain that it was a false track, yet with nothing better to follow, and hoping that sign would appear every moment. But even that dim trail had petered out in drifting dust, and the trailer was left without a clue, true or false, to follow.

"We're beat, old hoss!" said the Rio Kid.

He gave the mustang water—a spare drink, for water was more precious than gold in the dry desert. He moistened his own lips.

Then he swung himself into the saddle.

"Old hoss, it's your say-so," he said. "Beat it."

The mustang broke into a loping gallop

The Kid smiled faintly. He had lost the trail: no human eye could have followed it farther than he had followed it, if so far. But he had faith in the instinct of the mustang, and that was all that remained now. The mustang galloped on, with loose reins, left to his own guidance. If the animal's keen scent told him that another horse was in the desert he might guide the Kid to the hapless wanderer he sought. At all events, the mustang was heading somewhere, and the Kid left him to it because there was nothing else to be done.

"Gee-whiz!" ejaculated the Kid suddenly.

A glistening of water on the arid plain far ahead caught his eye.

It was not the scent of another horse; it was the scent of water that was drawing on the mustang.

Straight for the solitary water-hole in the heart of the desert the mustang galloped, and the Kid's face lighted. Water he needed, and his horse needed; but it was not only that. Where the mustang was heading, the black broncho might have headed; and there was hope in the Kid's breast of picking up the trail again at the water-hole.

The mustang's hoofs spattered in mud at last, and his thirsty muzzle sank to the water-hole. The Kid slipped from the saddle.

"By the great horned toad!" he ejaculated. "Old hoss, you're some cayuse, and I'm sure telling you so!"

There were horse's tracks, fresh tracks, in the mud round the water-hole. One glance was enough to tell the Rio Kid that they were the tracks of the broncho he sought.

He caressed the mustang's glossy neck.

"I guess we've hit it again, old cayuse," said the Kid affectionately.

There were tracks in plenty, and round them and among them were the tracks of the coyotes. The Kid picked out the trail where it led away from the water-hole, and noted that the coyote tracks accompanied those of the broncho. He whistled softly. The trail wound on through a tract of sage brush, and the Kid would not have been surprised to find in the sage the skeletons of horse and rider, picked clean by the scavengers of the desert. He allowed the mustang to drink his fill, filled his canteen, and mounted again and pushed on through the sage. Here the trail was easily read and easily followed, and the Rio Kid rode at a gallop. Once he loosed off his revolver at a coyote that peered hungrily from the brush, and the gaunt brute fled howling. But what the Kid feared to find, he did not find; and at last he came on the trail of the broncho where it ran on singly, the

coyote tracks vanishing, and he knew that the horse had outrun its pursuers.

The Rio Kid rode on. Ahead of him now rose the towering bluffs that marked the edge of the Staked Plain—a solid wall, viewed from a distance, but split by innumerable fissures and ravines at a closer view. The trail of the black broncho ran direct towards the high bluffs, and the Kid followed it at a gallop. And when it was lost in the dust and stones the Kid was only half a mile from a deep rocky ravine that split the bluffs ahead, and after casting round for a time seeking sign, he rode full speed for the ravine.

"I reckon that cayuse was dead scared of the coyotes, old hoss," he told his mustang. "I reckon he hit for the upper plain. And if he did, I'll sure pick up some sign yonder."

The Kid rode into the ravine. In rainy weather it was the bed of a stream, but it was now dry as a bone, the rocks baking in the sun. The Kid dismounted and hunted for sign; and he was not long in picking it up. Loose stones that had rolled down told that hoofs had lately clattered that way; a trampled sage-bush told the same tale. In that lonely desert it was little likely that any horseman had passed save the one he sought; but the Kid had to take the chance—the sign was too faint and doubtful for him to recognise tracks.

He pushed on up the ravine.

By steep ways it led him to the upper plain, and then before his eyes stretched the level, uninhabited waste of the Llano Estacado.

Far and wide the Kid's keen glance swept in search of a wandering broncho with a bound rider on its back.

But there was nothing to be seen save the desolate level and the stunted bushes that grew in patches.

Sign was hard to find on the baked earth, and the Kid proceeded on foot, scanning the ground, his reins looped over his arm.

Again and again the trail of the black broncho was lost and found again; the Kid keeping on tirelessly, while the sun sloped down to the west towards the sierras of New Mexico.

That the black broncho was still going was certain; not yet had he lain down to rest, or the Kid would have found sign of it. The cactus thorns placed on his back by the ruthless Redskin spurred him on. But sooner or later he must stop, and the Kid still hoped to find the broncho's tormented burden alive.

"Gee-whiz!" ejaculated the Kid suddenly.

From a fold in the rugged ground a little distance away a horseman emerged into view—a man stretched out on the back of a black broncho, bound hand and foot, his ghastly face turned to the sun from the horse's neck.

He was not three hundred yards from the Kid.

The Rio Kid stared, doubting for a moment whether it was not an effect of the mirage.

But it was no vision of the dusty plain—it was real. The trail the Kid was laboriously picking up ran due north, but the Mazeppa-rider had appeared due west. The Kid did not understand it, but he turned from the trail and galloped directly towards the broncho, hunting by sight now instead of sign.

But in a few minutes he understood as he dragged in his mustang almost on the verge of a wide, deep barranca that split the plain.

"Oh shucks!" growled the Kid.

He figured it out now. The black broncho had gone north along the barranco, which stretched for miles, a great fissure in the earth. At the northern end the broncho had turned west, and, following his unguided way, had come back along the other side of the fissure.

Less than two hundred yards away, but with the deep chasm between which no horse could leap.

The Kid sat in the saddle and stared at his quarry. The black broncho showed evident signs of exhaustion, but the torment on its back kept it in motion. The Kid looked along the barranca. It ran as far as the eye could read to the north, and to get at the broncho he had to follow its length and turn the end. The dusty, sweating broncho ambled wearily along. As the Kid gazed at it, uncertain, Jake Watson's head was raised from the neck, and the sheriff's glazed eyes stared despairingly round. His eyes were filmed, and he did not see the Kid.

The Kid dismounted and took the rifle from its leather case at the saddle. He hated to draw a bead on a horse, but there was no help for it if he was to save the rider. Long before he could ride the length of the barranca and follow the trail down on the other side the broncho would have vanished, and the chances were that the trail would peter out on the sun-baked earth.

The Kid levelled his rifle across the mustang's back, taking a steady aim. Crack!

(*Continued on next page.*)

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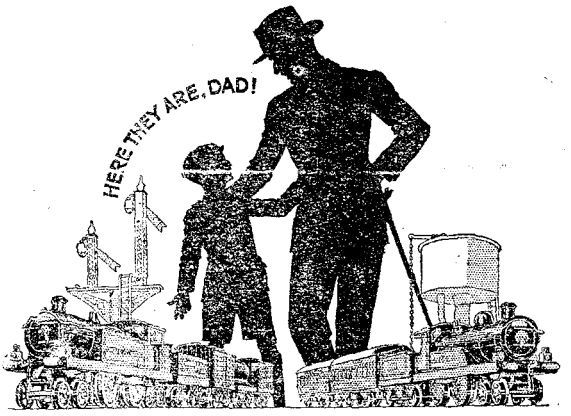

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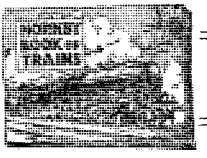

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The black broncho pitched heavily forward on its knees, fell on its side, and lay still.

One glance the Kid gave it; and then he remounted in hot haste and rode at a mad gallop along the rough verge of the chasm. Many long miles lay before him till he could reach the end—many long miles more to reach the spot where the broncho lay dead with its still living burden. There were fierce coyotes in the wilds of the Staked Plain; and already, as the Kid spurred on, black shadows of vultures appeared against the sky, winging their way towards the carrion they had already scented.

The Kid was riding for another man's life, but he rode as if he were riding for his own.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Sheriff and Outlaw!

JAKE WATSON, Sheriff of Frio, heard the shot that rang across the silent solitude, and felt the crash of the falling horse. But he did not know what had happened. Thirst and suffering and the blinding blaze of the sun had dulled his senses. It was long before he even realised that he was still—that the endless, endless motion of the tormented broncho had ceased. He had lapsed many times into unconsciousness; and after the fall of the horse he remained long insensible to his surroundings.

But his filmed eyes opened at last, and he stared dizzily. A hoarse croaking and screeching was in his ears; fierce eyes were glaring at him. His brain cleared a little and he stared at what surrounded him. The broncho lay on its side, lifeless. The bullet had killed it instantly. Had the Kid failed in his aim the sheriff might have been crushed to death under the rolling animal. But the broncho had fallen like a log, and lay like one. Hideous birds surrounded the bound man; and at the sight of them a terrible cry broke from him, startling the vultures back in alarm. They crowded and fluttered back in cowardly fear, croaking and cackling.

Cry after cry broke from the tormented man.

He knew now what had happened. He did not recall the shot, but he knew that the broncho was lifeless, that he was bound to the back of a dead steed, and that the scavengers of the desert were gathering for their prey. Frantically he struggled to release himself from his bonds—as vainly as he had struggled many times before.

His wild cries scared back the vultures from the carcase of the horse. They squatted round him, watching him with gleaming eyes, croaking.

The Sheriff of Frio groaned in utter horror and despair. The wild Mazeppa ride was over; it had ended here in the desert of the Staked Plain, and he lay bound to the lifeless horse, to perish of thirst and to fall a prey to the black vultures.

The carrion birds, recovering from their fear as the sheriff did not move, approached closer again. He screamed and shrieked, and again they receded. They squatted round him, croaking, watching, waiting.

Gallop, gallop!

Faintly from afar came the ring of hoofs on hard earth.

It was like a ghostly echo of the incessant hoof-beats of the black broncho which had rung for so many tortured hours in the sheriff's ears.

Gallop, gallop!

A rifle cracked, and a bullet spattered up stones close by the fallen broncho. It scared the vultures, who screeched and rose on the wing. The rifle cracked again, and one of the foul birds fell dead, the rest winging their way into the blue with discordant cries.

Gallop, gallop!

Nearer and nearer, louder and louder, came the clattering hoof-strokes. But the Sheriff of Frio did not understand that help was coming; he was shrieking in delirium now, half out of his senses. He did not know that the clattering hoofs stopped close at hand; he did not see a lithe figure that bent over him, a handsome sunburnt face that looked down on him. He did not know that a keen knife slashed through the cords that bound him, that he was free from his long thraldom.

He lay on the earth—with stiffened, aching limbs, shot through with pain—blind to his surroundings. But he knew when water was placed to his lips, and he drank greedily.

A strong arm lifted him, bulky as he was, and dragged him into the shade of a stunted bush. Again the water was at his lips; again he drank as if he would never cease drinking. And then, as in a mist, he saw the handsome, bronzed face that was before him, and laughed wildly.

"The mirage—the mirage again!" he babbled.

For how could it be the Rio Kid—the man he had hunted far and wide—who was kneeling beside him, holding water to his lips, supporting him with a strong arm?

"Forget it, sheriff," said the Kid's cool voice. "I guess this ain't any pesky mirage nohow! It's little me!"

"The Kid!" breathed the sheriff, staring at him with unbelieving eyes.

"Jest the Kid, sheriff."

"I'll string you up yet!" muttered Jake Watson. "I'll get out of this; I'll pull through yet, and string you up!"

The Kid laughed.

"Forget it, Jake! You ain't fixed to string up any galoot—you ain't, not by long chalks! Take another drink."

The sheriff lapped up the water like a dog. His senses were clearing now; and he leaned on the Kid's arm, staring into the tanned face.

"It's you, Kid?" he muttered weakly.

"Sure!"

"I guess I saw you—in the mirage—way back; I figured that you was around. You found me here?"

"I guess I shot down the broncho from the other side of that barranca yonder, sheriff, and rode hell-for leather to get round to you before the zopilotes or the coyotes could get you."

"You trailed me here?"

"Sure!"

There was a long silence. The sheriff, weak as a baby, would have fallen on the earth, but the Kid's strong arm supported his back. Again he drank from the boy outlaw's canteen.

"I guess I'll get that Injun who fixed me up like this!" the Sheriff of Frio muttered at last.

The Kid grinned.

"I guess that Injun has made long tracks!" he answered. "You'll have to go over the Staked Plain with a small comb to find him; I reckon. You sure riz that Injun's dander, Jake, when you put a ball in his laig. You're a hard cuss, Jake, and you ask for a lot of trouble."

"I'll get him!"

The Kid shrugged his shoulders and was silent. He had no doubt that Chief Many Ponies was already far from any chance of pursuit.

"What's your game, Kid?" the Sheriff of Frio asked at last. "You're a dog-goned outlaw, and there's a thousand dollars reward for you. I'm after you like sure death! What's your game?"

"Jest my old trouble, sheriff, of horning into what don't concern me," answered the Kid coolly. "I reckon I wasn't going to see a white man fixed this-a-way."

"You're plumb loco, Kid!" said the Frio Sheriff. "Soon as I get back to Frio I'm riding your trail again!"

"That's the kind of all-fired cuss you are!" agreed the Kid, unmoved. "I reckon I savvied that when I started out on your trail. But it ain't making any difference, Jake Watson. I've picked you out of the beaks of the buzzards, and I ain't letting them have you."

(*Continued on page* 27.)

A TRAIL AT LAST! "Great Gophers!" ejaculated the Kid. He bent down and examined the horse's tracks in the mud by the water-hole. One glance was enough to tell the Rio Kid that they were the tracks of the broncho he sought. (*See Chapter* 3.)

The Fistical Four owed their prominence to the undoubted fact that their little stunts almost invariably came off, and this was largely due to Jimmy Silver's habit of thinking things out in detail in advance; herein lay the success of the end study.

This case was no exception. Mr. Dalton had hardly seated himself at his high desk in order to commence the history lesson, before, running his eye over the Form in front of him, he noticed the absence of Lovell.

"*Why is Lovell not here?*" *he said* sharply. "Silver, do you know where Lovell is?"

"I saw him just before classes, sir," said Jimmy Silver demurely. "He was down by the priory ruins. Perhaps he did not hear the bell, sir."

Mr. Dalton frowned.

"He ought to have heard the bell," he said. "Just run down and see if you can find him, Silver. Be back in five minutes, whether you find him or not."

"Very well, sir," replied Jimmy Silver quietly, smothering a grin at the success of his plan

He raced round to the fountain, and joined Lovell, and together the two slipped into the Modern House and up into Tommy Dodd's study, where they found the hamper which was strongly corded, still unopened.

In five minutes they were back in the Fourth Form class-room, and the hamper was safely under the table in the end study.

Arthur Edward Lovell duly explained that he had not heard the bell, and was duly awarded two hundred lines. After this interruption afternoon lessons proceeded on their normal monotonous course. Lessons over, the Fourth Form streamed out of the class-room. Peter Cuthbert Gunner strode up to Jimmy Silver and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Look here, Silver!" he remarked loudly. "If you've got a wheeze for getting my hamper back, let's have it! We've got to do something, and do it quick, otherwise those rotters will scoff my tuck!"

Jimmy Silver, who was chatting pleasantly with his chums, looked over his shoulder.

"What hamper is that you're talking about, Gunner?" he asked blandly.

Peter Cuthbert stared.

"Why, you ass, my hamper—the one those Modern rotters raided!" he exclaimed excitedly.

Jimmy Silver raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, your hamper! Yes, I remember now, Gunny! It's in my study under the table. Kindly remove it, will you?"

"Why—what—where——"

Peter Cuthbert fairly spluttered.

"If not removed before bed-time it will be sold to defray expenses," grinned Lovell.

There was a general shout of surprise and laughter. Peter Cuthbert Gunner, after one dazed look at the Fistical Four, rushed upstairs followed by an excited crowd. He dashed into the end study and dragged out from underneath the table his hamper, still securely corded up and obviously unopened.

"Well, my hat!" was all Gunner could say.

But even then Rookwood had by no means heard the last of Gunner's Hamper.

THE END.

(D'you want another good laugh? Of course you do! Then don't miss "UNCLE THOMAS' SURPRISE!" next Tuesday's rib-tickling yarn of Jimmy Silver & Co., featuring that cheerful chump—Percy Cuthbert Gunner!)

"THE DEATH RIDE!"

(Continued from page 22.)

The sheriff's hard face worked.

"Kid, I got my duty to do! You're an outlaw, and you're my mutton if I can get a cinch on you. You better let drive a bullet through me while you got the upper hand. I ain't got any kick coming if you do."

"Forget it!" said the Kid lightly.

. . . . . .

That night the Kid camped in an arroyo in the Staked Plain, and the sheriff slept in the Kid's blankets, his feet to the camp-fire—sleeping the deep sleep of exhaustion.

The Kid sat on a rock by the fire and looked at the sleeping man, rolled in the blankets, with a whimsical grin.

There was a mutter from the sleeper. In the deep silence of the night in the desert, broken only by the faint crackling of the fire, disjointed words dropped from the sheriff's lips—words that told what dreams haunted his fevered brain.

"I'll get you yet! I'll sure get you yet!"

"Sho!" *murmured the Kid.*

The sheriff was sick and helpless; it would be days before he could travel. The Kid had saved his life—and his life still hung upon the Kid.

The Rio Kid glanced at his mustang nibbling the scant grass in the arroyo. To mount and ride, leaving his enemy there, was easy.

But if the thought crossed the mind of the boy outlaw, it came only to be dismissed. He rose from the rock, yawned, and stretched himself on the bare earth to sleep.

THE END.

(The Rio Kid's adventure is not yet over. He has still to get back with the wounded sheriff. See next week's roaring Western yarn!)

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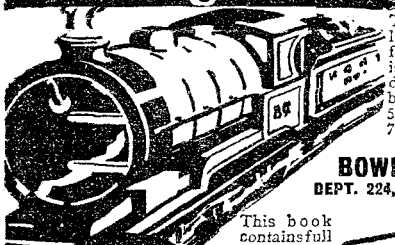

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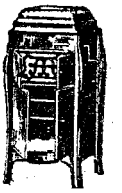

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THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Shadow of Death!

SHERIFF WATSON, of Frio, lay in the blankets, in the Rio Kid's camp, and stared at the sun as it sank westward over the desert waste of the Staked Plain.

He was alone in the camp.

Three days had passed since the Kid had rescued him from the vengeance of Chief Many Ponies. For three days the sheriff had lain in the Kid's camp, in the sheltered arroyo, tended by the Kid with patient kindness. And still he was too weak to leave the camp and attempt to return to Frio. Strong man as Jake Watson was, the death-ride in the desert had told heavily upon him, the long, long hours when he had been carried, bound to the broncho's back, tortured by thirst, under a blazing sun. The Kid had saved him; and his life still depended on the Kid. Had the boy outlaw deserted him he must have perished of hunger where he lay. But the Kid had not deserted him, he had tended him as he might have tended a comrade in the old days when he rode with the Double-Bar bunch.

Not until food was giving out had the Kid even left him for an hour. He had shared all he had with the helpless man who was on his hands, caring nothing that he was an enemy. Now the Kid was gone to look for game among the scrub; and he had been gone for some hours. The sheriff of Frio lay alone, a prey to bitter reflections.

It was bitter to him to owe his life to the outlaw whom he had hunted, whom he was resolved still to hunt. It was bitter to depend on the Kid for the food that kept life in him. It was bitter to know that if the Kid left him to his fate he would perish there in the wastes of the Staked Plain, his bones picked by buzzards and coyotes and left to whiten in the sun. Almost the Frio sheriff wished that the Kid had never tracked down the broncho that had borne him into the heart of the desert. His duty was the first thing in the sheriff's thoughts, and his duty was to rope in the outlaw, dead or alive. And it was the outlaw who had saved him, and was saving him now.

The Kid had left him comfortably fixed when he went out to hunt. The Kid's canteen lay beside him, full of water from the spring that bubbled up among the rocks of the arroyo. One of the Kid's guns lay beside his hand, lest wandering coyotes should nose into the camp. And the Kid had promised to return as soon as he could—as soon as he had something for supper for both. Three days had passed, and under the Kid's care Jake Watson's strength was reviving. In two or three days more he would be able to shift for himself—at least, make an attempt to get back to the cow country. And then—to resume the hunting of the boy outlaw! Sheriff Watson was a hard man, and a determined man, but the thought gave him discomfort. Yet it was his duty, and he had no thought of swerving from his duty.

The sheriff, lying on the blankets, watched the round red sun sinking lower and lower in the west. He watched it idly, his thoughts busy and bitter. He did not observe a dark, aquiline face that peered over a boulder in the arroyo; he did not know that two glittering, black eyes were fixed on him from a distance. He had almost forgotten the vengeful apache who had bound him to the broncho and sent him on the death-ride. But Chief Many Ponies had not forgotten him.

Behind the sheriff, as he lay staring moodily to the west, the Apache crept among the rocks, more silent than a stealthy coyote.

Close by Watson's hand lay the Kid's six-gun, and at a sound he would have grasped it and turned his head. Weak as he was, the sheriff was well able to handle the gun and send a bullet through the brain of the creeping Redskin. But he heard no sound.

Closer and closer the Indian crept, till he was almost within reach of the man lying on the blankets.

Still the sheriff did not stir.

His bronzed face was wrinkled in thought. He was thinking of his long pursuit of the Rio Kid, of the defeats and humiliation the boy outlaw had piled on him, of the derision that awaited him in Frio when he returned once more, after a failure. The Kid, with the disdainful recklessness that was a part of his nature, had trusted a six-gun in his hand for his protection while alone. It would be easy to turn that gun on the Kid when he came back from the hunt.

Jake Watson drove the black, treacherous thought from his mind. In spite of himself it would return. He was sheriff of Frio, and it was his duty to rope in the outlaw. To ride the Kid back to Frio a prisoner, or to leave him dead in the desert, to be able to tell all the cow country that the boy outlaw had been cinched at last.

(Copyright in the United States of America.)

HIS WORD!

Like a jaguar within reach of its prey, Chief Many Ponies made his spring.

The six-gun was snatched from the sheriff's reach and thrown a dozen feet away. The sinewy knee of the Apache was planted on his chest, pinning him down in the blankets. Jake Watson, with starting eyes, looked up at the dark, coppery face, and looked at his death.

"You durned Injun!" he muttered huskily.

Chief Many Ponies grinned down at him.

The sheriff lay utterly at his mercy, disarmed now, and too feeble to struggle. And there was no hint of mercy in the dark face of the Apache.

"Wah!" said Chief Many Ponies, in his guttural tones. "The chief of the Apaches has found his enemy!"

"You pesky Apache horse-thief——"

"My little white brother saved Chief Watson from the broncho," said the Redskin. "But he is far away now. He will return to his camp to find Chief Watson eaten by the coyotes. I have spoken!"

The sheriff made no answer.

He knew that it was the end, and the feeling was upon him that it was a judgment for the treacherous thoughts that had been in his mind. He had dallied with the thought of turning treacherously upon the man who had saved him, even while death was creeping close upon him. And now it had reached him.

The Indian's hand groped in his girdle, and a long knife flashed in the light of the sinking sun.

It circled over the upturned face of the sheriff.

"Let the white man sing his death-song," said the Apache, with gloating triumph. "He wounded the Apache chief and drove him from the town of the palefaces. Now Chief Many Ponies has found him."

The knife was poised in the air.

But the Apache was in no hurry to strike. With the savage vindictiveness of the Red Indian he was bent on prolonging the torment of his victim. The sweat started out on the sheriff's forehead. His eyes were fixed on the dark, deadly face above him, and on the poised blade. In those long, terrible moments he tasted again and again the bitterness of death.

"You Injun thief!" muttered Jake Watson at last hoarsely. "You dog-goned Redskin skunk, get it over!"

The Apache grinned evilly.

"Is the paleface in haste to tread the paths of the happy hunting-grounds?" he asked.

Clink! It was the sound of a loose stone falling in the arroyo.

Watson caught his breath. If it was the Kid returning——

The same thought was in the mind of the Apache. His eyes glittered and he threw up the knife higher for the death blow. A second more, and it would have descended upon the helpless sheriff.

Crack!

There was a yell from Chief Many Ponies as a bullet struck the gleaming blade and dashed it from his numbed hand. There was a sound of running feet, and a ringing voice:

"Hands up, you durned Redskin cuss!"

The Rio Kid had returned.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
In Camp!

THE Rio Kid ran up, his eyes blazing, the still-smoking rifle in his hand. His eyes blazed at the Redskin.

Chief Many Ponies leaped to his feet. He did not put up his hands at the Kid's bidding. He crossed his arms on his brawny chest, his tattered blanket draped round him, and faced the boy outlaw with the dignity of a chief.

"You hear me, Injun?" rapped the Kid savagely.

"Chief Many Ponies hears his little white brother," answered the Apache calmly. "Let him shoot. Chief Many Ponies will not raise his hand against his brother."

"Dog-gone your red hide!" growled the Kid, lowering the rifle. "I guess I came near putting that ball through your head instead of knocking away your sticker! What you doing here?"

The Indian's eyes flashed at Jake Watson.

"Chief Many Ponies found his enemy and came to kill him!" he answered briefly.

"I reckon you've slipped up on it, Injun. I sure guess that I ought to fix you for the buzzards!" growled the Kid.

"Let my white brother shoot, if it is his wish!" answered Chief Many Ponies.

"Oh, shucks! Git!"

The Apache hesitated.

"Now, jest chew on this, Injun," said the Kid. "We've camped together, and I allow you've got a grouch against Jake Watson for drilling you in the laig. But this hyer hombre is under my protection — savvy? — and you've got to ride clear. I'm riding herd over this galoot. You want to hit the trail; and by the great horned toad, if you come cavorting round again, I'll let drive a bullet through you! Git!"

"My white brother has spoken!" said the Apache, with dignity.

And, gathering his blanket round him, Chief Many Ponies stalked away out of the rocky arroyo and disappeared into the desert.

The Kid dropped his rifle and grinned at the sheriff.

"I reckon I didn't come home any too soon, hombre," he remarked. "You sure had a close call, Jake Watson!"

The sheriff nodded.

"Where's the gun I left you?" demanded the Kid. "You sure wanted to keep it handy, Jake. Was you asleep?"

"Nope!" muttered the sheriff. "There's the gun—among the donicks yonder! I've sure had a close call, Kid!"

"You sure have!" said the Kid. "You woke up a lot of trouble when you fanned that Injun with bullets and drove him out of Frio. I reckoned the pesky cuss would hunt cover in the Staked Plain, but I never figured on his hitting my camp. Injuns are sure pizen!"

The Rio Kid dismissed the subject with a shrug.

"I guess I've brought in meat for supper," he said. "That Injun won't worry us any now. I guess I'll start the fire."

Sheriff Watson lay on the blankets and watched the Kid building the camp-fire to cook the meat he had brought in. The Kid had tossed the six-gun over to the sheriff again, and it lay by his side. Again and again the sheriff's eyes turned on it, and at last he spoke hoarsely.

"Kid!"

The outlaw looked round from the fire.

"Cinch that gun, Kid!" said the sheriff.

"What's biting you now?" asked the Kid carelessly.

"I reckon you're plumb loco!" snarled the sheriff. "I guess if you leave that gun handy you're asking for a bullet through your heart, Kid! Take it away while you're safe!"

The Kid stared at him and burst into a careless laugh.

"Oh, shucks!" he said. "You're a white man, Jake—you wouldn't go for to pull a bead on the man that's tending you, sure?"

"Take it away, I'm telling you!"

"Sure, if you want."

The Kid picked up the gun and slid it into his holster. The Sheriff of Frio breathed more freely.

"Still thinking of trailing down a galoot my size when you get back to the cow country, sheriff?" asked the Kid banteringly.

"Yep!"

"Ain't you an all-fired, hard-baked cuss!" grinned the Kid. "Well, it don't cut no ice with me. I'm tending you till you can hit the trail, and then I reckon I'm putting your feet down in the cow country afore I quit you. After that you can hunt me all you like; I reckon it won't keep me from sleep o' nights!"

And the Kid laughed again.

The sheriff's eyes gleamed.

"Your luck will turn, Kid! I'll get you yet!"

"Forget it, feller," said the Kid carelessly. "Hyer's your supper, sheriff, and I reckon you'd not get a better in Poker Smith's joint at Frio. Quit chewing the rag, and eat, hombre!"

The sun had sunk behind the sierras of New Mexico. Darkness lay on the wild wastes of the Staked Plain. In the arroyo the fire lit at gleamed and flickered, casting light and shadows on the handsome face of the Rio Kid, the haggard, tanned visage of the Sheriff of Frio. The strangely assorted companions ate their supper and lay down to sleep, feet to the fire, under the glittering stars that shone down on the lonely desert.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Through the Desert!

"TURNING daylight!" called out the Rio Kid cheerily.

Three more days had passed, and the Sheriff of Frio was looking something like his old self once more. Another morning had dawned on the Staked Plain, and the Kid was turning out of his bed of sand and leaves, ready to hit the trail. Camp was to be broken up at last, and the sheriff was keen to see the last of the lonely arroyo where for a week he had camped with the outlaw. And the Kid, patiently and carelessly good-natured as he was, certainly was not sorry that the end had come. Had the sheriff's recovery taken longer the Kid would have stood by him—for weeks, had it been needed. But he was glad that it was not needed.

Jake Watson turned out of the blankets. The embers of the fire were raked together; the last breakfast cooked over the red glow.

Watson stood watching the Kid, with a moody brow, as he made his preparations cheerfully for breaking camp. The Kid made up his bed roll, packed all his fixings in the slicker pack, and secured the pack on the back of the black-muzzled mustang. He filled his canteen at the spring.

"Take a long drink, sheriff," he said, with a grin. "I guess we shan't strike water again till we hit the water-hole in the sage desert, and that won't be to-night at the rate we'll travel. This hyer canteen is all we'll have till then."

The sheriff drew a deep breath.

"Kid, I guess I can kick for myself now," he said. "I can walk, I reckon, and I'm ready to take what's coming to me if I don't have luck. Pull out, Kid, and leave me to it!"

The Kid laughed.

"You'd leave your bones hyer, sheriff! You can make a leetle pasear on your own, I allow, but you can't hoof it out of this desert alive. You're taking a front seat while I hoof!"

"I ain't!" growled Watson.

"You sure are!" said the Kid cheerily. "Feller, you make me tired! I reckon I ain't honing for your company any more than you're honing for mine. I guess I'll quit you the minute I can quit you safe. But I ain't looked after your durned old carcass for a week to leave you to the turkey buzzards at the finish! No, sir! Git on that cayuse!"

For a long minute the Sheriff of Frio hesitated. Then, without a word, he mounted the Kid's mustang.

Cheerily, though he hated walking, and hoofing it came hard in cowboy boots, the Kid started on the long trail. He swung along under the sunshine, cracking his quirt at the flies and mosquitoes that buzzed about them. Stones and sand and baked earth glided under their feet as the sun rose higher and higher in burning blue.

The sheriff rode without a word. He was well on the way to recovery, but the seat in the saddle meant life to him instead of death. He knew, at the bottom of his heart, that had the Kid taken him at his word, he would never have got out of the desert alive. Yet it was bitter and galling to have obligation heaped on obligation at the hands of the boy outlaw.

In contrast to his grim and silent companion, the Kid hummed snatches of Mexican fandango tunes, and sang old Spanish melodies of the border as light-hearted as any cicada that chirped in the sunshine from the crevices.

Travelling was slow, and it was weary work afoot, and the Kid was glad to rest for noon in the shadow of a great rock. The noonday meal was sparingly washed down with the precious water.

In the afternoon the way was resumed. It was a mystery to the sheriff, good plainsman as he was, how the Kid picked his way through the trackless waste, but the boy outlaw never seemed at a loss. Night fell when they were on the verge of the Staked Plain, looking down on the last gleam of the sun at the sage desert that lay below.

The Kid pitched the camp, the cold meat was eaten, a still more sparing drink was taken, and they slept. With the first gleam of dawn the Kid was up again.

By a winding ravine they descended from the high tableland, and reached the desert below. By sandy plain, dotted with sage and stunted cacti, they went on, the Kid heading for the water-hole that he knew. The black-muzzled mustang's head was drooping now, thirst intensified by the bitter dust of the desert; the Kid's throat was dry, and he no longer hummed fandango tunes. But a single drink of water only remained in the canteen, and there was none for the horse, and none for the Kid; he was saving that last precious gulp for the sombre-faced man who rode.

Mile on mile of sage and sand and scrub; while the sun rose higher and poured down burning rays on their heads. At noon this day there was no halt. Fatigue and heat, thirst and dust; but it was necessary to get to the water, and there was no time to halt.

The sheriff of Frio swayed at times in the saddle, his face haggard, his throat burning with thirst. He swayed at last so that he would have fallen; but the Kid's ready arm caught him and steadied him, and the canteen was placed to his lips. Hardly conscious of what he did Jake Watson drained it to the last drop.

The Kid slung the empty canteen on the horse. The last drop of water was gone, and it was neck or nothing now. And the water-hole still lay miles distant in the dry, burning desert.

The sheriff's haggard eyes turned on him. The water had revived him, and he knew what the Kid had done.

"That was the last, Kid?"

"Yep."

"You're plumb loco!"

"Sure!" grinned the Kid.

They pursued their weary way. The Kid's strong limbs were aching with fatigue, his throat burning. A pitiful whinny came from the mustang, and the Kid patted him gently.

The sheriff rode silent, assailed again by thirst, dizzy with the dust and the glare. The Kid shaded his eyes and stared across the sandy plain.

"Sheriff, I reckon you better hustle," he said. "That cayuse can sure find his way to the water-hole; I guess he's as knowing as any cayuse in Texas. He'll sure take you to the water, sheriff. Get on with it!"

Jack Watson looked at him dully.

"And you, Kid?"

"I guess I'll follow on; I'm hoofing it, anyhow. We're near enough now to the water-hole for the critter to find it on his own. Beat it, sheriff!"

Jake Watson eyed him. He saw the haggard lines of fatigue and suffering in the handsome face, belied by the whimsical smile. The Kid was game—game to the backbone; but he was perilously near the limit now.

"I'm not leaving you behind!" muttered the sheriff.

"Oh, shucks!" snapped the Kid. "That's fool talk! I ain't hoofing it any quicker for your company, Jake Watson. I keep on telling you the cayuse can find the water-hole now, he's smelt it already; and you can sure wait there for me to come up. You'll see me walkin' in soon after you. Get on with it, feller!"

The Kid spoke a word to the mustang and patted him. For a moment the intelligent eyes searched the Kid's face, as if the animal did not understand. Then he understood and broke into a gallop, carrying the sheriff of Frio on to the distant water-hole.

In a few minutes horse and rider vanished from the Kid's sight in the sage and dust.

The Rio Kid tramped on.

Thirst was tormenting him, embittered by the dust that flew on the hot wind of the desert. Bitter fatigue ached his strong limbs. And still the distance seemed endless before him. On the back of his mustang the Kid would have reached safety long, long ago; but for the helpless man he had burdened himself with the Kid had been in no danger. Now the danger he was in was close and terrible; and it was borne in upon his mind that he needed all his luck if the desert was not to claim one more of its countless victims.

The Kid was swaying as he walked now; in spite of courage and determination, his pace was slow—almost a crawl. Once he stumbled and fell on his knees in crackling sage, and it was a full minute before he pulled himself to his feet again.

No man dismounted in the desert had ever emerged from it living. Was the Kid to perish there, as so many others had perished, whose bones bleached in the sun amid the dreary sage? Slowly, but doggedly, the outlaw who was risking his life to save his enemy tramped on, dazed and dizzy, almost insensible now to his surroundings.

It was a shrill whinny from a horse that brought the half-conscious Kid back to himself. He dashed his hand across his almost blind eyes, and stared round him. It was the water-hole at last! Beside it lay Jake Watson, where he had slid from the back of the mustang to drink; the little spring bubbled and sparkled and sang in the sunlight. The black-muzzled mustang had trotted back to meet his master.

The Kid gripped the saddle and dragged himself half across it, too wearied to mount.

"Get on, old hoss!" he muttered thickly.

And clinging with his last ounce of strength to the mustang, the Kid was carried on to the water-hole. He slid from the horse, and fell, with his face in the bubbling water, and drank and drank as if he would never cease drinking!

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Fallen Among Foes!

"THAT was sure some pasear!" said the Rio Kid.

Night had fallen on the desert.

The Kid and his companion were

camped by the water-hole. Hours had passed, but the Kid's strong frame was still aching from the efforts he had made. Even the iron-limbed Kid was glad to lie beside the tinkling spring and rest.

"We've made it!" said the sheriff.

"We've sure made it," agreed the Kid. "I reckoned the desert had got me, Jake—I sure did! It was as close a call as I ever want." He grinned faintly. "Where'd you be now, Jake, if I'd let you hit the trail on your lonesome, like you wanted?"

In the morning the Kid was up with the rising sun.

"Burning daylight!" came his cheery call to the sheriff of Frio. And Jake Watson turned out.

The Kid, as if led by some instinct as sure as that of a dumb animal, picked the way through the trackless desert, where there was no sign that the sheriff's eyes could discern. Even yet, in the last stage of the weary journey, the sheriff of Frio was a lost man, if the Kid abandoned him.

But late in the afternoon the sage lightly. "Anything more I can do to oblige you?"

Abe Harrigan chuckled with glee.

"The Kid!" he repeated. "By the great horned toad, the Kid!" Abe seemed scarcely able to believe his good luck. "The Kid—and we've cinched him!"

"We've sure cinched the Kid!" grinned Pecos Pete. "There'll be a howl in Frio when we get him there."

"There sure will, fellers!" said the Kid. "But you ain't got me there yet, you galoots!"

CAPTURED AT LAST! As the Kid and the sheriff emerged from a winding path into an open glade, there was a shout, a tramp of footsteps, and a gleam of weapons. "The Kid!" "Hands up!" Five or six levelled revolvers stared the Rio Kid in the face! (*See Chapter* 5.)

"Buzzards' meat!" said the sheriff grimly.

"You've said it."

"I reckon we're through now, Kid."

"Yep! We hit the trail for the cow country to-morrow," yawned the Kid. "We'll part company then, sheriff, and you can get back to Frio and start trailing me again. I ain't exactly scared stiff to think of it!"

The sheriff shut his teeth hard.

"You've saved my life, Kid, and stood by me like a white man! I reckon I was hating you for the trouble you've given me. That don't go any more now. But duty's duty, and you're my meat if I can get you. I've sure told you so, fair and square, all along; you ain't got no kick coming?"

"Nary a kick!" yawned the Kid.

"Kid, get out of the country while you've got the chance!" said the Frio sheriff earnestly. "Light out of Texas, and give me a chance to let up on you."

The Kid shook his head.

"I guess not, sheriff! I hit the trail out of Texas once, and sure moseyed over a wide bit of the West; but I had to come trailing back. It's my own country, and I ain't a quitter."

The sheriff said no more. He lay down, and under the desert stars the two foes slept peacefully side by side.

desert was left behind at last, and they came into the green shadowy chapparral.

By devious winding paths the Kid pushed on, followed by the mustang bearing the sheriff of Frio. The sun was sinking over the plains, and the chapparral was deeply dusky. But the Rio Kid seemed never at a loss. And suddenly, as they emerged from a winding path into an open glade, where the red sunset fell more brightly, there was a shout, a tramp of footsteps, and a gleam of weapons.

"The Kid!"

"Hands up!"

Five or six levelled revolvers stared the Rio Kid in the face. The Kid halted in his tracks.

His hand did not drop to a gun. The Kid knew when he had no chance to draw, swift as he was on the draw; and he knew that he had no chance now. For once the wary Kid had been caught napping, and had walked fairly into the hands of his enemies.

Abe Harrigan, Pecos Pete, and half a dozen others of the sheriff's men of Frio had him covered, ready to riddle him with bullets if he touched a gun.

A mocking and rather bitter smile crossed the Kid's handsome face. He lifted his hands above his head.

"It's your say-so, gents," he said

"Keep 'em up!" said Abe, his eyes gleaming over his levelled gun. "We've got you dead to rights, Kid! I'd sure be sorry to spill your juice; but if you wink so much as an eyelash you get yours!"

The Kid shrugged his shoulders.

"You've got the cards stacked against me," he said. "I ain't got no kick coming. It's your say-so!"

"Get hold of his hardware, Long Jim!"

"You bet!"

The walnut-butted guns were lifted from the Kid's holsters. Though there were eight of them, every man with a Colt bearing on the Kid, the Frio men breathed more freely when the boy outlaw was disarmed.

The Kid glanced curiously at Jake Watson.

The Frio sheriff sat on the halted mustang, staring in grim silence at the scene. He had not spoken a word yet. Neither did the Kid address a word to him. Fortune had turned against him, and the Kid was not the man to ask favours. In helping his enemy, he had taken this risk; and now that it had materialised, the Kid had no complaint to make.

Neither, for the moment, did

Harrigan and his men take heed of the sheriff. They were too anxious to make sure of the Kid.

"Fix up his paws, Jim!" said Harrigan.

A length of trail-rope was drawn round the Kid's arms, and they were bound behind his back.

The Kid made no resistance. It was sudden death to resist; and the Kid was no fool. While there was life there was hope; it was not the first time the Kid had been roped in, and he was living yet to tell of it.

"We've sure got him safe!" grinned Long Jim. "By thunder, Frio will sit up on its hind legs and howl, when we ride him in."

Harrigan turned to the sheriff at last.

"I'm sure glad to see you alive, sheriff," he said. "All Frio reckoned that the Kid had got you, when you never came back. How you come to be riding with that fire-bug, and on his cayuse, too?"

Now that the Kid was a bound prisoner, and the Frio men could give their attention to the sheriff, all of them were staring at him in amazement.

"We sure reckoned you was gone up the flume, sheriff, arter you left Frio with that Injun cuss, and never came back," said Pecos Pete. "We've been hunting for you ever since, but I reckon we never allowed we'd find you alive. And now you walk into our hands—with the Kid! It sure gets my goat!"

Jake Watson breathed hard.

"The Injun turned on me," he said. "He got me a lick from behind, and fixed me up. The Kid saved my life!"

"Oh, shucks!" said Abe, in astonishment.

"He stood by me like a white man in the desert," said the sheriff slowly. "He was bringing me back, on his own hoss, to the Frio country, when he horned into you 'uns here in the chapparral."

"Great gophers!" said Harrigan blankly. "But that don't make no difference, sheriff; he's an outlaw, with a thousand dollars on his head, and I reckon he's our meat!"

"He sure is!" said Pecos Pete.

Sheriff Watson nodded.

"He sure is!" he assented. "He saved my life, and stood by me in the desert; but I sure warned him fair and square that he was my meat if I could get him. And, by thunder, I've got him now!"

"Now you're talking!" said Abe Harrigan.

The sheriff fixed his eyes on the Kid.

"Kid," he said huskily, "you allow I warned you fair and square. You allow I told you to put a bullet through me, if you durned well liked; I told you to leave me to take my chance in the desert. I warned you I'd trail you down if you saved my life. You got to own that, Kid."

"Aw, forget it, sheriff!" said the Kid carelessly. "I ain't got no kick coming. I reckon I was some mosshead to horn in; but I've got no grouch."

"You always was game, Kid!" said Pecos Pete.

"We was camping here, when you horned in with the Kid, sheriff," said Abe. "But I reckon we ain't camping none now. We're hitting the trail for Frio, pronto. That fire-bug ain't safe till we get him inside the calaboose."

"Sure!" said the sheriff.

He did not meet the Kid's eyes.

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THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
Ride!

BOUND in the saddle of the black-muzzled mustang, his arms roped behind his back, the Rio Kid rode out of the chapparral into the Frio grasslands. Under the glinting stars he rode, in the midst of armed men, watchful and wary. His face was cool and calm; if his heart was heavy, his looks gave no sign of it. Fortune had played the Rio Kid many strange tricks; but surely none stranger than placing him, a doomed prisoner, in the hands of the man whose life he had saved!

By his side rode the sheriff of Frio on a horse belonging to one of his men. The sheriff's face was grim and sombre. The Rio Kid was in his hands at last, bound, surrounded by armed men; the long trail was at an end. Triumph had come at long last; and the mockery of Frio and all the cow country would be silenced, when the elusive Kid was placed behind the bars of the calaboose. But the triumph of the Frio sheriff was bitter in his mouth.

He was not thinking, as he rode beside the Kid, of triumph. He was thinking of the days and nights when he lay feeble and helpless in the arroyo in the Staked Plain, watched over and cared for by the Kid. The heart of the Frio sheriff was heavier than the Kid's.

He had belted on the holsters with the walnut-butted guns in them. The Kid's rifle was strapped to his saddle. It was the Frio sheriff who rode armed and free now; the Kid was at his mercy, as he had been at the Kid's mercy. Under the glistening stars the cavalcade rode on, at a gallop, eating up the miles of grassy plain that lay between them and Frio.

Blacker and blacker grew the sheriff's visage as he rode. Suddenly he slacked rein.

"Halt!"

The riders drew in their horses. They peered at the sheriff of Frio in the dimness of the stars.

For a second Jake Watson was silent. When he spoke his voice was husky and harsh.

"You 'uns ride on to Frio; I guess I'll foller!"

"Sheriff——"

"Cut it out!" rapped the sheriff. "I guess I'm heeled, with the fellow's own guns, and I can sure take care of a bound man. Ride on, I'm telling you!"

"But——" muttered Pecos Pete.

The sheriff broke out savagely:

"Are you giving orders in this hyer outfit? Ride on, I'm telling you, or, by the great horned toad, I'll give you hot lead to chew on, dog-gone your hides!"

The Frio men exchanged glances. But they rode on, muttering to one another. The sheriff was left alone with the prisoner.

In silence he watched the horsemen till the last of them sank out of sight in a distant fold of the prairie.

Then he turned to the Kid, who sat silent, bound on the mustang. With the Kid's own knife Jake Watson cut through the ropes.

The Rio Kid smiled and stretched his limbs.

"That your game, Jake?" he yawned.

"Yep!" The sheriff spat out a curse. "I've hunted you, Kid, and I'll hunt you again. I'll never let up till I've got you cinched. But you saved me in the desert, and I'm not standing for this. You were toting me to safety when my men got you, and—it ain't good enough. Duty or no duty, you're a free man!"

"I sure reckoned you was no such dog-goned, hard-baked cuss as you made out, sheriff!" smiled the Kid. "You'd sure have been more pizen than an Injun or a rattlesnake if you'd toted me into Frio this-a-way!"

"Aw, quit chewing the rag!" broke in the sheriff roughly. "Hyer's your guns, dog-gone your hide! You're a free man, Kid, with horse and guns—ride, durn you, ride!"

The Kid grinned as he buckled on his belt and holsters.

"I guess I'll ride!" he said. "You're a white man, Jake, though you don't let on to be."

The Rio Kid wheeled the mustang. But he paused before he rode.

"Sheriff," he said, "you owed me this——"

"Don't I know it?" snarled the sheriff. "Ride, I keep on telling you!"

"But you've got me beat," said the Kid soberly. "You've got me beat at the end of the trail, Jake. If I ride a free man to-night I quit the Frio country so long as you're sheriff of Frio."

The sheriff breathed hard.

"Keep to that, Kid—and good luck go with you wherever you ride!"

The Kid, with a whimsical grin, held out his hand. Sheriff Watson gripped it for a moment.

"Ride!" he muttered.

"Adios!"

The darkness swallowed the Rio Kid; the beat of the black-muzzled mustang's hoofs died away in the night. The sheriff gave a deep, long sigh, wheeled his horse, and rode after his men.

(The Rio Kid keeps his word and seeks adventure far from Texas. Don't miss next week's roaring Western tale, entitled: "THE RIO KID'S CHRISTMAS!")

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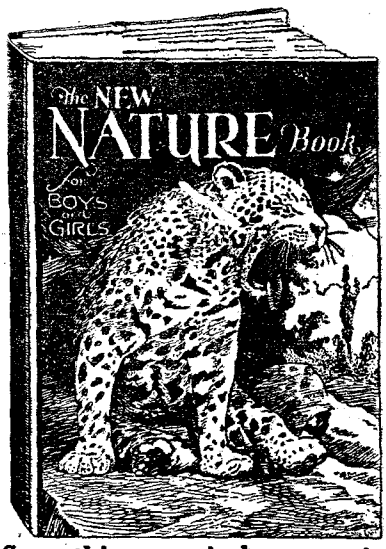

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The Lone Cabin in the Valley!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

THERE was rain in the Huecas—winter rain—and bitter wind. Darkness had fallen on the hills like a blanket, and through the darkness the rain lashed and streamed. The Rio Kid's slicker ran with water, water streamed from his Stetson hat, water squelched from his riding-boots. The grey mustang streamed with rain.

The Kid, leading the mustang by the bridle on a path hidden in blackness, kept his eyes fixed on a light that burned dimly in the night, far away, flickering faintly. On that stormy eve of Christmas the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande was a hard case.

"Dog-gone my boots!" growled the Kid as he tramped wearily through drenching rain. "This hyer is going to be some Christmas, old hoss!"

The Kid had been glad to see that lonely light burning in the distance, on the dark, rainy hills. It promised him, at least, shelter from the rain and the wind. Shelter, perhaps, might be refused to the outlaw; but the Kid cared nothing for that. He was ready to make his demand good, at the end of a six-gun, if needed.

The light, he reckoned, was burning in the window of some lone nester's cabin, many a long mile from the nearest settlement. Some hardy pioneer had settled in that lonely valley in the heart of the sierra.

The Kid tramped on towards the light, leading his horse, in an ill-humour with himself and all things. He had kept his word to Sheriff Watson, of Frio, and had ridden out of the Frio country: but he had not gone contentedly. But the Kid was not one to repine, and he had set his face resolutely towards new trails and a new country.

"Oh, dog-gone it!" snapped the Kid as he bumped, in the darkness, into a wire fence. "Them gol-darned nesters!"

The Rio Kid had no love for nesters, still less for their wire fences. In a worse humour than ever, he groped along the fence till he came to a gate. He threw the gate open, and led the mustang through.

The light was burning directly before him now.

It came, so far as the Kid's keen eyes could make out in the gloom, from the window of a cabin, or, rather, a shack, standing by the bank of a creek that overflowed with rain, and roared and splashed down the valley in a torrent.

He squelched through mud up to the wooden porch of the shack.

Save for the lonely light that glimmered through a curtained window, there was no sign of life about the place.

The Kid struck on the door with the butt of his quirt.

Knock, knock!

He knocked angrily and loudly.

There was no reply from within. The Kid knocked again, and shouted:

"Hyer, you'uns! Let a galoot in out of the rain! Thunder! Do you want me to bust a board out of your shebang?"

Knock, knock!

The door opened suddenly.

A candle-light glimmered from the dark interior. A man stood there—a man with a pale, harassed face, his finger on his lips.

The Kid stared at him.

"Quiet!"

"What's the dog-goned trouble?" demanded the Kid gruffly.

The nester pointed to the adjoining room, from which the light glimmered into the night from the window.

"She's sick!" he whispered.

"Oh!" said the Kid, shamefaced.

The man of the shack peered at him. He saw a handsome cow-puncher, drenched with rain. The Kid saw a haggard-faced, worn-looking man, weighted down with black care.

"Your wife?" asked the Kid soberly.

The settler nodded.

"Bad?"

Another nod.

"I'm sure sorry!" said the Kid awkardly. "Dog-gone my boots, if I'd knowed I'd never have knocked at your door, feller. Sleeping?"

"Yes."

"I hope I ain't waked her," said the Kid anxiously.

"No."

"That's good! I reckon I ain't troubling you any, hombre!" said the Kid. "Me and my cayuse can stand the rain and the wind. So-long!"

He backed from the porch.

"You can come in," said the nester quietly. "Put your horse in the shed and come in, stranger. I guess you're welcome to shelter, though there's little else I can offer you."

The Rio Kid hesitated.

But he nodded at last, and the man of the shack handed him the candle. The Kid sheltered the flickering flame with his drenched hat as he led his mustang into the shed adjoining the cabin. There was straw in the shed and a bundle of alfalfa; and the Kid fed and bedded down his horse, by the dim flicker of the candle, stuck in a ledge on the wall.

Then he tramped back to the porch.

The door was shut to keep out the wild wind; but it opened as the Kid's footsteps were audible without.

The Kid passed into the cabin, and closed the door behind him. He put the candle on a rough pine table.

The nester had stepped into the

adjoining room, where the lamp burned. He came back on tiptoe.

Silently, moving about like a man who was dazed, he set out a supper on the table before the Kid.

"Dog-gone it!" murmured the Kid.

Outside, the wind howled and the rain lashed and spattered. But the Kid was wishing that he had never struck that lonely cabin in the sierra. He had horned into a home where a sick woman lay, tended by a man who was worn out with watching, and he was worried about it.

"Been sick long?" he asked, as he ate his supper slowly, and with a poor appetite.

"Three days."

"You ain't got a doc here?"

"There's no doc nearer than Cow Crossing—that's forty miles. And I can't leave her!"

"Oh, sho!" grunted the Kid.

The Kid had seen much of the hard lives of the nesters, but this was the hardest case he had ever struck.

"There's a doc at Cow Crossing," he said thoughtfully. "I reckon I know the place—some!"

The man nodded.

While he stood by the table, one hand resting on it, he was listening for a sound from the sick-room.

The Kid knew Cow Crossing. Forty miles or more from the lonely shack in the valley in the Huecas, by the wildest and hardest trail in the west of Texas. The Kid remembered Cow Crossing well. He had ridden through that town once, with a sheriff and his posse on his heels, and bullets raining. It had been one of the closest calls in the Kid's career.

There was a soft, faint voice from the adjoining room:

"Harry!"

The nester made a gesture to the Kid, and went softly, silently into the sick-room.

A low murmur of voices followed.

The Kid, with a puckered brow, ate canned beef and drank cold coffee. He was careful to make no sound.

His thoughts were busy.

The man came back at last. He stood by the table, his haggard face looking deathly in the flickering candle-light.

"You can bunk here, stranger," he said, in a low voice. "There's blankets. Keep quiet."

"Sure!" muttered the Kid.

The wood fire burned low in the iron stove. The Kid, as he sat before it, was steaming. But he was not thinking of the blankets.

"Look here, feller," said the Kid, speaking barely above a whisper. "You want the doc from Cow Crossing."

The man made a hopeless gesture.

"I can't leave her."

"I reckon a galoot about my size might do it," said the Kid.

The man eyed him.

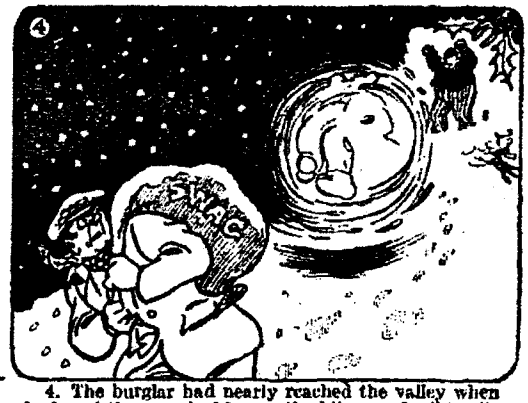
"A ride of forty miles on a night like this!" he muttered.

THE BUNTER BROTHERS! *Mirth Makers.*

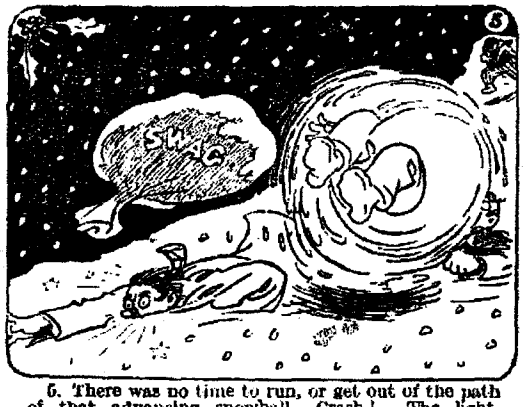
1. It was Christmas night, and Billy and Sammy Bunter were shuffling through the snow on their way back to Bunter Court, when they espied a strange figure moving away down the hill. "Why, if that's not a burglar, I'll eat my boots!" said Billy. "I bet he's pinched the pater's silver plate," added Sammy.

2. "What's to be done?" murmured Billy. "We can't let that old bounder run away with the family spoons!" "You tackle him," said Sammy. "What, and get a biff in the eye. I should think so," answered Billy. And all the time that light-fingered gent was getting farther and farther away.

3. The two brothers stood and argued on the brow of the hill. Then Sammy gave Billy a gentle push in the back. "Off you go, Billy," he said. And off Billy did go, rolling over and over down the hill.



4. The burglar had nearly reached the valley when he heard the sound of heavy thudding, and wild yells behind him. Looking back he saw a great snowball, complete with legs, come hurtling straight at him.



5. There was no time to run, or get out of the path of that advancing snowball. Crash! The light-fingered gent gave a foo-horn gasp as he was hit clean in the rear and sent whizzing into a snowdrift. "Och!"

6. The swag-hunter was completely winded. Billy called to Sammy, and they both held the burglar till the police arrived. The brothers got their reward in the shape of an extra-large dinner—and you bet they enjoyed it!

"Sure!" said the Kid.

"There ain't nothing coming, stranger," said the nester wearily. "Doc Pigeon don't travel forty miles at night, on Christmas Eve, for his health. And——" He broke off.

The Kid understood.

"I reckon the doc would want some fee," he assented. "And you ain't struck it rich on this hyer homestead, I guess."

"It's a living," muttered the nester—"a living while a man's in health. I ain't got no kick coming: but now——"

The Kid rose from the bench.

"You want that doc from Cow Crossing," he said. "I've heard of Doc Pigeon—he's a good man. I guess I could fix it with him. I reckon the galoots there won't be gunning after me to-night—on a night like this—Christmas Eve, too. Anyhow, I'm going."

The nester stared at him.

"You'd never make it," he said. "No man in Texas could ride that trail on a night like this!"

The Kid grinned.

"I guess I've hit trails as hard afore now," he said. "If you don't get that doc afore Christmas is out feller, you can tell galoots that the Rio Kid has ridden his last trail."

The nester started. Evidently that name was known to him.

"The Rio Kid!" he repeated.

"Yep—outlaw, fire-hug, and the worst wanted galoot in Texas," said the Kid grimly. "And I'm riding to Cow Crossing to-night, feller; and the doc's sure hitting the trail for this shebang, if I have to drive him at the end of a gun."

He shook his still dripping hat, jammed it on his head, and crossed to the door. The nester's haggard eyes followed him.

"God bless you!" he said softly. "Outlaw or not, God bless you, Kid!"

The Rio Kid stepped out into the wild night.

The Kid sat in the saddle, and gave one last glance at the lonely cabin. Then he turned his back on the glimmering light.

He rode through darkness and rain. Few riders would have followed that trail at all in the dark and the rain, and even the reckless Kid did not venture to ride fast. At a trot the sure-footed mustang clattered on, needing little guidance from the Kid. Later, the Kid would be able to break into a gallop, when he was clear of the rugged valleys and broken hillsides of the Huecas; but for the present he was cautious—as cautious as the Kid could be. He was not thinking of his own neck, but of the sick woman who lay in the lonely cabin, of the man worn down by watching who sat at her bedside.

Clatter, clatter, clatter!

The Kid had the route mapped out in his mind. He had ridden those lonely trails many a time. Beyond the slopes of the Huecas stretched prairie for long miles, till he should strike the ford of the Chicken River, which he had to cross. Beyond that, grassland again, till he came to the town of Cow Crossing.

It was wild, rough country, every foot of the way. The Kid, like a good plainsman, could guide his course on the boundless prairie by the stars; but in the blackness of the sky no star was visible. Here and there he would find landmarks that he knew, if he could pick them out in the darkness. It was a ride from which the hardiest cowpuncher might have shrunk. But the Kid entered upon it with a cheery heart.

The ill-humour, which had haunted the Kid ever since he had pulled out of the Frio country, was gone now. His grouch had vanished. All his thought and energy were concentrated on the task before him.

Somehow—if he did not break his neck on the way—he was going to hit Cow Crossing by dawn. Earlier would be useless, even if he could have done it earlier; for Doc Pigeon, good man and hardy as he was, could no more have ridden that trail in the dark than he could have flown it. But at dawn, the Kid swore to himself, he would hit Cow Crossing, and rouse out the doc and start him for that lonely cabin in the Huecas. There was always a possibility that the doc might refuse to stir at the demand of an outlaw; but the Kid did not heed that. Willing or unwilling, the Kid did not intend to take "No" for an answer.

The grey mustang clattered out of the Huecas at last, and the Kid was glad to feel the grassland under the beating hoofs. Now he let out the mustang and rode hard. By the instinct of horse and rider, the route was kept; no eye could have read the sign of the trail in the gloom and the wet. But here and there landmarks loomed up, to vanish behind the galloping rider—a clump of gigantic cottonwoods where the Kid had once camped—a burnt patch where chaparral had been cleared—a tract of sand and stones, an arm of the desert that reached into the grasslands.

The Kid knew it all; and if he had doubted, the successive signs he recognised would have told him that he was still on the right way.

Faintly, from the distance ahead, came the sound of roaring water.

The Kid smiled grimly.

He had to ride the Chicken River at the ford; but in the rain-flood the ford was likely to be deep, a roaring torrent of water. Torrent or not, the Kid had to ride it. And as the distant roar of tumbling waters reached him, and warned him that he was nearing the river, the Kid's keen eyes roved to right and left, striving to pierce the darkness.

He was in dangerous country now—somewhere in the wild and broken country along the Chicken River the Jefferson gang had their haunt, and a pilgrim needed to keep his eyes open and his gun handy when he rode that lonely trail.

"But I reckon them galoots won't be riding the trails to-night, old hoss," the Kid said to the mustang. But he dragged his holster within easy reach, and watched like a cat as he rode.

There was a lull in the heavy downpour of rain. From a rift in the black-clouded sky a bunch of stars glimmered down. Anywhere else on the trail the Kid would have welcomed the pale glimmer; but he would have been glad to ride as far as the river in the blackest darkness. He was not looking for trouble with the Jefferson gang

A DASH TO SAVE A LIFE! Wild oaths and sharp shots rang out behind the Rio Kid as he dashed on towards the foaming river. He set his teeth—there was a life to be saved that night, and he must ride on! (*See Chapter* 3.)

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Rio Kid's Ride!

"OLD hoss, you and me's got to hump it!"

The Kid's grey mustang stirred in his bed of straw. In the darkness of the shed his intelligent eyes glimmered, as he turned his head towards his master.

"We got to hump it, old cayuse," said the Kid, stroking the mustang's neck affectionately. "It's sure an ornery night to ride you on the roughest trail in Texas; but we're for it, old hoss, and don't you forget it!"

The Kid saddled up and led the mustang from the shed. In the dark sky was not the glimmer of a star. Dim shapes of hills loomed ghostly round the lonely valley in the Huecas. Behind the Kid, as he led his horse to the gate, the solitary light still burned in the window of the shack, where a haggard man sat by a sick wife's bedside. But round the Kid was rain and darkness and howling wind, and the crashing of the branches of the tortured pines.

now; he did not want to have to burn powder on his way to Cow Crossing. But he hoped that at so late an hour, and in such foul weather, the gang of cow-thieves and road-agents would be tucked under shelter, heedless of a lone rider on the trails.

It was a vain hope. Ahead of the Kid, in the pale glimmer of the stars, still far distant, but in sight, gleamed the wild, tossing waters of the river. And between the Kid and that glimmering water a bunch of vague, shadowy figures loomed in sight—he counted four of them, vague shadows that he knew were horsemen. A husky shout rang through the night, and a revolver barked, with a sudden flash in the gloom.

"Halt!"

The Kid gritted his teeth.

He might have ridden that lonely trail a score of times without horning into the gang; yet on this night, when he was anxious to avoid trouble, to carry out his task without hindrance. Fate willed that he should ride right into Hank Jefferson and his gang.

The horsemen were bunched in the trail. The Kid did not draw rein. His gun was in his right hand now, his reins in his left. The mustang thundered on at a mad gallop.

There was a wild sputtering of shots; a buzzing of bullets like bees. The Kid's gun was ringing as he rode. It seemed scarce a second before he was charging through the bunch of riders, who broke open and plunged wildly as he came. He swung his heavy Colt right and left, and felt the cracking of bone under the barrel as it struck. In the darkness the shooting had been wild; but that blow had reached the mark, and there was a heavy fall behind the Kid as he careered on.

Wild oaths and sharp shots rang behind him, and the thunder of hoofs. The Kid dashed on towards the foaming river, longing for the rain and darkness again; but the rain still held off, and the stars shone down still more brightly. He glanced back over his shoulder, and picked out three Stetson hats that bobbed to the motion of furious riders. There had been four in the gang, but one lay far behind in the drenched grass with a cracked skull. The Kid set his teeth hard.

The river was close now—a wild and roaring flood. The stars shone down on the wild waters; light enough, as the Kid knew, to make him an easy target while he picked his way across. Every moment was precious to the Kid; but he slacked speed, and drew in the panting mustang. With his gun in his hand, the Kid leaped from the saddle and faced his pursuers.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Kid Makes Cow Crossing!

"STEADY, old hoss!"

The mustang stood like a rock.

The Kid levelled the six-gun across the saddle, resting it there to steady his aim. From the shadows came three furious riders, galloping fiercely, firing wildly as they came. Whether the gang had recognised him in that glimpse in the starlight, the Kid did not know: but if they had, they knew there was a rich prize for them if they could rope it in. It was well known that the Rio Kid packed a fat roll.

Crack!

The Kid waited till he was sure of his aim, and then he pulled trigger. From the shadows came a fearful yell and a heavy fall, and a riderless broncho went careering into the night with dangling stirrups. Two horsemen dragged in their steeds in hot haste.

The Kid grinned.

"I reckon they know this infant now, if they didn't savvy afore," he murmured. "I reckon there ain't a whole heap of galoots in Texas that could have picked off that guy at the distance with a six-gun."

He stared through the dimness. The thick bunch-grass had swallowed the remaining two riders from sight. They dared not ride on in the face of the Kid's gun. The Rio Kid leaped into the saddle again and dashed on towards the river. He had checked the pursuit, and, with time on his hands, he would have pushed the fight to a finish, and rooted out the crouching ruffians in the bunch-grass. But he had no time to cut to waste, if he was to reach Cow Crossing by dawn. He galloped on to the river, taking his chance of further pursuit.

Thud, thud! came the beat of hoofs behind him. Bang, bang! rang the guns of the two pursuers, firing wildly. The Kid's eyes glittered back over his shoulder. With a sudden movement, he swung the mustang round and faced them, and his gun rang out at the same moment. It was such a shot as few marksmen could have brought off. But the Kid's aim did not fail him, and a wounded man went plunging into the grass, screaming hoarsely. The last of the gang hunted cover on the instant, and the Kid wheeled again and dashed on to the river. When once more he glanced over his shoulder, he had a glimpse of a distant, bobbing Stetson hat—out of effective range. Hank Jefferson was still following, but he was keeping his distance.

Before the Kid now roared the Chicken River. The ford, knee-deep to a horse at other times was a raging torrent now. But the Kid did not hesitate. He had not ridden so far to hesitate now. The mustang plunged into the flood.

Scrambling, plunging, swimming, steadied by the Kid's wrist of iron, the gallant mustang fought his way through through the swollen stream.

Once, twice, he was almost swept away; but still the Kid's luck, his strength, and his courage, saved him; and he fought on, with clenched teeth and grim brow.

The hoofs were in the shallows at last on the southern side, and the mustang, exhausted by the struggle, almost tottered from the foaming flood.

Bang! came the roar of a Colt from the bank the Kid had left, and a bullet grazed his wet cheek, drawing a spurt of blood. Hank Jefferson had reached the river now, and he was firing on the struggling horseman as he glimpsed him in the starlight on the wild waters.

Bang, bang!

"You ornery cuss!" gritted the Kid between his teeth, as the bullets fanned him. "You jest hold on a piece, you dog-goned gink, and you'll sure get yours!"

The mustang clambered up the bank from the water. He halted, and stood shaking and trembling. The Kid, standing beside the horse, stared back, with gleaming eyes, across the flood. He dragged open the holster, into which he had had to thrust his gun to keep it dry from the river.

Jefferson, on the farther bank, a black shadow against shadows, was still firing fiercely. The Kid's gun leaped into his hand, and from his hand leaped flame and smoke, and the black shadow across the river lurched and swayed. The Kid heard a hoarse yell, and saw a bent figure, drooping over the horse, ride away wildly into the night.

He thrust the gun back into the holster, and wiped a stream of blood from the cut on his sunburnt cheek.

"I guess that lets me out!" drawled the Kid.

He turned to his mustang again.

"It's sure pizen for you, old cayuse," he muttered. "But we've got to hump it—we sure have! We got to beat it!"

He remounted, and rode on under the glimmer of starlight. Long miles lay still before him, and the tired mustang responded bravely to his caressing voice. Whip or spur the Kid did not need to use.

Thud, thud, thud! rang the hoofs on the rough prairie. Behind the Kid the roar of the flooded river died away into silence.

The rain was over, but thick clouds banked the sky again; the glimmer of starlight failed. Through dense darkness he rode, but not at a gallop now.

Slowly, faintly in the east the blackness was giving way to the pale gleam that told of coming day.

Thud, thud, thud! The mustang kept steadily on, the Kid, weary to the bone, drenched with water, smothered with mud, still erect in the saddle. Slowly night gave place to day.

"Put it on, old hoss!" murmured the Kid anxiously.

The wild ride was almost at its end. In the dawn of Christmas Day the Kid would ride into the town. Once more he loosed the revolver in its holster. In Cow Crossing were foes. A score of guns would leap from their holsters if the Rio Kid was seen riding the street. There was a thousand dollars on the head of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande, and a hundred men in the town knew him by sight. At his journey's end, danger dogged every step of the boy puncher.

But he rode on without a pause. In the glimmer of wintry dawn, a weary horse and a weary rider rode into Cow Crossing. In the rainy, wind-swept streets, at that early hour, no man was to be seen, and the Kid was glad of it. At any other time, he might have found a wild amusement in shooting up the town, and bringing the Cow Crossing pilgrims to their doors and windows with the roar of his revolvers. But the Kid was not hunting trouble now. He rode into the sleeping town, with a clatter of hoof-beats that echoed eerily through the silent, unpaved streets, and drew rein outside the shack of Doc Pigeon.

He slipped from the saddle, and patted the sweating neck of the mustang.

"I reckon we've done it, old hoss. Now I guess we've got to rouse out the doc."

With the butt of his gun he knocked loudly on the door. At that early hour Doc Pigeon was not yet astir.

Crash, crash! rang the butt of the Kid's Colt on the door. From within came an angry shout.

"Aw, let up on that racket, and get home to bed, durn your hide!"

The Kid grinned. Doc Pigeon had the impression that some very late roysterer, full of fire-water, was rousing

out. The Kid ceased to crash on the creaking door.

"You're wanted, Doc!" he shouted.

"Aw, forget it!"

"You're sure wanted, Doc, and I guess I ain't taking no for an answer. You want to hop out of your leetle bunk, and hop lively!"

There was an angry growl in the shack, and the door opened, revealing a man in shirt and trousers, who peered out grimly at the Kid, as he stood with the grey glimmer of dawn behind him.

Then Doc Pigeon gave a yell.

"The Rio Kid, by thunder!"

He leaped back from the doorway, and grabbed up a shot-gun that stood by the wall.

But before he could raise the shot-gun a revolver was looking him in the face, with the Kid's cool eyes gleaming over it.

"Drop it, feller!" drawled the Kid.

The butt of the shot-gun dropped to the floor. The Kid holstered his revolver and stepped into the doctor's shack.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Christmas!

DOC PIGEON stared grimly at the Rio Kid.

"You've woke up the wrong cayuse, Kid," he said. "What do you reckon you'll raise by holding me up?"

"You ornery guy," said the Kid indignantly. "Do you figure that I've horned on hyer to hold you up, and you a medicine man, too, dog gone you!"

"I reckon you ain't rode into camp jest to wish me a merry Christmas," said the Doc, with a grin.

"I sure ain't," said the Kid. "And this ain't going to be a powerful, merry Christmas for you, Doc, seeing as you've got to ride forty miles on the roughest trail in Texas, with a galoot about my size to keep you company."

"I guess not," said the Doc.

"I guess it's a cinch," said the Kid coolly. "There's a sick woman in a shack up in the Huecas, the other side of the Chicken River, and I've sure humped it down here to fetch you, Doc."

"I should smile!" grinned the Cow Crossing medicine man. "You want to tell me you've ridden down from the Huecas to Cow Crossing on a night like last? That's sure a tall one, Kid."

"I'm jest telling you that," assented the Kid.

He leaned against the door, breathing hard and deep. The Doc eyed him curiously, reading the weariness in his face, the signs of a hard trail in the mud that lathered him from head to foot.

"You're giving me straight goods, Kid?" asked the Doc, at last.

"Straight as a die, dog-gone you!" growled the Kid. "Do I look as if I'd come here to string you along, you unbelieving guy?"

"You sure look as if you'd hit a hard trail," said the Doc. "And I reckon somebody's been pot-shooting."

The Kid dabbed the scratch on his cheek.

"That was Jefferson's gang," he said. "I struck them on the Chicken River prairie."

"Search me!" said the Doc. "You've come through that gang, and got lyer alive, Kid."

"I guess that gang won't worry this section a whole lot any more," said the Kid grimly. "I guess you'll see what's left of them, Doc, on your way up to the Huecas, if the coyotes have left anything for you to see. But I ain't here to chew the rag, Doc. You want to get moving."

BRINGING BACK THE DOC! The Kid drew weary *rein* at last, and pointed with his quirt at the lonely cabin. "I guess that's the shebang, Doc. You don't want me now!" panted the gallant young outlaw. (*See Chapter 4.*)

The camp doctor eyed him long and searchingly. He nodded at last.

"Ten minutes!" he said.

"Good enough!" said the Kid.

He sat down on a bench to wait.

"You give me the word, Doc, when you're ready."

"Sure!"

The Kid leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. He was asleep almost before his eyes had closed.

"Gee!" murmured Doc Pigeon, staring at him.

If he had lacked faith in the word of the Rio Kid, the Kid's trust in him was a rebuke. The boy outlaw, upon whose head was a reward of a thousand dollars, closed his eyes and slept in a town that swarmed with enemies. Doc Pigeon had but to give a call——

"Gee!" murmured the Doc again.

And he passed softly into his bedroom to dress for the ride.

A touch on the Kid's shoulder awakened him. The camp doctor, cloaked and booted and spurred, was standing before him. And at the door was his horse, saddled and bridled.

The Kid jumped up.

Side by side they rode out of the cow-town, and struck the trail across the prairie. In a few minutes Cow Crossing dropped out of sight behind them.

The doctor's horse, a powerful pinto, covered the trail with great strides. But the iron-limbed mustang of the Rio Kid kept pace. In a blaze of wintry sunshine they reached at last the ford on the Chicken River.

They splashed into the river, and fought their way across the flood. On the further side the trail was taken up again. Now they rode on in silence, while the hours of the morning passed; and at last the rugged tops of the Huecas broke the sky-line in the distance. The black-muzzled mustang, iron-limbed and long-enduring as he was, was panting pitifully as he faced the rugged slopes of the hills. But he kept gallantly on, weary horse and rider defying weariness.

The Kid drew rein at last, and pointed with his quirt at the lonely cabin in the valley, standing out against the sharp, cold sunshine.

"I guess that's the shebang, Doc. You don't want me now."

The Doc halted.

"You ain't coming on, Kid?"

"I guess not. But look hyer." The Kid groped under his slicker, and fumbled at a pouch in his belt. The Doc stared at the handful of bills he drew out, and made a gesture of refusal.

"Aw, forgot it, feller!" snapped the Kid. "That nester is down to bed rock, and he's got a sick wife to care for. You'll take them five hundred dollars, Doc, and hand them to that galoot, and tell him it's a Christmas present from the Rio Kid."

As the Doc still hesitated, the Kid's handsome face flushed.

"Dog-gone your hide!" he exclaimed. "Do you figure that there's anything on these hyer dollars, you pesky guy? I guess I made them with pick and spade, fossicking for gold in the gulches over in Arizona, you all-fired jay. Do you reckon I got them in a hold-up?"

"I guess I'll take your word for it, Kid, and the dollars along with it," said the Doc, taking the roll. "They sure tell a heap things about you, Kid; but I allow you're one of the whitest men I've ever struck. If you're hitting the trail, good-bye, Kid, and good luck!"

He held out his hand.

The Kid's brow cleared, and he smiled as he gripped it. The door of the lonely cabin opened. The nester stood there shading his eyes with his hand, and staring towards the two riders. His haggard face lighted up with joy as he recognised the Doc of Cow Crossing.

"Good-bye, Doc!"

Doc Pigeon rode on towards the cabin. The Rio Kid wheeled his weary mustang, and rode away down the valley.

In a far canyon of the lonely Huecas the Rio Kid camped to rest his weary horse, and his own weary limbs. As the dusk of Christmas Day faded into night the stars came out in a velvety sky, and glimmered down on the Kid, rolled in his blankets, sleeping peacefully as a child.

THE END.

(*The Rio Kid in another thrilling adventure, next week, chums. Don't miss "The Cattle Thieves!"*)

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