

YARNS THAT ARE THRILLING THE WORLD!

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

THE RIO KID!

by — RALPH REDWAY

This Week "THE TRAIL OF DEATH!"



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

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Kid Arrives!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Rio Kid—a cowboy to his finger—

ends—cursed the fences as heartily as any rancher as he rode towards the Alamito Ranch under the hot Texas sun.

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

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

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

"Say, mister!"

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

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

A raw-boned man, in blue jeans and

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

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

"Yep."

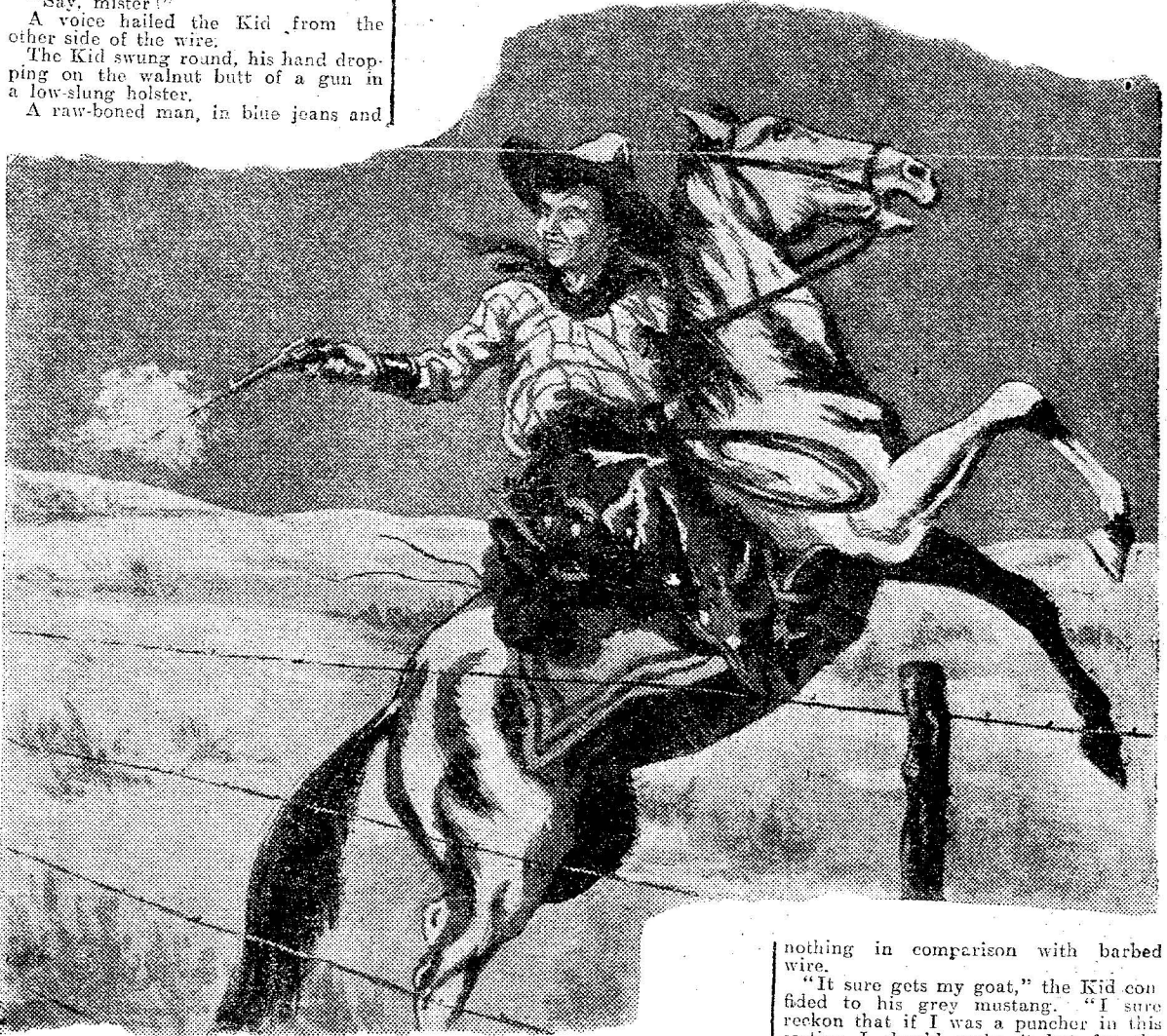
"Then this is for you!" said the Kid. The nester jumped back as the muzzle of a .45 looked him in the face.

Bang!

He laughed as he rode onward.

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

But his amusement faded as he came on another fence and another. He was glad to get out into the beaten trail at last. Half a dozen extra miles were



a Stetson hat, stared at him aggressively through the wire.

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

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

"You're on private land hyer."

"What!" roared the Kid.

"Don't you know what a fence means, you galoot?" demanded the nester.

"Keep to the trails. What are the trails for?"

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

"You're trespassing!" roared the nester.

"Trespassing!"

The Rio Kid laughed loud and long.

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

Bang, bang!

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

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

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

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

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

nothing in comparison with barbed wire.

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

The Kid rode up to the Alamo Ranch.

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

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

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

"Si, senior."

"Tell him the Rio Kid has called."

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

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

"Si, senior," faltered the Mexican.

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

"Si, señor."

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

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Not for the Kid!

"BRING the feller here!"

The Kid heard the rough, gruff voice of Seth Lewson, the boss of the Alamo Ranch. The rancher was smoking a cigar in a cane rocker on the veranda. The Mexican came back down the veranda steps and begged the señor to ascend.

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

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

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

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

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

"Boss Lewson?" he asked.

"Sure! You're the Rio Kid?"

"That very cuss," agreed the Kid.

"I reckoned you was older."

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

The rancher eyed him dubiously.

This handsome, careless fellow, little more than a boy in years, was evidently

not what he had expected to see when he had sent for the Rio Kid.

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

"No!" said Lewson.

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

The rancher's eyes gleamed.

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

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

The rancher smiled grimly.

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

"Heap handy," assented the Kid.

"That's what I want."

The Kid looked at him.

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

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

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

The rancher knitted his brows.

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

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

"They're all nesters!" he snapped.

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

"Just that!"

Again the Kid eyed him.

"Spill it!" he said.

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

The Kid winced.

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

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

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

"Your land?" queried the Kid.

"The land I've used as my own, at any rate!" snarled Lewson. "Nesters are not wanted on the Alamo. I guess

I've got half a dozen lawsuits going on now—about burned fences and sheep that have fallen over bluffs, and stacks that have caught fire in the night. But you can burn their fences and fire their stacks, and they still spread! In a few years' time there won't be feed for a third of my cattle on the Alamo. They've got to go."

He leaned forward, his keen eyes on the Kid.

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

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

"I get you," he said.

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

"Mine?" said the Kid.

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

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

"That's it."

"You darned rascal!"

"What?" roared the rancher.

The Kid's eyes blazed at him.

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

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

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

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

The Kid grinned at him cheerfully over the levelled Colt.

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

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

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

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

The Kid laughed audaciously.

in the south of Texas would have known the man; and the Kid knew him. It was Long Jim Sanders, the gunman; the most ruthless desperado on the border. Long Jim Sanders, the "killer."

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

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

"Correct!" said the gunman briefly.

"You're here to see Boss Lewson?"

"Yep," "Take my advice and hit the trail," said the Kid.

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

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

But he had not hit the trail. For days the Kid had camped along the Alamo, and his motive was one that made him grin at his own weakness.

From where he stood now, watching the black-muzzled mustang drink at the margin of the Alamo, he could see the smoke of homesteads rising in a dozen different directions. Woolly backs dotted the plain within his sight. Blackened stumps of trees, burned down by the settlers to clear the

ground, rose from the grass that was cropped low by the devouring sheep. All things that he saw were hateful to the eyes of the Rio Kid, bred a cowboy, bred to hostility to the nester. And yet he lingered in the Alamo country.



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

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

Lewson gritted his teeth as his gun was jerked away.

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

And, turning his back disdainfully on the enraged cattle-lord, the Kid swung carelessly down the steps to the ground. "My boss, Juan!" he called out to the Mexican.

"Si, senior."

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

The Kid returned the look with interest.

The horseman was a powerful, black-bearded fellow, with a face as hard as tanned leather, and only one eye, that glittered like steel. In five or six places his hard face, was scarred. Any sheriff

with a touch of earnestness. "What's wanted here is too dirty for even you to touch, though I guess your record would make an Apache blush."

Sanders laughed.

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

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

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Kid Takes a Hand!

"**K**ID, you're a durned fool!" The Rio Kid's handsome face was half amused, half angry as he thus apostrophised himself.

though every instinct urged him to ride.

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

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

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

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

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

Crack!

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

He glanced round.

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

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

The report of the rifle was followed by silence.

The Kid frowned.

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

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

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

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

"Gee!" ejaculated the Kid.

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

The Kid looked down at him, and his eyes glinted. At that moment the Kid knew why he really had stayed on the

Alamito; he knew that he was staying till he could "get" Long Jim Sanders. If this was the first hundred dollars that the gunman had earned, it should also be the last.

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

He dropped on his knees beside the man.

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

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

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

"Wife!" repeated the Kid. The man had a wife, then, doubtless awaiting his return at his shack. The flame of wrath burned more fiercely in the Kid's breast. "Courage, hombre," said the Kid softly. "I'm helping you, and I guess I can pull you through and take you home."

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

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

The man nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

He rode into Alamito like a whirlwind.

Five or six men on the street saw him and knew him, and there was a shout: "It's the Kid—the Rio Kid!"

The Kid rode on, laughing, up the

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

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Run to Earth!

THE death-hunt was long and weary.

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

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

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

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

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Three bullets pumped from the repeating-rifle in fewer seconds, and crashed through the hat before it could fall. A yell of triumph broke from the gunman. "I've got you at last, Kid!"

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

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

Crack!

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

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"The RIO KID!"

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from an arm that was broken by the bullet.

The Rio Kid laughed again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The gunman panted.

"The Kid's got me, boss!"

"The Kid!"

"And he's coming!"

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

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

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

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

The Kid's look was grin, and his look

struck terror to the very soul of the gunman. But he nodded.

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

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

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

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

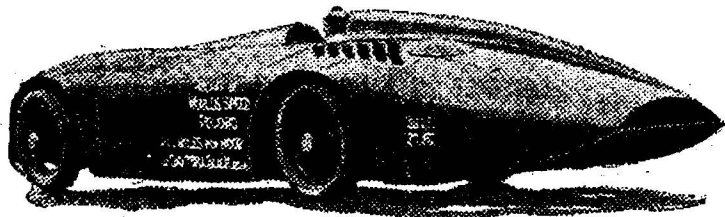
The nesters on the Alamo had cause to be glad that the Rio Kid had ridden that way, though they never knew. Many of their voices joined in the roar of wrath and condemnation at the story of the reckless outlaw who had ridden into the Alamo Ranch and shot up the ranch boss under the eyes of his outfit.

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

THE END.

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

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