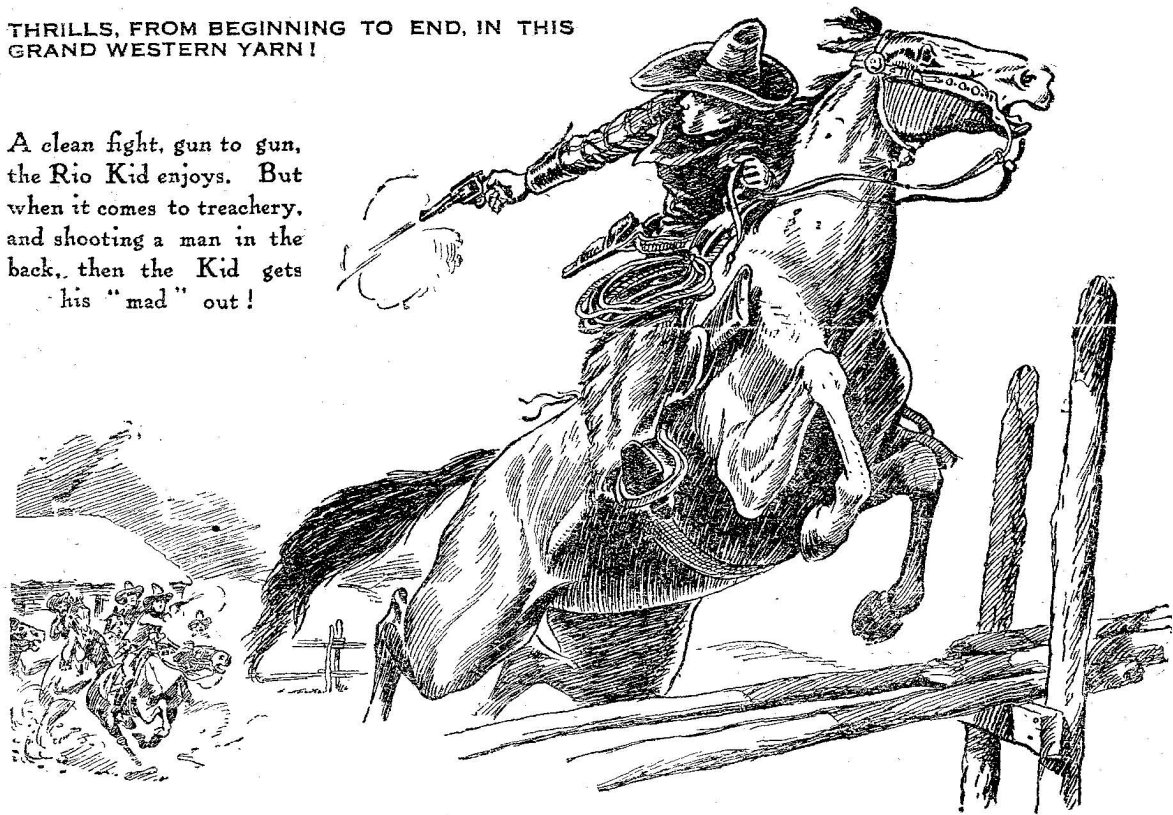


THRILLS, FROM BEGINNING TO END, IN THIS
GRAND WESTERN YARN!

A clean fight, gun to gun,
the Rio Kid enjoys. But
when it comes to treachery,
and shooting a man in the
back, then the Kid gets
his "mad" out!



Crapping the Kid!

By
RALPH
REDWAY.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Sun Dance Ranch!

CHRISTMAS, the Rio Kid reckoned, was not a time for camping in the lonely chaparral, or lurking in the untrodden recesses of the snowy sierras. Most times the Kid found his own company good enough for him; but he had a cheery and sociable nature, and when Christmastide came round the desire was strong on the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande to mingle genially with his fellow-men.

The Kid would have given much to ride back to his own country of Frio, and share in the rough joviality at the bunkhouse on the old Double-Bar Ranch. But that was not possible for the Kid. He was far from the valley of the Rio Frio, and though he had no doubt that the old bunch would have given him a welcome, danger would have dogged him there and those who welcomed him. The Kid had thought of that, and dismissed it from his mind. When he rode out of the snowy passes of the Huecas the Kid struck westward for the wild and almost trackless ranges of the Sun Dance Ranch.

The Sun Dance lay in a section of Texas where the Kid was not known, and where he figured that he could ride without every guy he met dropping his hand on a gun. His name and fame were known there, as they were known all over Texas; but he had never yet been on the Sun Dance trails, and to the eye the Kid looked what he really was, a handsome young cowpuncher, and few would have guessed merely on looks that he was an outlaw, hunted by sheriffs and rangers over all the wide

country between the Rio Grande and the Colorado River.

Carefully the Kid had blotted out all he could of his identity. The band of silver nuggets no longer encircled his Stetson; the silver spurs had disappeared, and Side-Kicker, the grey mustang, had been given a white stocking on his left foreleg, for the Kid was as skilful in disguising a horse as any horse-thief in Texas. It was not only of himself and his safety that the boy outlaw was thinking when he thus carefully blotted out the signs by which he might be known. He had to think of Buck Stenson, boss of the Sun Dance. If Buck was going to entertain him over the festive season, Buck had to be guarded against the penalty of sheltering an outlaw on whose head was a price of a thousand dollars. The Kid would have spent his Christmas in the loneliest recess of the Huecas rather than have brought peril on the Sun Dance boss.

But there would be no danger for Buck, the Kid figured. He would not call himself by his own name while he was Buck's guest; he would call himself Smith or Jones or Robinson, and he would happen into the ranch just as a puncher who had known Buck in the old days, when Stenson was a puncher himself. It was as simple as pie, the Kid figured.

That Buck would give him a hearty greeting the Kid had no doubt. Buck had been a puncher on the Double-Bar at Frio in the old days when the Kid had ridden with the Double-Bar bunch. He had been the Kid's comrade in the bunkhouse and on the range. Since those old days their ways had lain far apart. The Kid had been driven into outlawry, and Buck had cinched a

fortune from a distant relative, and come into the Sun Dance Ranch in the Hueca country. Once or twice, on his wild trails since those days, the Kid had had a word from his old pard, and he knew that Buck's friendship had not changed. Never yet had he visited the Sun Dance, though Buck would have been glad to see him there. The outlawed Kid had a delicacy in these matters. Now at last he was riding for Buck's home, leaving behind him the thick December snows in the Huecas—looking forward, with a light heart, to meeting his old comrade, and to Christmas under a hospitable roof.

It was a bitter winter, and there was snow on the ranges. Behind the Kid, as he rode westward, the frozen Huecas barred the steely sky. In the searching wind the Kid was glad of slicker and his goatskin chaps.

There was trampled snow on the trail—the trail that the Kid had reckoned was leading him to the ranch. But he was a stranger in the Sun Dance country, and when he sighted a pilgrim on the trail, he was glad to make sure of his way. A dark-skinned Mexican, mounted on a shaggy broncho, and wrapped, shivering, in a thick woollen serape, came down the trail, and the Kid pulled in his mustang to hail him as he was passing. Under his sombrero the Mexican eyed him with keen black eyes, suspiciously, the Kid thought. But the Kid was in a cheery and genial mood, and he greeted the Greaser like a man and a brother.

"Say, feller!" sang out the Kid. "You happen to belong to the Sun Dance outfit?"

"Si, senior."

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"Then I reckon you can put me wise," said the Kid. "Am I hitting the ranch on this here trail?"

"Si señor."

"Heap good," said the Kid.

The Mexican cowman pulled in his broncho. He drew nearer to the Kid, still scanning him keenly from under the rim of his sombrero. It came into the Kid's mind, with some discomfort, that this Greaser might have seen him before, in some other part of Texas where he was better known, and might guess who he was. That was not what the Kid wanted at all in the Sun Dance country.

"Say, you figure that you know me, feller?" he asked, restive under the keen scanning of the black, sharp eyes.

"No, señor, you are a stranger to me," said the Mexican. "If you seek the Sun Dance Ranch, it lies straight before you—three—four miles."

"Muy bien," said the Kid.

At a little distance he glanced back over his shoulder.

The Mexican had not gone on.

Sitting his broncho in the trampled snow of the trail, the swarthy cowman was staring after the Kid, as if deeply interested in the puncher who had asked his way to the Sun Dance Ranch.

The Kid's eyes glistened.

But as he saw the puncher looking back the Mexican wheeled his horse and rode on, and disappeared in the folds of the plain.

The Rio Kid rode on his way again, but there was a cloud on his brow. It looked as if that Mexican cowman knew him, or fancied that he did, and the Kid did not want to be known in the Sun Dance country. But, after all, the man might only be curious about a guy who was riding in the Sun Dance in the depths of winter, and strangers were few on these lonely ranges. The Kid dismissed the matter from his mind at last.

The grey mustang's hoofs covered the ground swiftly. The Kid came in sight of the ranch-house and the outbuildings. It was a large and handsome timber building, the ranch-house, and smoke was rising from several chimneys against a steely sky. Two or three men were to be seen about, and they glanced at the Kid as he rode up. One of them opened the gate for the rider, and the Kid called to him cheerily.

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

"Sure," answered the cowman.

"Good!" said the Kid. "I guess that's O.K."

The cowman looked at him as the gate crashed shut after the horseman.

"Say," he remarked.

"Shoot!" said the Kid, checking his horse.

"You aiming to ask the boss for a job?"

The Kid grinned.

"Nope," he answered. "Jest dropping in to see him and chin over old times, feller."

"Nothing doing hyer this time of year," said the cowman. "But if you want grub and a bunk, you only got to hump along to the bunkhouse, and you're sure welcome, feller. Sing out for Texas Bill, if you want me. I'll sure see you fixed."

"You're sure a white man, Texas Bill," said the Kid, "and I'll sure be glad to know you better; but I reckon the boss will be so glad to see me that he won't let me out of the ranch-house. You see, he's an old pard of mine."

And, with a nod, the Kid rode on to the house, leaving the puncher staring after him.

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THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Surprise for the Kid!

"SHUCKS!" murmured the Rio Kid.

He was a little worried.

He sat in a well-cushioned chair in a handsomely-furnished room. His riding-boots steamed at the stove.

He had been waiting quite a long time.

The Kid did not get it somehow.

A peon servant had taken his horse, another had shown him into that handsome room, and requested him to wait while the "senor" was informed of his arrival.

Naturally, the Kid had not given his name—it was a name that would have made the peon jump for cover if he had heard it. He had simply stated that he was an old friend of the rancher who desired to see him. That was enough to get him word with Buck Stenson. But the Kid, as he waited for Buck to horn in, was feeling more and more unquiet.

Buck had grown rich since the old days, he knew; but he had not expected to find a lot of change in him. But the handsomely-furnished house, the carpets and mirrors, the silent-footed peon servants, gave the Kid rather a shock. If this was Buck's way of life, then Buck had changed a whole lot since he had ridden Double-Bar trails with the Kid. Changed, at least, in his ways and his surroundings, the Kid was sure that his heart had not changed.

He was keeping the Kid waiting a long time before he came, but then, of course, he did not know that the visitor, who had given no name, was the Kid, and likely enough he was busy. Still, the Kid was feeling unquiet. He had not expected these handsome and almost luxurious surroundings. Perhaps some doubt rose in his mind while he waited whether Buck would, in these new and changed circumstances, be glad to see an old pard in spurs and staps.

The Kid, having steamed his riding-boots, rose from the chair at last and moved rather restlessly about the room. He wished that Buck would come. From somewhere in the house he could hear voices; there were a good many guys about, he figured.

The echo of a girlish voice came to his ears, and gave him a start. It had never even crossed his mind that Buck might have married since he had last heard from him more than a year ago. The Kid began to wonder whether, after all, he had done wisely in dropping in at the Sun Dance for Christmas. Still, if he found his presence there likely to be awkward for his old pard, it would be easy to bed down for the night and ride in the morning.

The door opened, and the Kid swung round with a clink of spurs towards the newcomer.

But it was not Buck Stenson who entered.

It was a man of about forty; a fat and portly man, with a rather hard and heavy face, and very keen, hard eyes. The Kid, at the first glance, did not like his looks much.

The sharp eyes fixed on the Kid.

"You wanted to see me?"

Surprise dawned in the Kid's face.

"I'm sure glad to see you, feller," he answered amiably; "but it was the boss of the Sun Dance I asked for."

Surprise was reflected in the other's face.

"I am the boss of the Sun Dance."

"Sho!" ejaculated the Kid.

"Lester Leigh, at your service," said the rancher. "I guess I'm rather

busy to-day. Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Carry me home to die!" said the Kid, staring in dismay at the fat rancher. "Say, I reckoned my old pard, Buck Stenson, was boss of this shebang. Buck that was my pard in the Frio country."

"I get you," assented Lester Leigh. "Stenson sold out six months ago."

"Oh shucks!"

The rancher smiled faintly.

"Sorry you've been disappointed," he said. "Mister—I don't think I've got your name."

"Oh, I guess that don't cut no ice now," said the dismayed Kid. "It sure never struck me that Buck wasn't boss of this here ranch any more. Say, you savvy where Buck has located?"

"I've heard that he went to California after she sold out here, but I reckon I couldn't say for sure."

"Dog-gone my boots!" said the Kid.

He picked up his quirt and slicker.

"Well, this sure has got my goat,"

he remarked. "I reckon I'm sorry I horned in here and wasted your time, Mister Leigh. I sure figured that Buck was running this ranch, like he was when I last heard from him. I knowed he'd be powerful pleased to see an old pard. But I reckon this child has loped into the wrong corral!" said the Kid ruefully. "It's me for the trail, Mister Leigh."

"I guess you don't want to hit the trail to-day, with the sun setting and more snow coming," said the rancher. "You're welcome to bed down in the bunkhouse if you like, and I guess the boys will make you welcome."

The Kid glanced from the window. The red of the sunset was reflected on heavy snow-clouds that banked the steely sky. He nodded.

"I guess I'll take that offer, and thank you, sir!" said the Kid politely. "I've ridden a long trail, and I'll sure be glad to bed down in your bunkhouse with your leave."

"You're welcome," said the rancher carelessly; and he stood by the open door while the Kid walked out of the room. Evidently the new master of the Sun Dance looked upon him simply as a cowpuncher, and did not care a continental red cent whether he bedded down for the night in the bunkhouse or rode on his way.

The Kid walked out of the ranch-house.

His brow was wrinkled; but a faint grin lurked on his face. Buck Stenson was gone, and the ranch had a new boss, and the Kid's plans for Christmas were knocked sky-high. He called himself a dog-goned gink for taking too much for granted as he walked away to the cowmen's quarters.

But the Kid was not the galoot to allow his spirits to be dashed for long. With his quirt under his arm and his slicker over it, he walked to the bunkhouse and looked in at the open doorway.

"Say, you Texas Bill!" he called. "You around?"

"Here," answered the cowpuncher who had let him in at the gate. "Wade in, feller. Wasn't the boss glad to see you?"

He grinned as he spoke.

"I guess he wasn't the boss I was looking for, feller," said the Kid. "This here shebang has changed hands, I reckon. Was you here in Buck Stenson's time?"

"I sure was," said Texas Bill. "Most of the outfit has been changed, but I was one of Buck's men; and a good man he was, feller. I guess I'm the last of the old bunch, and I'm taking my time after Christmas."

"You don't pull with Mister Leigh?" Texas Bill granted.
 "I ain't saying nothing agin my boss so long's he's my boss," he said.
 "But a harder-fisted skinflint than Mister Leigh never got a cowman's goat!"

The Kid chuckled.
 "So long's he's my boss," went on Texas Bill, "I ain't saying nothing agin the guy; but if he didn't double-cross Buck in buying this ranch off'n him, I'm a Greaser. So long's he's my boss I ain't talking about him, but let me give you the office not to do any business with him, feller, or you'll come out at the little end of the horn. That man Lester Leigh is a hard cuss, he sure is."

Texas Bill, it seemed to the Kid, was spilling a whole jugful—for a man who was not going to say anything against his boss.

However, it was no business of the Kid's.

He found a cheery welcome in the Sun Dance bunkhouse, and ate beans and bacon with the outfit when they came in. From the talk that went on, he gathered that Mister Leigh was no favourite with his outfit, and, remembering the hard, cold eyes of the rancher, he was not surprised at it. But the Kid had nothing to say on the subject; the rancher, "hard cuss" as he was, had given him leave to bed down in the bunkhouse, and the Kid was glad not to be riding a snowy trail that winter's night.

Looking out of the bunkhouse after supper, he saw many lights shining from the ranch-house. There were to be big celebrations there at Christmas he learned from the punchers; many guests from near and far, and a fancy-dress dance—"some jamboree," Texas Bill told him. Ranchers and their families for thirty miles round would be coming, and every sort of vehicle in the Sun Dance country would be converging on the ranch on the great occasion. The Kid yawned and went to the bunk that had been assigned him.

The boy outlaw, rolled in his blankets, slept the dreamless sleep of health and youth. But if he had dreamed he would not have dreamed of what was passing in the rancher's office over at the ranch-house while he slept.

In that room Lester Leigh was listening, with a cold, glinting eye and a hard-shut jaw, to a Mexican, who was excitedly telling him news.

"Verdad, senior," the Mexican was saying, "it is that picaro, the Rio Kid! I tell you, senior, that I saw him at Pecos Bend; it is now two months; he rode the street openly, like a hombre that has nothing to fear, though there was a crowd of hundreds, and many were grasping guns. It is the Rio Kid, senior—that hombre is the Rio Kid, and on his head is a reward of a thousand dollars!"

The rancher nodded slowly.

"He gave no name; and on his looks he fits the descriptions of the Rio Kid!" he said.

"I swear it, senior! I know him—know him like my own hand!"

"A thousand dollars!" said Lester Leigh.

"Si, senior!"

"I guess you're right, Fernando, but cinching the Kid—" The rancher spoke slowly. "That hombre is lightning on the shoot. And I guess the outfit here wouldn't jump to take him at my order."

"Keep him long enough for the sheriff of Sun Dance, to come, senior. By noon to-morrow. I will ride all night—"

The new boss of the Sun Dance Ranch

stood silent, thinking. Even with a cold, hard, grasping nature like his the laws of hospitality weighed for something. Outlaw or not, the Kid had come in peace, and intended to go in peace, and it was in trust that he slept under the bunkhouse roof. But if Lester Leigh hesitated, he did not hesitate long.

"He shall be taken, and you shall have two hundred dollars from the

The rancher's hard eyes searched his face as he nodded a greeting. This wandering puncher, who looked little more than a boy, was the Rio Kid; that was a cinch. Now that he knew, the rancher could fit him to the descriptions that were circulated all over Texas. But of what was in his mind, the Sun Dance boss' cold, hard face gave no sign.



"I tell you, senior," hissed the Mexican, "that that picaro who has come to stay here is the Rio Kid, and on his head is a reward of a thousand dollars!"

reward, Fernando, if you bring the sheriff here in time, and he is taken."

"Muy bien, senior!"

"And—not a word!"

Fernando grinned.

"Keep him, senior, till I return with the sheriff."

The Rio Kid, sound in slumber, did not wake at the beat of horse's hoofs on the trail.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Black Treachery!

"M E for the trail, I guess!" said the Rio Kid.

The morning sunshine streamed down on whitened plains. The Kid, standing in the doorway of the bunkhouse, looked out, and his face was cheerful enough. The Kid had been disappointed; but he was not the galoot to let that damp his spirits for long. Cold as it was, with snow on the trails, it was a clear, bright day; the keen air was like wine to the Kid, and he was ready to saddle up and ride.

From the ranch-house the portly figure of Lester Leigh came into his view. As the rancher came towards the bunkhouse the Kid swept off his Stetson in polite salute.

"Morning!" he said, with cold geniality. "I'm sure sorry you missed seeing Stenson here. You aimed to stop at this ranch over Christmas, I reckon?"

"I sure did aim to," the Kid admitted. "I guess Buck would have been glad to see an old pard."

"You knew Stenson long ago?"
 "Yep! In the Frio country, when he was a puncher, along with me," said the Kid, unsuspectingly.

Leigh's eyes glinted for a moment. He knew that the Rio Kid belonged to the Frio country. If he had doubted before, he was sure now.

"Well, you don't want to hit the trail in a hurry," said the rancher easily. "You aimed to stop along over Christmas; and there's sure room in the bunkhouse, and I guess the boys are civil. Why shouldn't you bed down here, jest as you aimed to do?"

"You're sure powerful good, sir!" said the Kid in surprise. From the talk of the outfit, and from his own impressions of the "hard cuss," the Kid had never expected this. True, it was no great thing for a rancher to allow the hospitality of the bunkhouse to a wandering puncher. Still, merely to a

remember him, and think of him showed a kind heart, to the Kid's mind. The Kid felt that he had been unjust in his thoughts to the new boss of Sun Dance. "I guess it cuts no ice with me," said Lester Leigh. "But I'll be glad if you'll stop along, jest as you aimed to do, and I reckon the boys will make you welcome. That so, Texas Bill?"

"Sure, sir!" answered the puncher, eyeing his boss in surprise. He had never before noticed Lester Leigh taking this kindly interest in any guy.

"I sure thank you, sir," said the Kid gratefully. "I ain't anxious to hit the trail with the snow thick on the ranges. I'll be glad to stay along this shebang a few days, Mister Leigh."

"It's settled then," said the rancher, and, with another nod, he turned away and walked back to the ranch-house.

The Kid took the change in his plans cheerfully. Christmas was not going to be as he had expected, but the Sun Dance bunkhouse was a warm corner for the boy outlaw, fresh from the snowy trails and icy precipices of the Huecas. The Kid reckoned that he would put in a few days at Sun Dance and hit the trail again when the weather mended a little, and, having no claim on Mister Lester Leigh, except the claim of any wayfarer in the hospitable cow country, he felt very kindly indeed towards the rancher. Not only for that reason, but because the Kid hated laziness and to loaf while other men worked, he joined some of the outfit who were mending the corral fence that morning, and lent a willing and useful helping hand.

He joined the outfit at dinner, and by that time the Kid was on cheery terms with all the Sun Dance punchers, and most of them had told him they were glad that he was staying over Christmas. Which was very pleasant hearing to the Kid, though he wondered a little what they would have said had they known that in the valley of the Rio Grande he was called the Rio Kid, and wanted by a dozen sheriffs and town marshals.

But that cut no ice now. The Kid was no outlaw by his own desire, and in a country where he was not known he was only too glad to drop outlawry behind him and be once again the cheery, care-free puncher of old. His few days at the ranch, the Kid reckoned, were going to be pleasant enough before he rode on a lonely trail, leaving the Sun Dance crowd in ignorance that they had entertained an outlaw.

That was how the Kid figured it out, with all his keenness never guessing what was in Lester Leigh's mind, or what the rancher had learned from the Mexican cowman, never dreaming that while he talked cheerily with the punchers—horsemen were riding for Sun Dance ranch, armed to seize him.

It was early in the afternoon, and the Kid was saddling the grey mustang, Side-Kicker, when a bunch of riders appeared on the trail. Texas Bill and two or three other cowmen were going out to look for steers that were lost in the snowy ranges, and the Kid had offered to ride with them and help. It was hard, bitter work on the frozen range, and the Kid's help was very welcome. He had saddled Side-Kicker, taking no heed of the beat of approaching hoofs on the trail, when a word from one of the punchers drew his attention.

"Say, what's the sheriff of Sun Dance want hornin' in here?"

The Kid looked round quickly at that. The Kid was not on friendly terms with sheriffs.

Four horsemen had reached the gate, and were coming in. The Kid had no difficulty in picking out the Sun Dance sheriff—a burly, muscular man, with a grim, determined face. Two of the men with him were sheriff's men from the distant cow-town of Sun Dance. The fourth was the Mexican cowman, whom the Kid remembered having met on the trail. And at the sight of Fernando's grinning face the Kid knew what to expect. The Greaser knew him, and had brought the sheriff's men down on him. That was sun-clear to the Kid, at a glance. But what was not clear to him was how Fernando knew that he was still at the ranch. But for Lester Leigh's invitation to stay he would have been a score of miles away, or more, by that time. And with that thought it came into the Kid's mind like a flash how he had been tricked.

"Shucks!" the Kid muttered between his teeth. "That dog-goned rancher's double-crossed me! He knew, and he got me hanging on while the Greaser fetched the sheriff. The dog-goned dirty skunk!"

The Kid's eyes burned. The black treachery of it got his goat. Had the rancher, guessing him to be an outlaw, pulled a gun on him, or called on his bunch to seize him, the Kid would have had no kick coming. But a friendly invitation to stay at the ranch, to accept the hospitality of the bunkhouse, with the intention of trapping him—that made the Kid sick. He would not have looked for treachery like that from a half-breed horse-thief.

He stood beside his mustang at the gate of the corral, and gave his belt a hitch, to bring his guns closer to his hands. Fernando had sighted him, and called out to his companions, and the three grim-faced men from the cow-town rode directly towards the corral. The Mexican took another direction. He had done his part, and had no desire to be in at the death when the lead began to fly.

The Sheriff of Sun Dance pulled in his broncho. His keen eyes were on the handsome puncher standing beside the grey mustang.

"Say, Heenan, what's this hyer circus?" asked Texas Bill, his glance going from the Kid to the sheriff, and from the sheriff to the Kid, in surprise.

"I guess you're my mutton, Kid!" said Sheriff Heenan. "Don't touch a gun, or we'll riddle you!"

"Say, what's got you?" drawled the Kid. "I guess you're a stranger to me, feller, and I don't want any trouble with you."

"You deny that you're the Rio Kid?" snapped Heenan.

"The Rio Kid!" repeated Texas Bill. The name was repeated right and left. The Sun Dance punchers gathered round, staring on at the scene.

"I guess there's no mistake," said Heenan. "You fit the description O.K., hombre; and if you ain't the guy we want, you can prove it up in town. I'm taking you!"

"Forget it," smiled the Kid. "Say, you sure you ain't got the wrong cayuse on the rope? You speak to Mister Lester Leigh, and he'll tell you that he asked me polite to stay over Christmas along with this outfit on his ranch."

The sheriff gave a gruff laugh.

"Mister Leigh sent for us to take you," he said. "He allowed that the Rio Kid was here, letting on to be a puncher, and bedding down in his bunkhouse, and he sent for us to cinch you."

The Kid's eyes flashed, but his face was calm.

"Say, that sure was playing it low

down," he remarked casually. "Mister Leigh asked me to stay on here, very kind and polite, and he sure wouldn't do that, jest to rope in the reward for an outlaw. He sure would not, sheriff. You making out that Mister Leigh is such a dirty, ornery, all-fired polecat as that comes to!"

"Can it!" said Heenan. "Mister Leigh sent us word that he'd got you here, and we've come for you. Put your paw to a gun, and we'll riddle you with lead! You're my mutton, Kid, with the wool on!"

"Aw, can it!" smiled the Kid. "I ain't handing over my guns a whole lot, Mister Heenan. Say, don't you be in a hurry; there's always time to shoot, feller. Mister Leigh would sure be a heap mad with you if you shot up his guest at the gate of his corral!"

"Guest nothing!" snapped the sheriff. "Mister Leigh kept you on here to give us time to horn in and cinch you. Ain't you wise to that yet, you bonehead? Hand over them guns before we riddle you with lead!"

The sheriff's gun rose to a level. Bang!

The shot came from the Kid's hip, and the bullet smashed the revolver from the sheriff's hand. The Kid leaped back into the corral as the sheriff's men open fire, and the tall wooden fence covered him. Sheriff Heenan clasped his numbed right hand with his left, yelling with pain.

"Shoot!" he roared. "Shoot! You've got him cinched! Shoot!"

He rode on into the corral, a gun in his left hand now, with his men. There seemed no escape for the Kid, only a fight to the death against the odds, or surrender. But the Kid was on Side-Kicker's back now, riding at a gallop across the wide corral to the farther fence. The fence was high, but Side-Kicker was more than equal to the leap, and the Kid rode at it and lifted the gallant mustang to the jump.

Crack, crack, crack! rang behind him as the mustang cleared the fence, and the lead flew close to the Kid, rapid as his movements were. The mustang's hoofs rang with a crash outside the corral wall, and the tall wooden fence was between him and his pursuers. And Sheriff Heenan and his men, not caring for the desperate leap the Kid had taken, rode savagely back to the corral gate, to ride round the fence at the outlaw.

The Kid gave his mustang a light flick of the spur.

"I guess it's us for the trail, old hoss!" he said.

And the grey mustang stretched himself to the gallop.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Kid's Last Word!

THE Rio Kid looked back. Behind him the Sun Dance Ranch and its buildings had sunk to a patch in the distance.

But closer behind came three grim-faced, determined horsemen, spurring on their bronchos. At intervals they loosed off shots at the fleeing outlaw, but the Kid kept out of effective pistol range. The Sun Dance three were well mounted; but Side-Kicker was the fastest cayuse in Texas, and the Kid could have walked away from his pursuers had he liked. But once at a distance, he did not let the mustang out, and the pursuers were allowed to keep him in sight on the snowy plains.

Before him lay the wide ranges of the Sun Dance Ranch, powdered with snow, with deep drifts in barrancas and arroyos and coulees. It was dangerous

riding, and the Kid was not hurrying. The Kid's brow was black as he rode. He had no bitterness towards the men who were hunting him; they stood for the law, and he was an outlaw.

But towards Lester Leigh, the man who had bought Buck Stenson's ranch, the Kid's feelings were black and bitter.

He looked back, and smiled grimly as he saw one of the pursuers flounder in a snowdrift. Two pursuers were now on the Kid's trail as he rode onward, keeping him in sight.

Still the Kid did not draw away from the chase. And in a short time one of the hard riders behind tailed off, his exhausted broncho failing to keep up the pace. The Kid, looking back again, saw the Sheriff of Sun Dance alone, and smiled.

And the Kid halted at last and wheeled his mustang, and sat in the saddle, a long-barrelled Colt in his hand, waiting for the sheriff.

Heenan slacked speed a little as he saw the boy outlaw waiting for him. He came on, however, and the gun in his left hand was barking. Two bullets flew wide of the mark; the third came closer; the fourth whistled by within a yard of the Kid. Then the Kid reckoned that it was time for him to burn powder, and he threw up the six-gun and fired.

Sheriff Heenan had heard of the Rio Kid's shooting, and now he learned for himself what it was like. The bullet would have gone through his heart had the Kid chosen, and Heenan ground his teeth as he realised that the outlaw was playing with him. The lead whizzed between his right arm and his body, cutting away cloth without touching him.

Bang! went the Kid's gun again, and this time the bullet passed under his left arm, again without breaking skin. The Kid was smiling, and the Sun Dance sheriff's brow was black as thunder as he rode on, taking desperate aim with his gun. But the third shot from the Kid carried away the six-gun from the sheriff's hand, and spun it away into the snow, leaving him disarmed.

The Kid rode towards him.

"Put 'em up!" he snapped.

He was not smiling now, and his eyes glinted like cold steel over his gun.

Heenan hesitated a moment, and then his hands went up over his head, and he sat his broncho, staring blackly at the outlaw of the Rio Grande.

"That's better," said the Kid coolly. "Say, sheriff, you woke up a lobo-wolf when you figured that you was catching a prairie rabbit. Why, dog-gone your pesky hide, I'd have wiped out your bunch if I'd had a mind to! But I guess I ain't spilling any guy's juice at Christmas, if I can help it. Git off'n that cayuse!"

Heenan, black with rage, dismounted. "You sure are a good little man, and know how to do as you're told!" commented the Kid. He gave the broncho a lash of his quirt, and the animal flung up its heels and dashed away. "I ain't going to hurt you any, sheriff. I ain't got any grouch agin you for trying to rope me in. You got to walk back to the ranch, and I guess when you've hoofed it six miles, you'll be powerful sorry you horned in after the Rio Kid. That lets you out, sheriff."

"Dog-gone you!" muttered Heenan. "I got to let you light out of the Sun Dance country, dog-gone you!"

The boy outlaw's eyes flashed.

"You hit it back to the ranch," he said quietly. "You tell Mister Leigh that I'm on his trail! Tell him that I'm hornin' in at the ranch this Christmas, and that I'm going to shoot him up in his own ranch! You get me!"

"I guess you won't dare hit Sun Dance agin!" growled Heenan.

"You want to forget it," said the Kid. "Come Christmas, I'm shooting up that durned polecat in his ranch! I ain't spilling your juice, sheriff; I got no grouch agin you. I'm shooting up that pizen skunk that tricked me and sold me out, and you want to put him wise to it!"

And with that the Kid wheeled his mustang and dashed away.

Sheriff Heenan stood staring after him till the horseman vanished in the misty distance of the ranges. Then slowly, on foot, the sheriff started for the ranch, with a grim and thoughtful face.

The Kid would keep his word—all Texas knew that the Rio Kid was the slave of his word. But if he came to the Sun Dance Ranch again that Christmastide, he would find the ranch swarming with enemies, with the sheriff at their head, and the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande would be cinched at last—so the sheriff said to himself grimly, as he tramped wearily across the snowy, misty ranges. It would be a wild Christmas for the Rio Kid if he kept his word—and the Kid was the man to keep it.

THE END.

"THE RIO KID'S CHRISTMAS GIFT!" is the title of next week's roaring Western tale. Don't miss it, chums!

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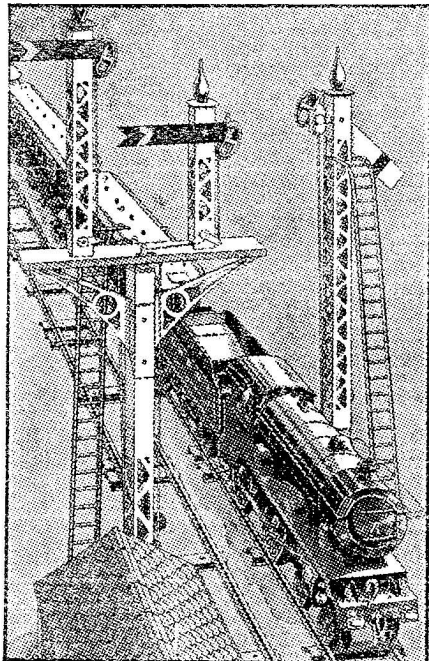
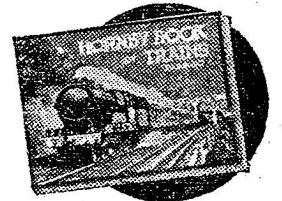
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