CLEARING HIS NAME! At the Double Bar Ranch, the place where he had once been a cowpuncher and whence he had been driven out as a thief, the chance is given to the Rio Kid to clear his name! And you can bet your life the young outlaw takes it!

THE RIO KID!

by RALPH REDWAY

This Week: The WHIP HAND!

HERE'S ANOTHER OF OUR ROARING WILD-WEST TALES, FEATURING THE AMAZING BOY OUTLAW, THE RIO KID!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Sheriff Watson Looks In!

THERE was a clatter of hoofs and a jangling of bridles outside the Double Bar ranch-house.

Old Man Dawney, in the rocker on the ranch veranda, removed his feet from the rail, and the black Mexican cheroot from his mouth, and rose. He leaned on the cedar rail and looked down at the bunch of horsemen who had drawn rein.

Sheriff Watson of Frio stared up at him from under the shadow of his Stetson. His bearded face was grim.

"Mornin', rancher!" he grunted.

"Morning, sheriff! You're coming in?"

"I guess I'm coming in for the Rio Kid, rancher, onless you hands him out, pronto!" said the sheriff.

"The Rio Kid?"

"We sure know he's here," said Watson. "We've come for him, Mr. Dawney. We want the Kid."

Old Man Dawney stared steadily at the Frio sheriff.

"If you want the Kid, sheriff, you should sure have kept him when you had him," he answered. "You had him in the calaboose at Frio yesterday. If you let a lynch crowd hook him out it's sure your own funeral."

"I guess we're wise to that now!" growled Watson. "The Double Bar crowd chipped in jest to save him from lynching. I'm sure obliged to them for saving my prisoner. But if they figger on keeping him, wash it out, rancher. The Kid's my game, and we want him."

"I guess you can want."

Old Man Dawney spoke quietly and coldly.

Watson's rugged brow darkened. His hand rested on his gun-holster as he sat his horse under the veranda rails. The six men who rode with him had their hands on their guns.

"I reckoned that was the game, *rancher*," said Watson. "But it cuts no ice with me. You don't stand for taking a prisoner outa the hands of the law, George Dawney."

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"I did not take him out," said Old Man Dawney icily. "You let a lynch crowd take him. You failed to protect your prisoner, Sheriff Watson, whether it was your fault or not. The Double Bar outfit had to save him. They're keeping him."

"Cut it out, rancher. We're heeled, and we've come for the Kid. If there's shooting, you take the blame. You're sure a big man in the Pecos Valley, rancher, but you ain't so all-fired big that you can snap your fingers at the law. You'll hand over the Kid."

The rancher shook his head.

"He's here?" demanded Watson.

"I guess I'm not answering questions," drawled Old Man Dawney. "If you figure that he's here, you can hook him out by legal process. Get an order from Judge Fink at the county town, sheriff."

"While you put him on a cayuse and start him safe over the border into Mexico!" snapped Watson.

The rancher shrugged his broad shoulders.

"It won't wash, rancher," said Watson. "The Rio Kid's my meat, dead or alive. We want him, and we mean business. Your outfit sure put the goods on Frio last night; but you ain't fooling me. Where's the Kid?"

"You jaspers will have to find him if you want him," said the rancher. "The Kid's a pesky little fire-bug. I allow; and it was me that boosted him off this ranch long ago. But since then he has saved my life from the Black Sack rustlers, sheriff, and George Dawney don't stand for forgetting a thing like that. Cut it out!"

"We shall search the ranch for him," said the sheriff.

"I guess not. You won't step into this ranch," said Old Man Dawney. "And there's a crowd of punchers hyer that will tell you so."

The sheriff glanced round.

Twenty men of the Double Bar were gathering on the spot, and they had rifles in their hands. The sheriff's posse exchanged uneasy glances, and moved closer together. They had come armed and ready to fight for the young outlaw if he was not handed over peaceably. But they realised that they had to think again, if Old Man Dawney's outfit were prepared to stand by the Kid. A volley from the punchers' rifles would have emptied every saddle there.

Watson gritted his teeth.

"If you're puttin' up a fight for the Kid, rancher——"

"Just that," said the rancher coolly. "I guess these hombres will think twice afore firing on the sheriff's posse."

"Guess again, sheriff!" grinned Bud Wash, the foreman of the Double Bar. "You pull a trigger hyer, feller, and you'll never pull a trigger agin on this side of Jordan. What Mr. Dawney says goes."

The sheriff breathed hard.

"You'll have all Frio at the ranch afore sundown, Mr. Dawney. They don't stand for allowing you to run things jest as you please. You'll get burnt out."

"All Frio's welcome, if they want bad trouble," said Old Man Dawney coolly. "I don't give a continental red cent for all Frio, with every other cow-town on the Pecos thrown in. Hit the trail, sheriff, while the going's good."

The sheriff of Frio looked at his men. They had withdrawn their hands from their guns.

"I guess they've got us beat, sheriff," said one of the posse. "It's a cinch for them."

"That's loss-sense," said the rancher, with a nod. "Keep your prisoners when you've got them, if you want them."

"I'm not goin' without the Kid!" said Watson. "This is too late in the day for you, George Dawney. It was you boosted the Kid on this gol-darned ranch, and turned him into an outlaw. I never quite cottoned to it that the Kid had done what you believed; and he says he didn't. But he's done enough since to hang a dozen hombres, and we want him. You started him as an outlaw, and you can't alter it now."

The rancher's face hardened.

"I did the Kid no injustice," he said. "What I believed then, I believe now. But he's saved my life since, and I'm not goin' back on him. Hit the trail, sherm, while the going's good!"

"Not without the Kid."

The Double Bar punchers exchanged glances, and the rifles were at a level. It needed only a sign from Old Man Dawney, for the sheriff and his posse to be swept out of existence. It was plain that the punchers would pull trigger at a sign from their boss. Sheriff Watson did not falter; but his followers were not made of the same stern stuff. They wheeled their horses and rode for the trail.

"Foller on, sheriff!" grinned Bud Wash.

"Not without the Kid!" said Watson, between his teeth. "I've got my duty to do, and my duty's to take the Rio Kid to the county gaol to stand his trial. Shoot'm be durned to you!"

Whiz!

A rope sang in the air, and a loop dropped over the sheriff's shoulders. The rope twanged, and the sheriff of Frio was plucked from his saddle, falling with a crash to the ground. Tex the horse-breaker ran forward, dragging in his lasso as he ran.

There was a bang from the sheriff's Colt, but the lead was wasted as he rolled over in the grip of the riata. The next moment the gun was kicked from his hand.

"I guess that fixes you, sheriff!" grinned Tex. "I'd be sorry to see a good man like you cashin' in his chips for nothin'!"

"You durned gink!" roared the sheriff, struggling madly with the rope.

There was a roar of laughter from the punchers. A dozen hands grasped the struggling sheriff of Frio.

Mr. Dawney smiled coldly from the veranda.

"Don't damage him, boys! Ride him off the ranch!"

"You'll hear agin of this!" raved the sheriff. "By the holy smoke, I'll bring half Frio here and wipe out the hull outfit!"

"Ride him off!" said the rancher.

Bud Wash and Tex gripped the sheriff and hoisted him into his saddle. Tex leaped on his broncho and rode; the lasso, still gripping the disarmed sheriff, led him after the horse-breaker. A roar of laughter from the Double Bar outfit followed them as they rode, and the enraged sheriff disappeared in the bunch-grass in the distance.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Kid's Choice!

THE Rio Kid laughed.

The Kid, from a window of the ranch-house, had been watching the scene at the veranda rails.

At the sight of the sheriff of Frio, the Kid's hand had gone instinctively to his belt. But the holster at his belt was empty; the Kid's guns were gone. The Double Bar outfit had saved him from the lynch mob in Frio, and brought him to the ranch, and the Kid knew that he owed his life to Old Man Dawney. But what the rancher's intentions were he did not know yet. He was unarmed, and he was not permitted to leave the ranch. But the Kid did not worry. He had slept soundly through the night, and turned out cool and cheery in the morning. Whatever was coming, the Kid was sure to meet it with a cool and smiling face.

He laughed as he watched the sheriff ride off at the end of Tex's lariat. His laugh rang cheerily.

Old Man Dawney was standing by his friend, as he had said that he would when the Kid was taken a prisoner into Frio. The Kid had saved his life at the hands of the Black Sack crowd, and the rancher was not the man to remain under an unpaid obligation. The account was square now. The Kid wondered what was coming. He wanted no more favours from the man who had once driven him off the ranch at the muzzle of a Colt. He wondered what Old Man Dawney's intentions might be. But he would not have waited to learn, had a chance offered to reach the corral and his mustang, and ride for the Rio Grande.

But he was a prisoner. The door of the room where he stood was locked. But the Kid was not an easy man to keep.

There was a click of a key, and the door opened. It was Old Man Dawney who entered.

The Kid gave him a rather mocking smile.

"Morning, rancher!" he drawled.

Old Man Dawney closed the door and sat on a pinewood settle, facing the Kid. At a movement of the Kid, he drew forward his gun-holster a little. The Kid laughed.

"I've no gun, rancher," he said banteringly.

"I guess I'm not trusting you too far, Kid," said Dawney dryly. "I've saved your life, and you know it; but if you get your ears up with me, I'd let daylight through you before you could say, 'No sugar in mine.'"

"I get you!" assented the Kid, shoving his hands into his pockets. "What's the game, rancher? Have you come here to chew the rag?"

Old Man Dawney nodded.

"I've come to talk to you," he said. "You saw Watson and his posse ride in. They're gone; but Watson isn't the man to swallow it. He will sure get you if you hang on to the Double Bar."

"My mustang's in the corral," said the Kid. "What's the matter with riding for Mexico?"

"I guess it's not so easy. You saved my life, Kid, and I've saved yours. But you're a gun-man—a bad egg—and I guess I don't know that I can let you loose on the plains again. You're a bad man to let loose, Kid, and all the ranchers along the Pecos will curse me if I let you loose again!"

"They sure will!" agreed the Kid. "But you ain't turning the Double Bar into a calaboose, rancher?"

"Nope!"

"You'll have to keep me or let me go," grinned the Kid. "Better let me go, rancher. I'm not a safe hombre to keep around."

"That's got to be settled," said Dawney. "I was thinking of taking you to the county gaol to stand your trial. But I guess I might as well have left you to Judge Lynch."

"Right in once!" assented the Kid. "You washed out the Black Sack

crowd, and that would count in your favour. But——"

"But there's too many ginks along the Pecos who are sure keen to get me," said the Kid.

"That's it."

The Rio Kid shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm asking nothing of you, George Dawney," he said. "I never asked you to hook me away from Judge Lynch.

"That isn't the talk for a man who holds your life and liberty in his hands, Kid!"

"It's the talk you'll get from me!" said the Kid disdainfully. "Why, you was plumb loco to believe what you did. A bunch of greasers held me up when I was bringing the pay from the bank in Frio, and got away with the greenbacks. You figured it out that I hid the money, and fancied the hold-up!" The Kid's lip curled. "It was like you, George Dawney—you was always a hard and suspicious man. I never did it, and if you'd given me a show, I'd have got after those Mexicans and got back the goods. You called me a thief and drove me off the ranch!"

"Cut it out, Kid—that talk does no good!" he said. "What I thought then I think now."

The Kid gave another shrug. For a moment he had been betrayed into anger; but he was cool again at once.

"Then what's the palaver about?" he asked. "You've got me here."

"I'm not handing you over to the law," said Old Man Dawney. "And I can't let you go free on the ranges. I want you to get out of the country."

"So that's the lay-out?" said the Kid, with a grin.

"That's it. You'll get your horse and guns, and dollars in your pocket to see you through. And you'll light out of Texas, and never ride back on your word. I believe you'd keep your word."

"I'd keep it if I gave it," said the Rio Kid disdainfully.

"Then it's a cinch?"

"Forget it," said the Kid. "I'm not riding out of Texas, to please you or any other hombre. Forget it."

If your conscience worries you any, keep in mind what the sheriff told you."

"And what's that?"

"That I never did what you believed when you boosted me off this ranch!" snapped the Kid, with a glint in his eyes. "What I became after that, you made me, Old Man Dawney."

"Cut it out, Kid!"

"You don't believe that?"

"No."

"Suit yourself, rancher. You always were a hard case," said the Kid, with an amused smile. "I'd never have robbed the ranch where I was raised, and where I had friends—even after I'd taken to the trails. And you figured it out that I'd robbed you when I was a puncher here. You was always a hard man. Believe what you like, and be durned to you!"

The Kid's eyes glittered, and his voice vibrated. "You was a fool, rancher, as well as a pesky cayuse. You was always too high-handed. I swore I'd get back on you, but——" The Kid broke off with a laugh. "I've let the Double Bar alone. I was raised here, and you treated me well once. That's why."

The rancher watched him with a thoughtful look, but he shook his head. It was not easy for an opinion once formed to change, in the hard and imperious mind of the boss of the Double Bar.

The rancher's brows contracted darkly.

"That's the best I can offer you, Kid," he said. "I ain't letting an ornery cayuse like you free on the plains. It's that or trial in the county town. Horse and guns and dollars, and a ride into the next State and a promise to stay there."

"Keep your dollars!" jeered the Kid. "And I'm freezing on to Texas! Now what're you going to do, rancher?"

George Dawney rose from the settle. "That's your last word?" he asked quietly.

"Correct."

"Then it's you for the county gaol," said Old Man Dawney, "and my punchers will ride you there safe."

He turned to the door.

His hand was on the door, when the Rio Kid made a sudden spring—sudden and swift as the leap of a cougar. George Dawney went staggering as his gun was whipped from his belt by a swift hand. The next moment the muzzle of the Colt was grinding into his neck.

"Jest one yaup, rancher, and you're dead meat!" hissed the Kid, and the shout died unuttered on the lips of Old Man Dawney.

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THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Whip-hand!

THE bantering grin was gone from the Kid's face. His features were set and grim, his eyes gleamed like polished steel, his teeth shut hard. The rancher, black with rage, stared at that set, deadly face, and was silent, choking back his fury. He read death in the eyes of the Kid, in his snarling lips, in the grind of the gun-muzzle on his neck. The Kid's words were not idle. One shout for help, to alarm the punchers, and Old Man Dawney would never have uttered another cry but his death-cry. He would have lain dead on the floor while the Kid fought his way to freedom. Old Man Dawney knew it, and though rage choked him, he was silent, staring at the Kid with burning eyes.

"You've said your say, George Dawney," said the Kid, between closed lips. "Now it's your turn to listen. You bring the punchers here, and you're a dead rancher, and I'll take my chance of fighting my way out. I'd be sure sorry to pull trigger on the galoots who got me away from Judge Lynch, but a man's life is his to fight for. Sabe? Don't drive me to blotting out any of your punchers, Old Man Dawney. And take it from me that you'll go first over the range. Sabe?"

George Dawney nodded.

He was cool, watchful, holding back his fury.

"Your game, Kid," he muttered. "You was too spry for me. I oughta never trusted you close. You'll pay for this."

"Sorry you yanked me away from Judge Lynch?" grinned the Kid.

"Nope; that was a debt I had to pay. But I've sure paid it now, and after this, Kid, I'll hunt you like a wolf from the Llano!" His voice was hard as ice, his eyes glittering. "I'll never quit till you're strung up, Kid, if you don't hand me that gun instanter!"

"I'll hand you hot lead if you blow off your mouth too much!" said the Kid. "No more than that! Our account's square, feller, and I'm goin' to hit the trail. Worse luck for you if you don't leave me alone after. By gum! I don't know what keeps me from blowing your cabeza into little pieces now. I guess I'd get clear, too. You put the brand of thief on me, you ornery cuss, you did! Now I tell you again that that hold-up long ago was the truth, and that I'd never have robbed the ranch where I was raised to save my life! I tell you again, with a gun at your head! What about it?"

The rancher's lips curled.

"I don't believe you!" he answered coolly.

The Kid's finger seemed to quiver on the trigger of the Colt.

"You're a hard case, George Dawney," he said, "but you've sure got grit. I ain't putting your light out if I can help. But my gum, if you get your ears up afore I'm clear of the Double Bar, it's you for the long trail! You wronged me, and I said I'd get back on you, and instead of that I saved your life. But it's cold business this time. By the holy smoke, you give me half an excuse, and the Double Bar will want a new boss!"

The Kid almost hissed the words.

"You've got me fixed!" said the rancher coldly. "It's your say-so, till I get the upper hand; and then, watch out!"

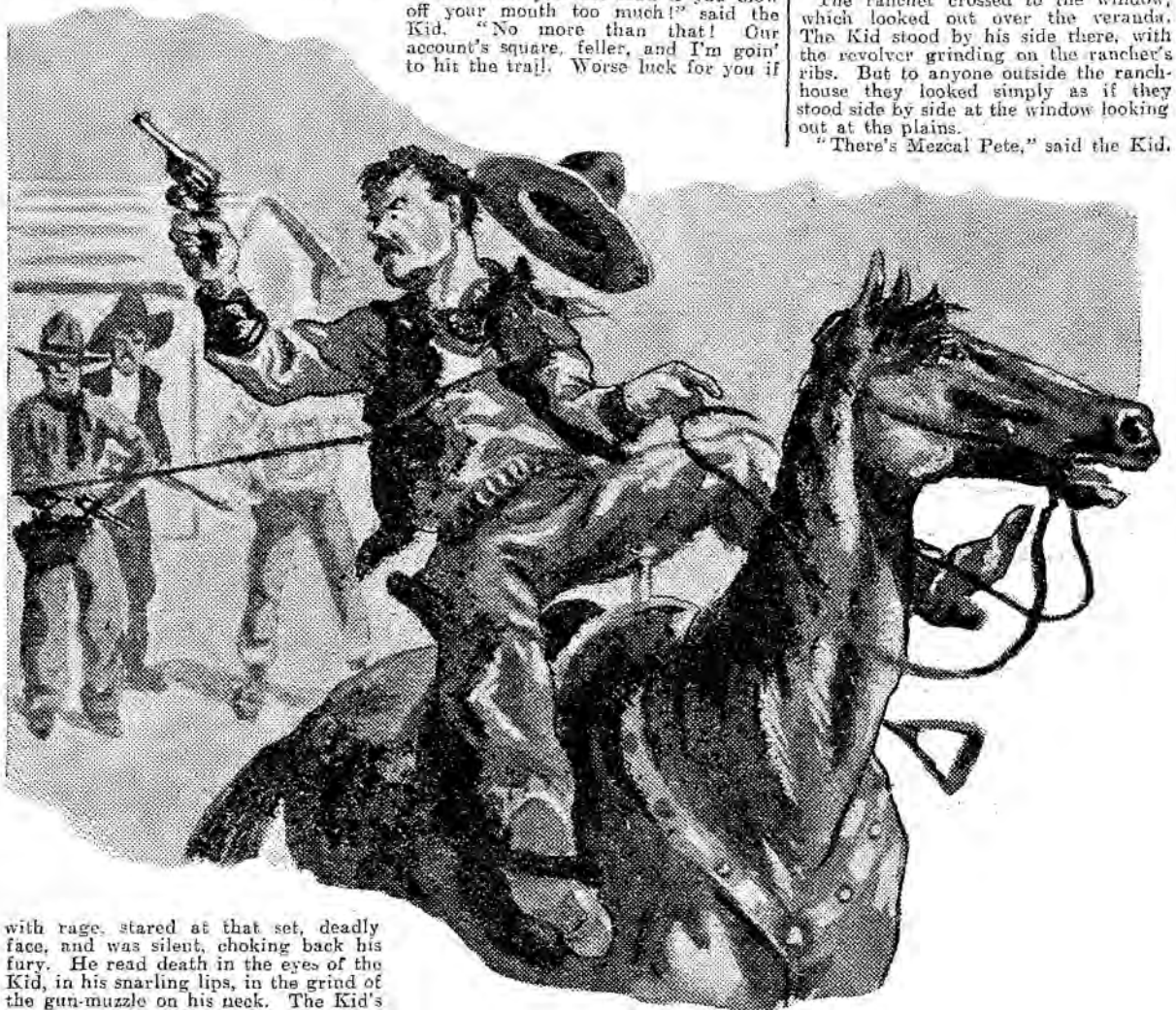
"Step to the window!"

The rancher crossed to the window, which looked out over the veranda. The Kid stood by his side there, with the revolver grinding on the rancher's ribs. But to anyone outside the ranch-house they looked simply as if they stood side by side at the window looking out at the plains.

"There's Mezcal Pete," said the Kid. "Call to him, and tell him to bring my mustang from the corral."

Old Man Dawney breathed hard and deep.

"Tell him," went on the Kid mockingly, "that you're letting me run, and they're to leave me loose. And we're



TROUBLE AT THE DOUBLE BAR! "I'm not going without the Kid!" said the sheriff. "I've got my duty to do. Shoot'n be durned to you!" Whiz! A rope sang in the air, and a loop dropped over Watson's shoulders. The rope twanged and the sheriff of Frio was plucked from his saddle. (*See Chapter* 1.)

parting friends. Tell him that, feller, before you're stopped from tellin' any hombre anything."

The rancher ground his teeth.

Almost he resolved to take his death at the Kid's hands, and trust to his punchers shooting the fugitive down before he could get clear. But life was dear to the rancher, and it was by no means sure that the Kid would be stopped in his flight. Loose, with a gun in his hand, the Rio Kid would not be easy to stop. Well the rancher knew it.

"You hear me sing?" snapped the Kid.

"It's your say-so," muttered the rancher.

He opened the window and called to Mezcal Pete, who was rubbing down a horse near the veranda rails.

"Pete!"

"Hello, boss!" The puncher looked round.

"The Kid's goin'. We're parting friends," said the rancher. "Bring his hoss here from the corral, Pete, and tell the boys to let the Kid ride loose."

"I'm sure glad to hear it, boss!" said Mezcal Pete. "No hombre on this ranch wants to hurt the Kid." And he gave the Kid, standing at the window, a cheery grin. "I'll sure have your cayuse here inside five minutes, Kid, saddled and ready."

"*Pronto!*" snapped the rancher.

Mezcal Pete strode away round the building to the horse corral. The rancher's eyes glittered at the Kid. Life was dear, but pride and arrogance were almost dearer to the boss of the Double Bar.

"That goes," said the Kid.

"Now git!" muttered Old Man Dawney. "And as sure as there's a sky above us, Kid, I'll ride you down, if I have to ride you to the Rockies."

The rancher's hard voice shook with suppressed fury.

"You're seeing me safe off the ranch, I guess!" jeered the Kid. "That's your hoss yonder, and you're mounting and riding with me to the last fence, feller!"

"Keep it up while you may," said Dawney. "You'll pay for it all in a lump when I get you where I want you."

"*Hump it!*" said the Kid.

He marched the rancher out of the room, the revolver close to his side. George Dawney was swinging away towards the door, but the Kid stopped him.

"Not that-a-way," he said coolly. "I guess it's us for your office, feller."

Silently, but shaking with rage, the rancher turned down the passage to his business-room. A peon servant was crossing the passage, and he stood back for his master to pass. The Kid's revolver was out of sight now, but it was ready to show, as Dawney knew. He did not speak a word to the peon as he passed him, though he longed to call to the man to yell to the punchers. The rancher and the Kid passed into the ranch office, and the Kid kicked the door shut behind them. Old Man Dawney's eyes glittered at him like points of steel.

"It's a hold-up?" he asked savagely.

"You've said it," assented the Kid. "I guess I know how much you generally keep in that safe, feller. Hook it out!"

Without a word, under cover of the gun in the Kid's steady hand, the rancher took out a key, and opened the big steel safe.

The Kid glanced over his shoulder into it.

Coolly he pointed out what he wanted. His face white and drawn with rage, Old Man Dawney picked out the rolls of notes.

"Ten—twenty!" chuckled the Kid. "You can afford to give away twenty thousand dollars, feller, and you the *richest hombre in Texas!*"

The rancher did not speak. Rich as Old Man Dawney was, twenty thousand dollars was a large sum to lose. The look on the rancher's grim face might have scared anyone but the Rio Kid. But the Kid was enjoying the situation.

"Hand it over, feller," he drawled.

The Kid took the fat roll in his left hand and dropped it into his pocket. Dawney watched it go, and a quiver ran through his muscular limbs. But there was death in the gun the Kid held.

"And that's the galoot that asked me to believe that he never robbed me," said the rancher bitingly. "That's the hombre who would not rob the ranch where he was raised. You're going with that roll of dollars in your pocket, Kid. You'll repent it."

"I guess not. Walk, feller," said the Kid. "I'm *putting* this gun in my pocket when we get outside. Don't forget it's there. You've seen me shoot through the lining in the old days, rancher. It's you for the long trail if *you try any shenanigan game. Git!*"

With his hand in his pocket on the hidden gun, the Rio Kid walked out of the office with the rancher.

Old Man Dawney went quietly and sedately. He was under dog now, and he valued his life, if only to get back on the Rio Kid when his time came. They stepped out under the ranch-house porch.

Mezcal Pete was leading up the grey mustang, saddled and bridled.

The Kid gave Old Man Dawney an expressive look.

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"Saddle up my claybank, Pete," said the rancher. "I guess I'm riding with the Kid to see him safe off my land."

"Sooner the healthier, boss," grinned Mezcal Pete. "Sheriff Watson will sure be back afore sundown with a crowd."

"I guess we're hittin' the trail lively, Pete," said the Kid. "Waitin' for you, Mr. Dawney!"

Old Man Dawney swung himself into the saddle. His lips opened. One word to Mezcal Pete, one shout to the punchers within sight, and a dozen guns would have leaped from their holsters to deal with the Rio Kid. But the Colt in the Kid's pocket bulged in view, and the glance of his steely blue eyes was ruthless. It was death to speak.

"Ready, Kid!" choked the rancher.

The Kid swung himself upon the mustang. He rode close by the rancher.

"I guess I'll have to go without my guns," he remarked. "Sheriff Watson's got my old guns safe in his office in Frio. P'r'aps I'll call on him some time for them."

Mezcal Pete chuckled.

"Ride!" muttered the rancher. The position was gall and wormwood to Old Man Dawney.

"So-long, Kid, and good luck!" sang out Mezcal Pete.

"So-long, old hoss!"

And the Rio Kid and Old Man Dawney rode away from the ranch side by side, and the Double Bar punchers round the corrals waved their Stetsons and shouted a cordial good-bye as the Kid went.

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THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The Rio Kid's Farewell!

"HALT right here!"

The Rio Kid pulled in his mustang.

Five miles lay between them and the ranch-house; round them lay the rolling prairie, dotted with scrubby sage-bush, and herds of steers, but with no human being in sight. Old Man Dawney had not uttered a word during the ride, but his grim, savage face told of his repressed rage. He drew rein.

"We part here, feller," said the Kid, smiling. The gun reappeared in his hand. "I guess Sheriff Watson and all the ginks in Frio will never rope me in now."

The gun came up to a level.

"And what's to stop me from getting back on you now, George Dawney, as I always said I would?"

His eye glittered mockingly along the levelled barrel at the rancher.

George Dawney sat like a statue on his claybank. Only a slight pallor showed on his bronzed face.

"What about it?" jeered the Kid.

"Shoot, and be durned to you!" said the rancher grimly.

The Kid laughed and thrust the revolver into his holster.

"You're a hard case, Old Man Dawney," he said. "Harder'n your saddle-leather, I opine. I told you I never fingered the pay-roll that day long ago, and that a bunch of Greasers had it. You never believed me, and you don't believe me now. I'm goin' to make you."

The rancher shrugged his shoulders.

The Rio Kid drew the roll of notes from his pocket. He tossed the roll across to the rancher. Old Man Dawney, in amazement, caught it. He stared blankly at the Kid.

"You gink!" said the Kid. "You sure allowed that I was cleaning out your safe. Well, there's your dollars—twenty thousand. Is that good enough for you, George Dawney?"

The rancher only stared.

The Rio Kid laughed loud and long, as he looked at the rancher's amazed face.

"I tell you I was jestin'," he said. "You figured out that I'd touch your dirty dollars. Take them and ride, rancher."

The Kid swung round his mustang, and the rancher still sat the claybank and stared.

But as the Kid rode, Old Man Dawney called out:

"Kid!"

The Rio Kid looked back, with a grin.

"Are you satisfied now, feller?" he drawled.

The rancher looked at the thick roll of notes in his hand. The Kid had tossed the twenty thousand dollars back to him, as if the roll was so much dirt.

Old Man Dawney's face changed. He was slow to believe, but he had to believe at last.

"Kid, I'm a hard man, as you say, and perhaps I was hasty in believing that against you. But——"

"You was hasty," said the Kid, "and you was hard—hard as rock. You'd believe it still, if I hadn't made you give in. I tell you again that I never touched the pay-roll that day, and a gang of Greasers held me up and pouched it. You ought to have taken my word."

"I believe you now, Kid," said the rancher, with an effort. "Perhaps I was hard. I was kinda mad with you, and you gave me lip. But I take your word now, Kid; and by the holy smoke, I'll take you back into the Double Bar outfit if you'll ride with me. You've given me a lesson, Kid, and I'm sure sorry I ever doubted you. Ride back and join the Double Bar again."

For a moment the Kid seemed to waver. But he shook his head, with a bitter smile on his handsome face.

"Too late, rancher," he said. "I ain't the puncher I was when you boosted me. I'm the fire-bug that's wanted by every sheriff and town marshal between the Pecos and the Rio Grande. I guess Watson wouldn't leave me to punch cows peaceable on the Double Bar. It's too late, feller. I guess it's me for the pen, if I hang around where them ginks can find me."

"I'll stand by you, Kid. The Double Bar outfit will stand by you to a man!"

The Kid shook his head again.

"Too late, rancher. But if you figure to part friends, there's my fist on it."

He rode back and put out his hand. Old Man Dawney grasped it. The hard face was no longer hard.

"Kid, come back with me!"

"Too late. I'm hittin' the trail pronto."

And the next moment the Kid was galloping. George Dawney, sitting his horse, watched him out of sight in the bunch-grass, and then turned and rode back to the Double Bar, a deep cloud on his face, and many thoughts working in his mind.

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THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
A Late Caller!

"COME in!" growled the Sheriff of Frio.

The hour was late.

The Red Dog saloon in Frio was still in full blast, with naphtha lights flaring. But the rugged streets were dark and deserted. Sheriff Watson, in his office in the calaboose building, had heard a horseman dismount outside, and there was a thump at the door. The sheriff's brow was dark. That day he had been busy, and he was tired with hard riding. Old Man Dawney had sent him word that the Rio Kid was gone from the Double Bar, and saved the sheriff another visit to the ranch. Watson and his men had ridden far and hard, seeking a trace of the vanished Kid, but the wide plains had swallowed him up, and they had returned late to Frio, savage and disappointed. The sheriff was thinking it over glumly when the knock came at his door. He called to the late visitor to enter, hoping that it was news of the Kid. And it was—though not in the way that he hoped.

The door swung open.

Sheriff Watson leaped to his feet, reaching for his gun, as he found himself looking at a levelled Colt, with the Rio Kid's handsome face grinning behind it.

"The Kid!" gasped the sheriff.

"Put 'em up, sheriff!"

Slowly the sheriff's hands went up over his head. He glared at the cool Kid as if he could eat him.

"You here—in Frio?" he panted.

"I guess I've called for my guns, sheriff," said the Kid cheerily.

"Gee!" muttered the sheriff.

"You'll hand them over," grinned the Kid. "I'm used to those guns, and I want them. Put 'em over, sheriff, and don't try any gun-play if you want to see the sun rise again on Frio."

He stepped forward, took the sheriff's Colt, and stamped his heavy boot on it on the floor.

"I'm waiting, sheriff."

Without a word Sheriff Watson took the Kid's walnut-butted, notched guns from a locker and handed them over. The Kid slipped them into his holsters with a laugh.

"Thanks, sheriff. You're sure an obliging cuss, when a galoot has a bead on you. So-long, sheriff! If you want to see me again, follow me up into the Hueeas, and you'll find me at home."

He tramped out of the sheriff's office, leaving Watson dumb with rage and astonishment. There was a clatter of hoofs as the Kid rode away across the plaza. Watson rushed to the door and tore it open and roared.

"It's the Kid—the Rio Kid!"

A horseman rode into the flaring light of the Red Dog saloon. He rode with his knees gripping his mustang, and a .45 in either hand. Bang! Bang! Bang! rang the revolvers as he rode by the saloon, and the bullets crashed through the windows of the Red Dog. There was a rush and a roar.

"The Rio Kid!"

Guns blazed and roared in the street, but only the beat of galloping hoofs answered. The Rio Kid had said his emphatic farewell to Frio, and he was gone, laughing aloud as he hit the trail for the open plains.

THE END.

Another Thrilling Yarn of the RIO KID next week, chums, entitled:

"THE TRAIL OF DEATH!"

Be sure you do NOT miss it!