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The POPULAR

EVERY TUESDAY.

Week Ending Dec. 1st, 1928. New Series No. 514.

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WESTERN THRILLS GALORE!

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

THE VENGEANCE OF CHIEF MANY PONIES!

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

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Chief Many Ponies Hits the Trail!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jake Watson raised his hand and pointed to the prairie.

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

"Wah!" grunted the Indian.

His black eyes gleamed ferociously at the sheriff.

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

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

"Drop it!"

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

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

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

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

Unregarding, the Apache stalked on.

Bang!

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

Bang!

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

"Wah!" ejaculated Chief Many Ponies.

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

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Friend in Need!

"SHO!" ejaculated the Rio Kid.

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

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

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

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

The Kid stopped and looked at him.

"Hurt?" he asked.

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

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

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

The Apache silently indicated his leg.

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

"Chief Watson."

The Kid whistled.

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

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

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

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

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

The Apache nodded.

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

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

"Wah!"

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

The Indian looked at him silently.

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

"Wah!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Little paleface good to Injun."

The Kid chuckled.

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

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

The Kid whistled.

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

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

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

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Snaring the Sheriff!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"An Injun!" he repeated.

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

Watson only scowled.

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

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

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

"Shall I tell him to quit?"

"Nope! Turn him in."

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

The Apache shuffled in.

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

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

"Injun know much!"

"Spill it!" snarled the sheriff.

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

Jake Watson bounded to his feet.

"Jumping gophers!" he gasped.

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

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

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

"You've seen the Kid?"

Chief Many Ponies nodded.

"You savvy where to lay hands on him?"

Another nod.

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

"Little chief hide in chaparral."

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

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

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

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

Chief Many Ponies shook his head decidedly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"When did the Kid ride?"

"Morning."

"And he's away for three days?"

The Indian nodded.

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

The Indian reflected, and held up four fingers.

"Hours?"

"Chief Watson has spoken."

"Four hours—in the saddle or afoot?"

"Injun go afoot; Chief Watson ride."

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

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

The sheriff grinned.

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

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

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Fearful Fate!

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Getting close?" asked Jake.

Chief Many Ponies nodded.

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

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

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

It was long before his senses came back.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The sheriff's tanned face grew pale.

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

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

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

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

. . . . .

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

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

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

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

"Sho!" said the Kid.

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

The Kid started.

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

Chief Many Ponies nodded.

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

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

He rose to his feet.

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

The Kid drew a deep breath.

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

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

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

THE END.

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

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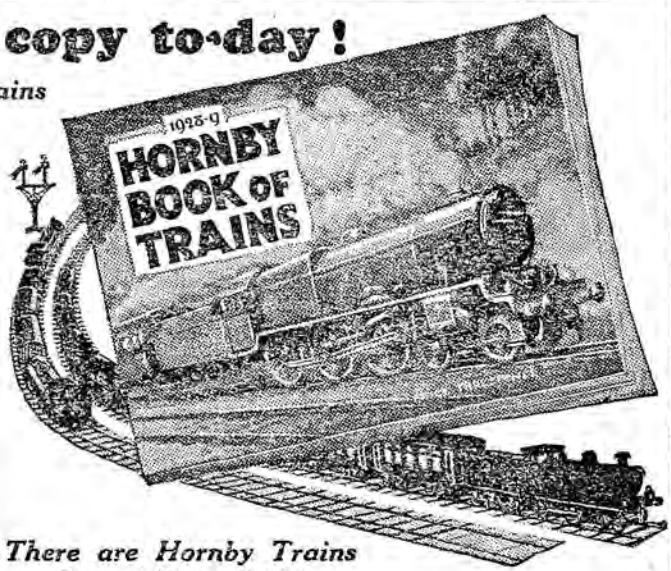

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