LOST IN THE DESERT!

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

The DEATH RIDE!

by RALPH REDWAY

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

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Kid's Way!

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chief Many Ponies came silently to his side.

The Kid eyed him grimly.

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

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

The Kid laughed shortly.

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

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

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

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

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

"Sure!"

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

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

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

"I guess I'm going to try."

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

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

The Apache's hand was at his girdle.

The Kid whipped out a six-gun.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Apache watched him silently.

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

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

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

Chief Many Ponies drew a deep breath.

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

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The Death Ride!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Frio sheriff stared round him with hopeless eyes.

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

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

The sheriff groaned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He groaned again.

Gallop, gallop, gallop!

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

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

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

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

Sheriff Watson raised his head to look back.

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

Gallop, gallop!

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

It was a mirage of the desert.

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

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

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

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

Clatter, clatter!

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

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
A Tough Trail!

"OLD hoss, we're beat!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then he swung himself into the saddle.

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

The mustang broke into a loping gallop

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

"Gee-whiz!" ejaculated the Kid suddenly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He caressed the mustang's glossy neck.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He pushed on up the ravine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Gee-whiz!" ejaculated the Kid suddenly.

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

He was not three hundred yards from the Kid.

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

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

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

"Oh shucks!" growled the Kid.

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

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

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

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

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

(*Continued on next page.*)

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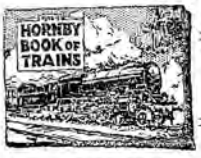

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The black broncho pitched heavily forward on its knees, fell on its side, and lay still.

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

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

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Sheriff and Outlaw!

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

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

Cry after cry broke from the tormented man.

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

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

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

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

Gallop, gallop!

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

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

Gallop, gallop!

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

Gallop, gallop!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Jest the Kid, sheriff."

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

The Kid laughed.

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

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

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

"Sure!"

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

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

"You trailed me here?"

"Sure!"

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

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

The Kid grinned.

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

"I'll get *him*!"

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

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

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

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

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

(*Continued on page 27.*)

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Dalton frowned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Peter Cuthbert stared.

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

Jimmy Silver raised his eyebrows.

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

"Why—what—where——"

Peter Cuthbert fairly spluttered.

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

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

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

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

THE END.

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

"THE DEATH RIDE!"

(Continued from page 22.)

The sheriff's hard face worked.

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

"Forget it!" said the Kid lightly.

. . . . . .

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

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

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

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

"Sho!" *murmured the Kid.*

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

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

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

THE END.

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

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