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The OUTLAW RANCHER!

RALPH REDWAY

The Rio Kid sets out to prove that a well-known rancher in the district is an outlaw, hold-up man, and a villain. Once the Kid puts his nose to a trail he never lets up until the end, whatever the obstacles that may lie in his path!

OUR ROARING WESTERN YARN STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
A Bird's-eye View of a Hold-Up!

"OH, shucks!" snapped the Rio Kid.

His eyes gleamed with anger.

The Kid lay on the grassy summit of a high bluff, overlooking the wide waters of the Rio Claro. In a hollow near by him his mustang was contentedly cropping the grass. Neither the Kid nor his horse was to be seen on the skyline by any puncher who might have been riding the prairie trails. In the neighbourhood of the cow-town of Gunsight the Kid had the best of reasons for keeping himself out of view.

Lying in the grass on the top of the bluff, the Kid was staring across the wide river that rolled before him. A mile lower down the Rio Claro was a ford, where the water shallowed over sandy reaches. But below the bluff where the boy outlaw lay, it was wide and deep, and flowed between high, clayey banks. On the other side ran the stage trail from Claro to Gunsight. For some time the Kid had been idly watching the two-horse hack coming from the direction of Claro, at first a speck in the distance, but now almost opposite the bluff.

The hack had suddenly halted.

The Kid saw the reason. From a clump of cottonwoods on the other side of the stage trail a horseman had pushed out—a horseman whose face was masked, and whose hand held a levelled revolver. It was a hold-up, taking place in full view of the Rio Kid, though at such a distance that the actors in it were like toy figures to his eyes.

"Of all the dog-goned pesky luck!" said the Kid, in utter disgust.

For, small as was the figure of the masked horseman in the distance across the river, the Kid knew it only too well. He knew the grey mustang with the left shoulder painted black to imitate his own steed. He knew that he was looking at the trail bandit who had borrowed his name, and who had made himself the terror of the Gunsight country under the name of the Rio Kid. And the Kid knew—what no other man in Texas knew—that the outlaw's mask hid the face of a rancher well known at Gunsight—Poker Poindexter, of the Poindexter Ranch.

It was intensely exasperating to the Kid.

For weeks he had haunted the prairie trails, watching for a chance at the man who was using his name. It was not an easy task the Kid had set himself. All Gunsight was thirsting for the blood of the boy outlaw—and he remained in the country at the risk of his life. Every cowman in the country believed that the desperate trail-robber was the Rio Kid, and the Kid would have been given short shrift had he fallen into the hands of the ranchers. But he was resolved not to hit the trail till he had brought his enemy to book. Hold-ups and shootings were laid to the Kid's account. He was credited with all the desperate deeds of the man who used his name. The Kid aimed to rope in the secret bandit, and prove to all Gunsight that the man was not himself. Sooner or later, he figured, he would get the galoot, catching him in the act of some desperate deed, and proving

beyond doubt that the masked outlaw was not the Rio Kid. And now he had spotted the trail bandit at work—with a broad river flowing between, which made it impossible to get at him.

The Kid gritted his teeth.

The hold-up across the river was out of pistol-shot from the bluff where the Kid lay. The Kid's hand had gone by instinct to a gun; but he relinquished it. He lay and watched, with a frowning brow and gleaming eyes.

From the distance across the river not a sound came to his ears, not even the tramping of the horses as the stage-driver pulled them in. There were four or five passengers in the hack, but there was no sign of resistance being offered to the masked man. That he would shoot, and shoot to kill at the first sign of it, they knew only too well, and they descended from the hack, lined up by the trail, and held up their hands like lambs. The masked man was getting away with it as easy as rolling off a log. The passengers from Claro were not likely to start anything with the man who had shot the marshal of Gunsight and three or four other pilgrims since he had commenced operations in the valley of the Rio Claro.

The Kid made a movement. His rifle was in its leather case on the mustang in the hollow behind him. The rifle would carry the distance.

But he shook his head, and settled down to watch. The hack and its horses, the driver, and the bunch of passengers with their hands up, were between him and the masked rider, and the distance was great even for a crack shot like the Kid. He did not want to spill the juice of one of the passengers from Claro by a mischance, or knock the driver from his perch. And other thoughts were already working in the Kid's mind. He controlled his impatience, and watched quietly from the top of the bluff.

Under the masked man's revolver the passengers from Claro were ponying up their money with terrified haste. The driver sat motionless in his seat, chewing tobacco while he waited for the outlaw to get through. He looked cheerfully indifferent to what was going on. But the passengers were in a state of terrified flutter, obvious to the Kid's keen eyes, even at the distance that made them like dolls to the view. They seemed more than eager to satisfy the trail bandit.

"That galoot sure has got that crowd where he wants them," the Kid muttered, with a curl of the lip. "They sure ain't honing for trouble with the guy they figure is the Rio Kid. Shucks!"

The passengers were getting back into the hack.

The Kid had only a partial view of the masked horseman, half-hidden from sight by the hack. But he made out that the trail bandit was stowing away his plunder in a grip that was buckled to his belt. From his motions the Kid reckoned that he had made a good haul. He had not troubled to go through the victims, which implied that they had handed out enough to satisfy him. It was not likely that any man in the crowd would have kept anything back, at the risk of the outlaw's revolver.

The horseman made a sign, the driver cracked his whip, and the hack rolled on down the river, towards the ford which it had to cross to reach Gunsight.

For a moment the masked horseman remained in the trail, looking after the departing vehicle, full in view of the Kid.

But it was only for a moment.

He turned instantly to the belt of cottonwoods at the side of the trail, pushed into the trees, and vanished.

Far away down the Rio Claro the hack disappeared, going at a gallop for the ford.

The stage-trail was deserted again; no sign of life met the watching eyes from the bluff on the south side of the river. The Kid might almost have fancied that the scene he had watched had been a vision of the imagination.

"Oh, sho!" growled the Kid. "I been trailing that galoot high and low, and now he sure holds up a durned hearse under my eyes, and gets away with it. But I guess he ain't riding home safe with that loot. No, sir! I reckon them jaspers figure that he's hitting for the chaparral, or the Mexican border as fast as his cayuse can raise the dust. They sure don't figure that he's hitting for the Poindexter Ranch, and that they'll see him cavorting around Gunsight this evening, with his mask off, dog-gone him. But he ain't getting away this time, I guess."

The Kid had been thinking it out while he watched. He knew, if no other galoot knew, that the masked outlaw was Poker Poindexter. He knew that the trail robber would not be hitting for a hiding-place in the chaparral or across the border in Mexico; but that when he had washed the paint from his disguised horse and concealed the black mask, he would ride back to the Poindexter Ranch unsuspected. A few weeks ago the Kid had been a stranger in the Gunsight country; but since then he had learned his way about. For many miles either way the Rio Claro could not be crossed, excepting at the ford where the trail ran to Gunsight. The ford was a mile away; Gunsight lay five miles farther on down the river. After the hack was safely gone the Kid figured that it was likely that the trail bandit would ride across the river at the ford. If he was hitting for his ranch there was no other way for him.

The Kid left the grassy top of the bluff and called to his mustang. He rode down the bluffs and followed the direction of the river.

If Poker Poindexter rode across at the ford he would find the Kid waiting for him there.

He would have discarded his mask, washed the disguising paint from his horse; but he would have the plunder of the hack stacked in his grip—and that would be enough to cook his goose, the Kid figured.

In a clump of mesquite, in sight of the ford, the Kid took cover and waited.

He waited with his eyes on the ford. The hack had passed and disappeared towards Gunsight. The Kid had long to wait. He knew that he might be waiting in vain; that the secret outlaw might not come. But it was the Kid's first chance of catching the desperado in the very act—the chance he had hitherto sought in vain—and he was patient—as patient as an Apache watching the trail for an enemy. He sat his horse, with his riata ready in his hand.

And his patience was rewarded at last.

There was a splashing of horse's hoofs in the shallow water of the ford.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Roped In!

POKER POINDEXTER rode down to the ford of the Rio Claro.

If he was the man who had held up the Claro hack a mile back on the trail there was nothing in his appearance to betray him.

His mustang, a handsome and powerful animal, was grey from nose to tail, with no speck of black on him; and the outlaw's horse had had a black muzzle—in imitation of the Rio Kid's well-known steed. The outlaw had worn goatskin chaps, as the Kid always did; but Poindexter wore no chaparejos over his well-cut riding-breeches. And there was no mask now on the handsome, dissipated face.

Any Gunsight galoot who had met Jim Poindexter on the trail would have exchanged greetings with him, never dreaming of suspecting how he had lately been occupied.

His raids were put down to the Rio Kid; and they had made the Kid the best-hated man in the section. Nobody was surprised that the Kid, hunted out of the Frio country, had located in the Gunsight section; and nobody dreamed that the masked outlaw was in reality, not the Kid at all, but a Gunsight rancher. The device of adopting the name and appearance of a well-known outlaw saved Poker Poindexter from the slightest danger of suspicion.

More than once, closely pursued on his lawless raids, he had shot down his pursuers; and the blood he had shed had been put to the Kid's account, and the Kid was hunted far and wide—Poindexter, with cool effrontery, leading his own ranch outfit to join in the hunt.

Only one difficulty had cropped up—the unexpected appearance of the Rio Kid himself in the Gunsight country. Poindexter had not looked for that, and it had disconcerted him.

That the Kid's feelings towards the man who had borrowed and blackened his name would be bitter he was well aware. But, after all, the Kid could not know his real identity; and, in any case, the Kid could not show up in any cow-town without being lynched for his double's deeds.

Poindexter was thinking of that as he rode across the ford; and he was thinking that if the Rio Kid had any boss-sense he would hit the trail out of the Gunsight country—indeed, had probably already done so. He did not suspect how near the Kid was to him in those moments.

He rode up the bank of the Rio Claro and out on the trail from the river towards the Gunsight ranches.

Whiz!

He was passing a clump of mesquite when he heard the well-known sound of a whizzing lasso.

Before he could even glance round him the noose descended over his shoulders.

There was a twang as the rope tautened.

Crash!

With his arms pinned to his sides by the gripping loop, Poindexter was plucked from his mustang's back.

He rolled in the grass behind the startled horse.

A fierce oath broke from his lips.

But he was not greatly alarmed for the moment. He had been roped in, but he could only think that it was a freak of some drunken cowboy.

He scrambled to his feet; but a jerk on the rope sent him reeling again, and he fell. He was not given a chance to loosen the loop that held him a prisoner.

The Rio Kid rode towards him, coiling up the lasso as he came.

While he coiled it, he kept it steadily taut, the noose as tight round the rancher as a band of steel.

Poindexter sprang up again, and again rolled over under a jerk of the rope.

He sat in the grass and glared at the rider who bore down on him.

His face paled as he recognised the Kid.

The Rio Kid dropped from his mustang, and, without a word, took another turn of the rope round the rancher and secured it.

Then Poindexter was allowed to get on his feet.

He stood staring at the Kid, his face black with rage.

"You gol-darned fire-bug!" he panted. "What's this game?"

The Kid smiled.

"I guess I've cinched you, Jim Poindexter," he remarked. "I sure had a hunch to pull a gun on you, you durned coyote! But I reckon what you want is a rope and a branch!"

"You don't mean——" gasped Poindexter.

"Forget it!" said the Kid. "If I wanted to make it last sickness for you, I guess I'd have pulled a gun. No, sir! I ain't stringing you up on this riata! I'm taking you where you belong! The Gunsight galoots are going to string you up."

"Are you mad?" hissed Poindexter. "You dare not ride into Gunsight!"

"I guess I'm putting you on your cayuse and taking you into town," answered the Kid coolly. "The Gunsight galoots won't have any hunch to get mad with me when I hand over to them the outlaw who's been raising Cain in this section and shot up their town marshal."

"You think——"

"I guess I know!" chuckled the Kid. "After I found that your grey mustang had had his shoulder painted black I reckon I was put wise. You're the fire-bug that borrowed my name, Poker Poindexter—and before sundown all Gunsight will know it!"

Poindexter stared at him.

"You reckon you'll get away with a yarn like that?" he panted. "I'm known in Gunsight; I've a crowd of friends there. You ride into the town and you'll be shot at sight!"

"I guess I'm taking the risk."

"You're mad!" hissed Poindexter. "You figure that any man in Gunsight will believe a word of it?"

"Sure!" grinned the Kid. "The *hack's at Gunsight now*; and I reckon the passengers will be able to pick out the durocks they handed over to you way back on the trail when they get a look into that grip of yours!"

Poindexter became pale as death.

"You see, hombre, I was around," grinned the Kid. "I saw the whole game, though I was too far away to chip in. I've been waiting for you to come back across the ford."

The rancher could not speak.

He knew now that it was not suspicion on the Kid's part. The puncher *from Rio knew!*

In the bag buckled to the rancher's belt were more than a thousand dollars he had taken from the passengers of the Claro hack. Some of the bills, at least, could be identified by the owners if inspected before they were placed in circulation.

Every man who had travelled in the hack was now in Gunsight, telling the story of the robbery on the trail. Every one of them could be called on to identify his property.

Poindexter's brain was in a whirl.

With reckless hardihood he had faced the dangers of a trail bandit, relying on the speed of his horse and his skill with his gun to save him while he was on a raid, and on the borrowed name of the Kid to protect him from suspicion. But he had never dreamed of a danger like this. For the moment the desperate rascal was unnerved.

He found his voice at last.

"You durned geck!" he muttered hoarsely. "You won't have time to tell that yarn in Gunsight. You'll be shot up before you can get it loose."

The Kid nodded.

"I allow there's a big risk" he assented. "The galoots are apt to be sudden on the shoot, after the way you've raised Cain in my name, you coyote. But I guess I'm taking the risk. I ain't letting this section believe that the Rio Kid has been robbing and shooting around here."

"You're mad!" panted Poindexter. "Look here, what is it to you, anyhow? You're an outlaw."

"Right, in once," agreed the Kid.

"I guess I'll share with you," muttered Poindexter. "I guess you can take the boodle, if you want. That's enough for you."

"It sure ain't enough," said the Kid. "I ain't touching stolen money, Jim Poindexter."

"And you an outlaw, wanted by all the sheriffs in Texas!" sneered the rancher.

"Right again," said the Kid cheerfully. "But I reckon I never wanted to be an outlaw hombre, and it was jest my durned luck. You've given me a bad name in this section, and I guess you're going to set it right."

"Dog-gone you——"

"I guess I ain't roped you in jest to chew the rag with you, feller," said the Kid. "You want to get on that hoss and hit the trail for Gunsight along with me."

He swung the rancher to the back of the grey mustang. A length of trail-rope secured Poindexter to the saddle.

With the riata in his grasp, the Rio Kid mounted his own horse and headed for Gunsight, leading his prisoner.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Fallen Among Foes!

THE Rio Kid's face was thoughtful as he rode across the prairie at an easy gallop, in the direction of the cow-town on the Rio Claro.

He was well aware of the risk he was running.

There were a heap of galoots in the cow-town who knew the Rio Kid by sight, and it was likely enough that guns would be drawn at the first glimpse of him. Poindexter, unsuspected in the cow-town, had friends there—plenty of them. It was quite on the cards that the Kid might be fighting for his life before he had a chance to tell the Gunsight men what he had come to tell them.

But it was the only way to clear his name of the black stain that the secret bandit had brought upon it. To deliver up the bandit, with the goods on him, was the only way, and the Kid had to take the risk.

He reckoned, too, that his act of riding into the cow-town and placing himself at the mercy of the citizens would be likely to get him a chance of speaking out before the trouble began. Once he was able to put the Gunsight crowd wise, all was well. He had only to make it clear that he was not the man who had been robbing and shooting on the trails, and to reveal the guilt of Poker Poindexter. Once Gunsight was convinced of the truth he would have friends there, instead of foes.

But there was plenty of danger in the enterprise, and the Kid knew it, though he did not shrink from it.

Poindexter's face was white as chalk as he rode, a bound prisoner, at the end of the lasso.

His adoption of the Kid's name had saved him from the faintest breath of suspicion, but it had been his undoing at the finish by bringing the Kid himself into the game. That was a danger of which he had never dreamed.

If the Kid had time to speak out he had no hope of escape. The stolen money was on him, and other evidence of the truth, as the Kid guessed easily enough. The materials with which he disguised his horse were hidden in his saddle-bags there was a black mask in an inside pocket. No hope—if the Kid had time to speak out. He could only hope that some hot-headed hombre would fire on the Kid before the boy outlaw had time to speak. And that hope was a frail reed to lean upon.

But in the depths of despair a sudden flash of hope came to the desperate rancher.

Ahead, on the grassy prairie, three Stetson hats bobbed over the high grass.

Three cow-punchers had emerged into sight from behind a timber island, and were riding directly towards them. One of them, a burly puncher, Poindexter recognised instantly as Tex Clew, the foreman of his own ranch, and the others were members of his outfit.

"Oh, shucks!" ejaculated the Kid.

He recognised the punchers at the same moment.

They had sighted the pair of riders and were galloping down on them, each man with a gun in his hand.

The Kid gritted his teeth.

He looped the riata to his saddle-bow and jerked the walnut-butted guns from his holsters. The crack of a revolver rang from the distance, and a bullet whizzed overhead. Tex Clew, and Mohave, and Sandy Jones had seen their boss, a bound prisoner, and Tex had recognised the Kid. The three punchers were galloping to the rescue, and they fired as they came.

Three to one, as the foes were, the Kid would have had little fear of a combat. But he did not want to fire on cow-punchers—men with whom all his own sympathies lay. The Kid was in an awkward corner.

He dropped from his horse, and stood behind the halted horse of the rancher. The oncoming cowboys ceased to fire. They could not hit the Kid without sending their bullets through their boss.

The three riders separated, to circle round the Kid and his prisoner.

The Kid waved his hand.

"Hold on, you-uns!" he shouted.

They were within hearing of his voice now.

"You pesky fire-bug!" roared Tex. "I guess we've got you dead to rights now. Come out from behind Mr. Poindexter, you white-livered skunk!"

"You durned mosshead!" retorted the Kid. "I guess I could drop you like a ten-pin, if I wanted. Pull in your horses and talk, or I'll sure let you have yours."

And the Kid fired and the Stetson hat went spinning from Tex's head. It was a warning.

"The next goes through your cabeza, you durned bonehead!" shouted the Kid. "Hold in your hosses, I tell you!"

The three punchers reined in.

There was no doubt that the Kid held the trump card for the moment. He was under cover of the rancher, and the punchers were full in his view and under his fire, and they knew the unerring aim of the Rio Kid.

"You let the boss loose, you pesky cow-thief!" roared Tex. "What you doing, roping in our boss?"

"You quit chewing the rag a spell and I'll sure put you wise," answered the Kid coolly.

"Ride him down!" yelled Poindexter furiously. "Shoot—shoot, you ginks! Never mind me—shoot him down!"

The Kid's hand struck the rancher across the mouth.

"Quiet, you!" he snapped. "By the great horned toad, you spill any more and I'll quiet you for keeps with the butt of a gun."

The three punchers, reining in their prancing broncbos at a short distance, eyed the Kid wolfishly. Only the danger of their boss kept them from a reckless rush at the boy outlaw.

"I guess I want to pow-wow with you-uns," said the Kid. "Heap time for shooting, if you want, later. You savvy?"

trail bandit. "Me. Help me! I order you——"

The butt of the Kid's revolver struck the rancher on the head, and he swayed in the saddle, half-stunned, and effectually silenced.

But at the same moment the punchers obeyed the rancher's orders. They came on at a reckless rush, spurring their bronchos, and firing The chance of explanation was gone—and the Rio Kid had to fight for his life.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Gun-Play!

"DOG-GONE it!" breathed the Kid.

It was bitter luck.

Had the punchers heeded him for a minute more the game would have been in his hands. Not a man on

A bullet grazed the rancher, and missed the Kid by an inch.

The Kid's shot in return did not miss. Sandy Jones went headlong from his saddle into the grass

"Dog-gone it!" muttered the Kid.

Over the high grass in the distance five or six Stetson hats were bobbing in sight. The firing had been heard far across the plain, and other punchers were galloping to the scene.

The Kid, with a black brow, cast loose the lasso from the half-stunned rancher, who swayed helpless. in his saddle. He mounted the black-muzzled mustang again.

The game was up and the Kid knew it. There was no chance of taking his prisoner into Gunsight now, and telling his tale. Nothing but a desperate fight against odds remained for the Kid, unless he hit the trail at his best speed.

CLOSE QUARTERS! The Kid dropped to the ground and stood behind the halted horse of the rancher. "Pull in your hosses!" he shouted to the oncoming cowpunchers. "Pull in, or I'll sure let you have yours!" And the Kid fired, sending the Stetson hat spinning off Tex's head as a warning. (*See Chapter* 3.)

"What you got to say, you geck?" snarled Tex.

"I got this to say: This here Poindexter rigged himself out to look like me and held up the Claro hack, across the river," said the Kid "He's got the goods on him now."

The punchers stared at him blankly.

"You loco?" gasped Ted.

"Sure not!" answered the Kid cheerfully. "What you reckon I was doing with the galoot? I ain't roped him in jest for his company. I was taking him into Gunsight."

"Search me!" said the amazed foreman.

"I guess I'm ready to ride on, with you galoots in company" said the Kid. "Ain't that fair? You fellers ride with me into town, and I'll prove what I say to all Gunsight."

Tex burst into a laugh.

"You want to tell us that our boss is the fire-bug that's been holding up and shooting around this section for six months past?" he demanded.

"Jest that!" said the Kid.

"Waal, carry me home to die! I reckon you're plumb loco if you mean it," said the foreman.

"Shoot him down!" screamed Poindexter. "I tell you to shoot him down! Are you afraid of one man?"

"Ain't I told you not to spill any more!" snapped the Kid, as the punchers made a movement. "Another word——"

"Help!" yelled Poindexter, reckless of anything at the Kid's hands, in his eagerness to seize the last chance of avoiding discovery, and the fate of the Poindexter's ranch suspected his secret, and had they known it, they would have seized him and lynched him as willingly as any other galoots in the section. And the evidence was there—more than enough to convince the most doubtful, had they listened to the Kid.

But to the ears of the punchers the accusation seemed utterly wild, and all they heeded was their boss' yell for help.

They came on furiously, firing, at the risk of hitting the swaying figure that screened the Kid.

Crack, crack, crack crack!

The Kid had to shoot now He had to shoot or be shot down, and the walnut butted gun came into swift action.

Tex Clew reeled in his saddle, and went plunging to the earth, and disappeared in the high grass.

The next moment Mohave plunged over, as his horse fell dead under a shot.

The Kid changed his position a little, to keep Poindexter between him and Sandy Jones, who was close to him now.

He wheeled his horse, and rode away to the west, spurring his mustang to a fierce gallop.

Mohave was on his feet again now, and firing. Bullets whistled dangerously close to the Kid as he galloped.

But in a few moments a fold of the prairie hid him from the puncher, and he rode on with set teeth.

Behind him came the thunder of hoofs.

Half a dozen punchers had ridden on the scene, and a shout from Mohave told them what was toward Without drawing rein, they galloped on in pursuit of the Rio Kid.

Twice they sighted him, at a distance, on the grassy prairie, and shouted and loosed off bullets, riding furiously in chase. The Rio Kid his teeth set, his brow black, rode his hardest, with the bunch of punchers in hot pursuit.

"They'll sure get him!" panted Mohave, staring after the chase till it disappeared in the distance over the rolling prairie.

"Get me loose, Mohave!" panted Poindexter.

"Sure, boss!"

The puncher ran to him and loosed the trail rope that bound him to his saddle.

Poindexter, with dizzy head, stared after the chase. It was vanishing into the distance to the west.

"They'll get him, boss!" said Mohave.

Poindexter did not feel so sure of that. But the Rio Kid was gone, whether he escaped or not, and the secret bandit was safe. The dreaded accusation, with proof to back it up, would never be made in the plaza of Gunsight.

Mohave eyed his boss curiously.

"The galoot sure was loco," he remarked. "He's sure got suthin' agin you, boss, to spin a yarn like that!"

Poindexter gritted his teeth.

"I'll make him pay for it!" he said savagely.

"You reckon he was toting you into Gunsight, like he allowed?" asked the puncher.

"Of course not!" snapped Poindexter. "He was heading for the chaparral, taking me a prisoner. I guess he was going to hold me to ransom."

"This here ain't the trail to the chaparral, boss. I guess he was riding straight for Gunsight when we raised him on the prairie."

"Don't chew the rag, Mohave!" snarled Poindexter. It seemed to him that the puncher's eyes lingered on him, not with suspicion, but with a strange curiosity.

For, when the puncher had time to think of it, there was no doubt that the Kid, with his prisoner, had been heading direct to Gunsight. His way could have led him nowhere else.

That, at least, was a circumstance that was likely to be discussed in the bunkhouse, with curious surmises. Poindexter would not have been sorry had the Kid's bullet killed Mohave instead of his broncho. Only too well he knew that all Gunsight wondered how he met his heavy gaming losses, and how he met the interest on the mortgage on the Poindexter ranch. Once suspicion was started——

"I guess the galoot's made it last sickness for Tex and Sandy Jones," said Mohave, and he turned away to look at the fallen men. "Gee-whiz! You, Tex, ain't you got yours?"

Tex Clew was staggering from the grass, passing his hand over his forehead, with a dazed look.

"Thunder!" he said. "I guess I've had a close call! I reckoned I'd got mine, sure!"

He felt his thick hair.

"Jest creased!" he said—"creased like an ornery steer! They say that the Rio Kid never misses, but he sure missed me!"

The bullet had passed close enough to stun the ranch foreman. Tex rubbed his head thoughtfully.

"They say he never misses," he repeated. "Dog-gone my cats! I sure reckon he jest creased me, and never wanted to lay me out!"

"He's killed Sandy!" said Poindexter bitterly!

"He sure ain't," said Mohave, raising Sandy Jones from the grass. "He's jest creased him, same as Tex!"

"Thunder!" said the foreman.

Sandy Jones opened his eyes, and stared. He passed a hand over his head.

"That Kid is sure some hombre with a gun!" said Mohave admiringly. "I guess he can put his lead jest where he wants."

"He shot to kill, you geck!" snarled Poindexter.

Mohave shook his head.

"I guess not, boss! I reckon the Rio Kid wouldn't have missed three times nohow. He shot my critter, and he creased Tex and Sandy. He never wanted to kill."

"That's a cinch," said Tex. "And we was riding him down and burning powder at him! I guess this sure gets my goat!"

The punchers were puzzled. The masked outlaw who rode in the name of the Rio Kid had never hesitated to shoot to kill. Six Gunsight men had fallen to his bullets since he had ridden the trails of the Gunsight country. Yet the Rio Kid, with the punchers riding him down and firing on him, had deliberately spared their lives. They knew it—as well as Poindexter knew it.

"Thunder!" said Tex slowly. "That Kid allowed that some other hombre had been riding in his name, when I met up with him in the chaparral. I guess it looks as if he was spilling the truth."

"They say in Frio that the Kid never would pull trigger if he could help it," said Mohave. "Sho! If some ornery fire-bug has been using his name, he's sure made a fool of all Gunsight."

"Nonsense!" rapped out Poindexter.

Tex looked at him.

"It ain't nonsense, boss," he said slowly. "We was shooting to kill, and the Kid let us off. He never wanted to spill our juice. That sure looks as if he ain't the fire-bug that's been riding the trails and shooting up galoots all over the section."

"It sure does!" said Mohave.

Poindexter breathed hard. From that belief, to belief in the accusation the Kid had made was only a step. It seemed to him that the eyes of the punchers lingered on the "grip" that was buckled to his belt—the bag that held the loot of the Claro hack. The Kid had said that he was the trail robber, and that he had the goods on him.

"Boss," said Tex slowly, "that kid outlaw was sure shooting off his mouth wild when he allowed that you was the fire-bug that's been raising Cain around Gunsight. No hombre on the ranch is going to believe that. It's sure pesky fooling. He said that you'd held up the Claro hack, and had the goods on you. There ain't a galoot in the cow country will take stock in that, and I guess you can make it clear, too. You can show up here and now that you ain't got *nothing on you that ain't your own, and* we can tell all Gunsight so, seeing with our own eyes, if that yarn should get round the town."

Poindexter felt a chill at his heart. There was evidence on him that would have made his own outfit string him up to a tree, if their eyes could have seen it.

He wheeled his horse.

"I guess you're forgetting your place, Tex Clew," he said. "You want to remember you're talking to your boss!"

"I guess——"

"That's enough!"

Poindexter put spurs to the grey mustang, and rode away towards his ranch at a gallop. Tex stared after him, and then looked at his comrades. Their startled eyes met his.

"Gee!" said Tex, with a deep breath.

The Rio Kid had failed; but he had not wholly failed. Poindexter, as he rode away, knew that he was under suspicion in his own outfit.

THE END.

(So far the Rio Kid has succeeded in his task of bringing the masked raider to book. But there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and lip, and the Kid has not yet finished his task. Don't miss next week's roaring Western yarn.)

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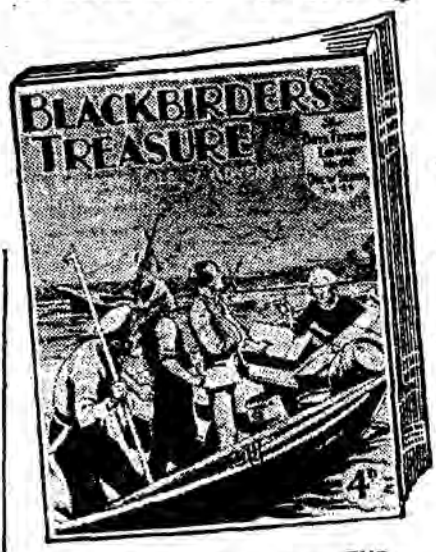

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