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IN THE GRIP OF A SANDSTORM!

A Thrilling Story of Schoolboys' Peril in the Desert!

THRILLS GALORE!

With everyone against him, and ready to shoot on sight, the Rio Kid risks his all in an attempt to prove to the men of Gunsight that he is not the Unknown Raider for whom they are looking!

FRIEND or FOE?

OUR ROARING LONG COMPLETE YARN OF THE WILD WEST, STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Hands Up!

DON FELIPE SANTANDER dropped the black Mexican cheroot from his lips, slid his dusky hand under the folds of his serape, and grasped a revolver. His swarthy face set, and his black eyes glittered at the horseman who had pushed out of the timber into the trail ahead of him. Don Felipe had come into Texas to buy cattle, and was heading for Gunsight, but he was ten miles from the cow-town, and his way lay across a wide prairie dotted with timber islands. In the Mexican buyer's saddle-bags was a sum that might well have tempted the raider, who for months past, had haunted the trails within a wide radius of Gunsight. And in the horseman who suddenly appeared ahead of him the man from Mexico had no doubt that he recognised the raider. He slackened speed and rode his pinto on at a walk, the revolver gripped in his hand under the ample folds of the serape.

The Rio Kid glanced at him and pulled in his mustang.

The Kid was not hoping to meet up with strangers on the trails. It was better for his health to keep out of sight while he was riding the Gunsight country. But the timber had hidden the Mexican, and the Kid was almost upon him before he saw him. But there was nothing to alarm the boy outlaw in the sight of a Mexican cattleman, and he drew in his horse beside the trail and saluted the stranger civilly as he came up. The Kid did not think much of "Greasers," as a rule, but his manners were always polite.

Don Felipe halted within a few paces of the Kid. Over his pinto's head his revolver suddenly leaped into view, aimed at the surprised face of the Rio Kid.

"Thunder!" said the Kid.

"Not this time, senor bandit!" grinned Santander, over his levelled gun. "Put up your hands, ladrone."

The Kid's handsome face flushed at the word.

But the Mexican's finger was on the trigger, and the gun looked him full in the face. Slowly, with a glint in his eyes, the Kid elevated his hands over his Stetson hat. For once the Kid had been taken off his guard. He had not looked for danger from a fat, swarthy Mexican cattleman.

"Say, feller, what's this game?" drawled the Kid. "You sure don't look like a hold-up man."

Don Felipe laughed, showing his white teeth through his black beard.

"You know me?" he asked.

"Not from Adam," answered the Kid, "and I'm sure honing to know why you're pulling a gun on me."

"But you were watching this trail for me?"

"Guess again," said the Kid.

"Todos los Santos!" said Don Felipe. "You cannot deceive me, senorito. You are the Rio Kid."

"Right in once," agreed the Kid cheerfully. "You figure on earning the thousand dollars they're offering for me at Frio?"

"No, senor. I figure on saving the dollars in my saddle-bags," answered the Mexican. "I have heard of you—they talk of nobody else at Gunsight. To-day you are riding without a mask on your face, but I know your horse, and I have been warned to watch out for you. Your description is well known, amigo."

The Kid knitted his brows.

He understood now.

Once more he was being called to account for the desperate reputation of the secret bandit who was riding the Gunsight trails under his name.

"Keep your hands up, senor," said Don Felipe. "I am giving you time to say your prayers before I fire."

"Shucks!" said the Kid. "You reckon you're going to shoot me up, you durned greaser?"

"Si, senor," answered the cattleman with perfect coolness. "I am not riding on to be shot in the back after I leave you. I know your ways, amigo. You have shot six men in this country in the last few months; but—por los Santos—you will not add another notch to your gun on my account."

The Kid breathed hard.

The revolver was steady; the Mexican's eyes glittered over it. He was ready to pull trigger at the first movement of the Kid to reach for a gun. The Rio Kid had been in many a tight corner, but he realised now that he was in one of the tightest corners of his life. But he was quite cool as he watched the cattleman's swarthy, determined face over the levelled gun.

"Say, feller," drawled the Kid, "you've sure got the drop on me, and it's your say-so. But I guess you want to let me put you wise before you begin burning powder. I'm telling you that I ain't the galoot that's been shooting-up the guys around Gunsight. That galoot is a rancher, who's borrowed my name to ride under. That's sure why he covers his face with a mask."

Don Felipe shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm giving you the straight goods, dog-gone you!" said the Kid. "That hombre paints his horse to look like mine, and sports goatskin chaps, and calls himself the Rio Kid; but if you saw him with his mask off you wouldn't see me."

Another shrug from the cattleman.

"You ain't taking that in?" asked the Kid.

"No, senor," grinned the Mexican.

"Dog-gone you," said the Kid angrily, "if I was here to hold you up, do you figure that I'd have let you get the drop on me like that-a-way?"

The Mexican looked perplexed for a moment. It was not like the desperate rider who had been raising Cain in the Gunsight country to ride into a trap as the Kid had done.

But Don Felipe shook his head.

He was not taking risks. He had ten thousand dollars in his saddle-bags and only one life to lose. And the masked man who robbed on the Gunsight trails was ruthless, and few men in the section doubted that if he was seen without his mask it was the face of the Rio Kid that would be revealed. If the Mexican was dealing with the desperate bandit there was only one thing that could save him and his dollars, and that was to shoot while he held the drop. And that was what Don Felipe

fully intended to do. If there was a doubt, he could not afford to give the Kid the benefit of it.

Neither could he afford to make an attempt to take the outlaw prisoner. The Rio Kid was known to be lightning on the draw, and half a chance would be enough for him.

"I am sorry, senor," said the Mexican with ironical politeness. "If, as you say, another ladrone has been riding under your name, you will suffer for his sins. I cannot take chances. I have but one life, and, carambo, it is dear to me! If you have a prayer to say, lose no time."

The Kid's eyes gleamed.

The man meant to shoot, and the levelled gun was only six feet from the Kid. To reach for a gun was futile; there was no time, even for the lightning-like Kid. The Kid did not reach for a gun.

"I guess it's your say-so," he drawled. "You've sure got the goods on me, greaser. Shoot, and be durned to you!"

Crack!

But even as the Mexican was pulling the trigger the Kid flung himself backwards over his horse's tail and went with a crash to the earth, and the bullet that had been intended to crash through his brain tore a lock of hair from his head and spun his hat across the trail. It grazed the skin, and a trickle of blood ran down the Kid's face.

"Carambo!"

A swift leap saved the Kid from a second bullet that crashed into the sun-baked earth an inch from him as he leaped.

The Mexican had no time to fire again; for the Kid's fist crashed into his ribs like a lump of iron, and hurled him from the saddle with a stunning crash to the earth.

The pinto flung up its head and dashed away down the trail with empty stirrups swinging.

The dazed Mexican raised himself on his elbow, his right hand still gripping his revolver. But the Kid's gun was in his hand now, aimed at the furious, swarthy face.

"Drop it!"

And Don Felipe Santander let his revolver fall into the grass.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Not a Hold Up!

"CARAMBO!"

"Aw, cut it out!" snapped the Kid. "Swearing won't buy you anything, you dog-goned greaser. Thunder, I guess I've a hunch to spill your juice. Get on your feet and, if you touch a gun, you sure get yours so sudden you'll never know what hit you."

Here's one of the FREE GIFTS—a drawing set—offered to members of the Birthday Club.

Don Felipe scrambled up.

"Put up your paws, feller."

The Mexican shrugged, and lifted his hands above his head. He was at the Kid's mercy now, and still dazed by the sudden turn of Fortune's wheel.

The Kid dabbed at the trickle of crimson on his face. His eyes gleamed at the man from Mexico.

"You dog-goned greaser!" he growled. "I guess there ain't a Mexican born yet that could put it over on me. But it sure was a close call. And now, why shouldn't I fill you full of holes, you goldarned geck?"

"Senor——" faltered the Mexican, his swarthy face growing white.

"Aw, forget it!" growled the Kid. "I ain't shooting, you durned locoed mosshead! Now, you figure that I'm that fire-bug that rides this section with a rag over his face, and calls himself by my name?"

The cattleman nodded.

"Well, I guess I'll prove up that I ain't, clear enough even for a bonehead like you," said the Kid, his good humour returning. "You was hitting for Gunsight?"

"Si, senor."

"To buy cattle, I guess?"

"Si, senor."

"And you got a good-sized roll in your rags?"

Santander nodded.

"Well, you goldarned gink, you can ride on to Gunsight, and take your roll with you," growled the Kid. "Pick up your gun, and get to your cayuse, and hit the trail."

The Mexican stared at him blankly.

"Senor——" he faltered.

The Kid picked up the cattle-buyer's revolver by the butt, and shoved it back into the holster under Santander's serape.

"I guess you'll want that, if you meet up with the galoot that's been riding under my name," he said.

The Mexican could only gasp.

"And I'll put you wise to this," added the Kid. "If Poker Poindexter, of Gunsight, knows that you're riding this trail with a big roll, you'll meet up with that fire-bug sure enough. I'm telling you that Poker Poindexter, of the Poindexter ranch, is the galoot who rides in a mask. You get me?"

Don Felipe stared.

"It is to the Poindexter ranch that I go, senor, to buy cattle," he said.

The Kid laughed grimly.

"Poindexter's expecting you to-day?" he demanded.

"Si, senor."

"Then you want to watch out, between here and Gunsight," grinned the Kid. "I guess if Poindexter's wise to it that you're riding the trail to-day with a fat roll, you'll want all your luck to get that roll safe into town."

The Mexican could only stare.

"But, senor——" he stuttered.

"Oh, quit chewing the rag, and beat it," interrupted the Kid. "I'm through with you."

The astonishment in the cattle-buyer's face was almost ludicrous. He could not doubt that his life and his roll were to be spared, as the Kid waved him away; but he did not understand. Poindexter he knew as a rancher who had sold him cattle more than once, and the Kid's accusation seemed wild to him. And though the Kid spared him, and spared his dollars, he did not believe that the outlaw of Frio was not the masked rider of the Rio Claro. He did not know what to think; and he could only stare at the Kid blankly.

The Kid made an impatient gesture.

"Beat it," he repeated. "There's your cayuse—beat it—and you can sure tell them jaspers in Gunsight that the Kid ain't the all-fired fire-bug they think he is."

"Si, senor," gasped the Mexican.

His pinto had stopped at a distance on the plain, and was cropping the grass. The Mexican started towards the horse, but with more than one backward glance.

Plainly the fear was in his mind that the outlaw was somehow fooling him, and he more than half-expected a shot to ring out.

The Kid watched him grimly.

He had set himself the task of proving that the bandit who used his name was not himself. If he had doubted that the task was difficult, he realised it now: for the cattle-buyer from Mexico, although his life and his dollars were spared, still doubted him. Again and again the Mexican glanced back in doubt and uneasiness, his look betraying only too plainly that he believed this was some trick to serve some unknown purpose of the trail-robber.

He reached his horse at last and leaped into the saddle.

Instantly he set spurs to the animal and dashed away at top speed.

The Kid smiled a grim smile. The man was not giving him a chance to change his mind. The Mexican rode hard, and took a course that placed the timber island between himself and the boy puncher of Frio.

"The pesky gink!" growled the Kid.

A TRICKY CUSTOMER! "Shoot, and be durned to you!" drawled the Kid. Crack! But even as the Mexican was pulling the trigger, the Kid flung himself backwards over his horse's tail, and went with a crash to the ground. (*See Chapter* 1.)

The galloping hoofs died away on the prairie: the Mexican vanished beyond the timber.

He was gone—and gone in the belief that he had narrowly escaped the ruthless trail-bandit of the Gunsight country. That was all the impression the Kid had made on the mind of Don Felipe Santander.

The Kid rubbed his head where the Mexican's bullet had grazed the skin.

"The dog-goned geck!" Goldarn him and all greasers!" growled the Kid. "But I reckon he will be put wise. If Poker Poindexter knows he's on this trail with a big roll, he won't get through to Gunsight without being held up. That's a cinch."

The Kid remounted his mustang.

He knew—and he alone—that Poindexter was the secret bandit. And his chance had come at last for getting the goods on the desperado who had used his name and blackened it in the sight of all men. He rode at a gallop in the direction the Mexican cattle-buyer had taken.

It was impossible to keep the man in sight. The country was one of high grass and rolling ridges, broken by timber islands and bunches of post-oaks. But the track of the Mexican's horse in the grass was more than enough for the Kid. Once or twice he had a glimpse of the cattle-buyer's big sombrero bobbing over the grass a good distance ahead. The Mexican was heading for Gunsight as fast as his pinto could stride, perplexed by his escape, but keen to give the outlaw no second chance.

That he would reach Gunsight safe the Kid did not believe for a moment. The Kid would have laid a hundred dollars to a red cent that the masked rider was laying for him on the trail. The dollars in the cattle-buyer's saddle-bags were a prize that the desperado would never miss, if he knew—and he knew, since Poker Poindexter knew.

Suddenly, from the rolling plain ahead, came the loud bark of a revolver.

The Kid laughed grimly.

The Mexican's trail, before him, ran into a timber island, shadowed by big cottonwoods. And the bark of the revolver told the Kid that that clump of timber was the cover the masked outlaw had picked for holding up the buyer, who was going to Poindexter's ranch with dollars in his saddle-bags. A gun leaped into the Kid's hand, and he gave his horse the spur.

"Old hoss, I guess we've got a cinch on that fire-bug!" said the Kid, and he dashed on at full gallop.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Man in the Mask!

"NUESTRA SENORA!" stuttered Don Felipe Santander.

He was taken utterly by surprise.

Danger, he believed, was behind him; and he was riding through the timber at a gallop, where the trail wound under the vast branches of tall cottonwoods, anxious only to put a greater distance between himself and the outlaw he had escaped. Danger ahead he did not dream of. But it was ahead the danger lay.

From an opening in the timber a horseman with a mask on his face emerged into view, with revolver raised.

Santander stared at him. The levelled revolver was a warning; but the Mexican did not halt. He drove the long Mexican spurs into the pinto's flanks, and dashed on desperately, risking his life to save his roll. The revolver rang, and the pinto made a convulsive leap, and crashed down in the grass. Santander was hurled half-stunned from the saddle.

"You durned greaser!" came a savage voice from under the mask, as the horseman rode closer, his eyes glittering at Don Felipe through the holes in the mask. "Put up your paws, you geck, afore I drive a bullet through your cabeza!"

The Mexican struggled dazedly to his feet. He lifted his hands over his head. His horse lay dead in the trail, killed instantly by the bullet that had crashed into its brain. The gleam in the masked rider's eyes told that he was inclined to send a second bullet crashing through the Mexican's head, and Felipe Santander knew that his life hung by a thread.

He made no effort to reach the gun, which the Kid had replaced in his belt under the serape. His dusky hands went promptly over his sombrero.

"Senor! Hold your hand!" he gasped. "I will not resist."

The masked man laughed scoffingly.

"I guess you're wise, you gol-darned greaser! I reckon you wouldn't live long, if you aimed to pull on the Rio Kid!"

The Mexican started convulsively.

"The Rio Kid!" he gasped.

"Sure!"

"You—you—you, senor, you are the Rio Kid!" stuttered the Mexican.

"I guess that's what they call me, to home in the Frio country, and if you've heard of me, you sure know that you better not play any tricks!" snapped the masked man.

"Por todos los Santos!" gasped the Mexican.

He stared at the man. He was of slim build, not unlike the Kid. The mark of his grey mustang was black; the animal looked a twin to the Kid's steed. He wore goatskin chaps, like the Frio puncher. There was a band of silver nuggets round his Stetson hat, the well-known sign of the Rio Kid. But for his late meeting with the Kid, a few miles back on the prairie trail, Don Felipe would have had no doubt. But he knew now that the masked man was lying; he knew that this could not be the Rio Kid, whom he had left behind him on the trail.

The Kid had told him the truth; that a secret bandit was riding in his name. Felipe Santander knew that now.

The masked man eyed him grimly.

"I guess I ain't no time to waste!" he snapped. "Jud Blake is riding the prairie to-day, I reckon, and I ain't no hunch to meet up with the marshal of Gunsight. I reckon I know you, greaser—you're Felipe Santander from Chihuahua, and I guess you've got a good-sized roll. Where you stacked it, say?"

The Mexican made a gesture towards the fallen horse.

"In them saddle-bags?" demanded the outlaw.

"Si, senor."

"I guess you want to sort it out, and you want to do it quick!" snapped the man in the black mask. "Pronto, hombre!"

"Si, senor!" faltered Don Felipe.

"Keep in mind that I've got you covered," growled the trail-robber. "You try any tricks, greaser, and you get yours sudden."

"I am at your mercy, senor," said Santander.

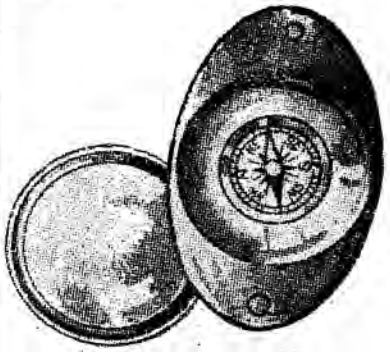
"Sort out that roll, pronto."

The Mexican stepped to the body of the horse, and knelt in the grass beside it. The revolver in the outlaw's hand bore full upon him, a ready finger on the trigger. The Mexican's manner was all obedience; but there was a glint in his black eyes. The loss of the dollars in his saddle-bags meant ruin to the cattle-buyer; and with all his submissive look, he was prepared to take the most desperate of chances.

He fumbled at the saddle-bags. The horseman rapped out an impatient oath.

"Pronto, I'm telling you!"

"Si, senor."



A JOLLY USEFUL PRESENT—a combined magnifying-glass and compass, which is included in the list of Gifts for POPULAR readers. (*See page* 2.)

Through the holes in the mask, the horseman's eyes glittered to and fro. The trail, winding through the timber, allowed little view in either direction. It was a good spot for a hold-up, hidden from all eyes. At the same time, any rider on the trail could not have been seen till he was close at hand. And the outlaw knew that the marshal of Gunsight was riding the prairie that day—there was little that went on in the cow-town that he did not know.

He was almost feverishly impatient.

"Pronto!" he snarled. "By the big thunder, you waste one second, greaser, and I'll lay you in the trail as dead as Abe Lincoln."

The Mexican submissively opened the saddle-bags. From one of them he drew a thick wad of notes, and the eyes through the mask glittered at the sight of it. He stepped to the horseman and held it up—and at the same instant he reached for the gun hidden under his serape and flashed it out.

The masked man fired instantly.

It was a desperate attempt—and it failed. Before the Mexican could pull trigger, the masked man's bullet struck him down.

With a loud cry, Felipe Santander fell, his revolver dropping from one hand, the wad of notes from the other, into the grass.

The horseman glared at him over the smoking gun.

"I guess you would have it!" he snarled.

The Mexican sank bank, with a deep groan. A crimson stream reddened the fold of the serape over his breast, and his dusky face was white.

With a curse, the horseman sprang to the ground, to help himself to the loot. At the same moment there came the thunder of horse's hoofs on the trail through the timber.

The masked man started, and spun round towards the sound.

The approaching rider was not yet in sight, but was close at hand, screened, so far, by the trees along the winding trail. A fierce oath dropped from the masked man.

A second more, and the Rio Kid was riding down on him, and the gun in his hand was rattling. But the masked man had already leaped back into the saddle, and dashed his spurs into the flanks of his mustang. Even as the Kid burst into sight and began to fire, the masked man rode desperately in the opposite direction, and vanished round the winding turn of the trail.

In the grass lay the wad of notes, unheeded, close by the nerveless hand of the man he had shot down. A second's delay would have sealed the outlaw's fate, but he did not delay the fraction of a second. He rode madly, plying whip and spur, and vanished from the sight of the Rio Kid round the winding trail, though, swift as he was, the rapid shots of the boy puncher went very close.

The Kid's glance turned on the man who lay in his blood in the grass of the trail. His impulse was to ride on, in hot pursuit of the outlaw, to ride him down and force him to stop and fight for his life. It was the chance he had long sought, and swift as the masked man's steed was, the Kid would have relied on his mustang to win the desperate race. But as he reached the spot where the cattle-buyer lay, the Kid drew rein.

The outlaw had shot down the hapless man, and to leave him weltering in his blood, unaided, was not the Kid's way. Reluctantly he drew rein, and with the fleeing hoof-beats of the outlaw still in his ears, bent over the Mexican. If the man was dead, it was but a moment lost—a moment that would be swiftly regained by the fleet-footed mustang. But a groan from the Mexican told that he lived.

"Dog-gone it!" growled the Kid.

He stood for a moment undecided. The hoof-beats of the masked trail-robber were faint in the distance now. He was riding madly to escape, and beyond the timber lay the open plain. A few minutes, and he would be riding the prairie, screened by the dotted timber and the clumps of mesquite. The Kid made a movement to remount his horse, but he turned back to the Mexican. Santander's eyes were fixed on him. The Kid could not resist that appeal.

"Dog-gone the luck!" he snapped.

"Senor," came a faint whisper from the Mexican.

The Kid sighed. To let his enemy escape was bitter, but the Kid would not stand for deserting a wounded man—perhaps dying. He dropped on his knees in the grass beside the cattle-buyer.

Santander tried to speak again, but his voice failed. He sank back heavily in the grass, and his eyes closed. The Kid, whose life had taught him something of rough surgery, stripped aside the serape and the velvet jacket under it, and examined the wound in the cattle-buyer's breast. That the Mexican would live, with care, was likely, but it was plain that only prompt care could save him. With his own neck-scarf, torn in strips, the Kid staunched the flow of blood, and bound up the wound. He worked swiftly and carefully, and all that he could do for the wounded man was methodically done; and while he tended the outlaw's victim the hoof-beats of the masked man died away in the distance and were lost.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
A Close Call!

THE Rio Kid rose to his feet.

He had done all he could, and he had saved the life of the Mexican cattle-buyer. But Don Felipe Santander lay senseless in the grass, and the Kid was perplexed. To lift him on a horse was to reopen the wound; all that could save him now was to be carried in a litter to Gunsight, where the cowboy doctor could tend him. But that was not in the Kid's power, and to ride into Gunsight to bring help for him was to ride into a hornets' nest.

"I guess this has got me beat!" growled the Kid.

But the Kid was not given time to think out that problem. There was a sudden shout from the timber.

"Put 'em up!"

"Oh, shucks!" ejaculated the Kid.

Three men had leaped out from the cottonwoods, and three levelled revolvers covered the Kid. Half-way to his gun his hand stopped, just in time to save his life. With a grim face the Rio Kid put up his hands and faced the marshal of Gunsight and his men.

"You sure win, Jud Blake," he said coolly.

"Keep 'em up!" said the marshal, finger on trigger. "We've got you now, by the great horned toad!"

"You sure have," said the Kid bitterly, "and you've sure got the big bonehead of Texas, marshal."

The three Gunsight men gathered round him—Jud Blake, the marshal, and Tex Clew and Mohave, of the Poindexter Ranch. While the marshal held his gun almost jammed in the Kid's face, Tex and Mohave disarmed him. And Tex ran a trail-rope round him, and bound his arms to his sides. The Kid made no resistance. The marshal's finger was on the trigger, and a bullet through the head would have been the answer. The marshal of Gunsight was taking no chances with the Rio Kid. Not till the Kid's arms were bound did Jud Blake shove his revolver back into its holster.

"Cinched!" he said, with a deep breath. "You durned coyote, you're cinched good, with the man you've shot up at your feet! You sure ain't showed your hoss-sense this time, Kid. I guess you might have figured that that shooting might be heard, but I reckon you never knew we was riding the prairie so close. Cinched at last, Kid."

"You dog-goned galoot!" said the Kid. "You've sure sneaked through the timber like a pesky gang of Apaches, but you wouldn't have got me if I hadn't been the prize bonehead. You figure that I shot up that Greaser? You gol-darned locoed gink, he was shot up by the man that's riding under my name, and I sure was here to help him."

The marshal grinned.

"You won't get away with a yarn like that, Kid," he said. "Durn my boots, you made me near believe that you was square when you talked turkey to me the other day, and allowed that you wasn't the firebug that's raised Cain round Gunsight. You sure did! Now I've rope you in good, and enough evidence to hang every rustler in Texas."

"It sure is a cinch," said Tex. "That galoot allowed that it was our boss, Jim Poindexter, who was riding the trails with a mask on his face, and here we've got him dead to rights, with the man he's shot up lying at his feet. I guess there ain't any more doubt, marshal."

"There sure ain't," said Mohave, "and I guess a rope and a branch is what the guy wants, and wants bad."

The marshal nodded.

"Git your riata, Tex," he said briefly.

"Sure!"

Tex went back through the timber.

The Kid smiled bitterly. While he had cared for the wounded man, he had been caught in this deadly trap. The marshal and his men had left their horses and crept on the scene, guessing from the sound of shooting that there was a hold-up in the timber. And now they had him! The senseless cattle-buyer could not speak, and nothing that the Kid could say would save him.

"Jud Blake, you're a durned locoed mosshead," said the Kid. "I'm telling you that I never shot up that Greaser, and if you look at him you'll sure see that I've bandaged him good."

"That won't let you out," answered Jud Blake. "If you've bandaged the guy, you sure shot him up first, and that's a cinch. Why, there's his dollars lying in the grass this minute."

"I tell you——"

"Forget it!" interrupted the marshal.

Tex came back through the trees with the lasso. He threw one end over a high branch.

The Kid's face paled a little.

"You ain't toting me into Gunsight?" he asked.

"I sure ain't," answered the marshal emphatically. "It wouldn't help you any if I did; the boys would lynch you on sight. But you're too dog-goned slippery for me to take chances with

you, Kid. You've been roped in before, and you've got clear—more'n once, I reckon. You're caught in the act, and you're going up, pronto."

"I guess you're in a powerful hurry, marshal," said the Kid quietly. "Wait till that galoot's able to speak, and he'll sure tell you that I saved him from the *man* who shot him up."

Jud glanced at the insensible Mexican.

"We ain't wasting time on you, Kid," he answered. "You've shot six galoots in this country, and you've tried to put it on that rancher Poindexter—and I guess you talked so well, you near made me believe you was giving me the straight goods. You got the gall to stand for the same story, with that guy Santander lying at your feet? Sho! You sure take me for some soft Rube, you sure do!"

"Let him speak——"

"You make me tired, Kid," said the marshal. "I guess you got yours here and now, pronto. Put that rope on him, Tex."

"You bet!" grinned Tex.

"*Oh, search me,*" said the Kid. "It sure gets my goat to go up at the hands of a bunch of prize boobs, it sure does! Go ahead with the funeral, marshal, and be *durned to you!*"

There was a groan from the wounded Mexican. His black eyes opened, and stared wildly on the scene.

A flush of hope came into the Kid's face. His eyes fixed anxiously on the wounded man.

"You sure seem hard hit, Santander," said the marshal. "But I guess we'll get you to a doc when we're through with this galoot. You're going to see him strung up."

The Mexican started.

"Senor! He saved my life!" he gasped

"You mean to say it wasn't this galoot shot you up?" roared the marshal of Gunsight.

"No, senor!"

"Waal, carry me home to die!"

"It was a masked man—who called himself the Rio Kid," said the Mexican faintly. "He shot me—and this hombre came to my aid! He bound up my wound—he saved me——"

"Dog-gone my cats!" said Jud. He scratched his head, perplexed. "This here galoot is the Rio Kid, Santander."

"I know! The man who shot me up called himself by the same name!" said the cattle-buyer. "He was masked—he rode for his life when this hombre came up——"

The Mexican had half-raised himself in his eagerness.

"He is the Rio Kid, but he saved me from the outlaw!" he said faintly. "If I live I owe him my life."

There was a long silence. The marshal of Gunsight looked at the Kid, and then slowly threw aside the riata. He made a sign to Tex, who released the boy puncher's arms. The marshal pointed to the Kid's horse.

"Beat it!" he said laconically.

The Kid smiled.

"I reckon you're wise to it now, marshal, that I ain't the pesky fire-bug that's called himself by my name," he said.

"I guess that's proved," answered the marshal. "There's sheriffs in Texas that want to rope you in, Kid, but I guess that ain't my funeral. You ain't the fire-bug we want, and you've got into this cinch by helping a man what was shot up by that fire-bug. I reckon I ain't got no grouch agin you. There's your hoss, and there's your guns—and you want to hit the trail." Jud Blake hesitated a moment, and then held out his hand. "Shake, and beat it!"

While the marshal and his men were making a litter of branches to carry the wounded Mexican to the cow-town, the Rio Kid rode out of the timber. That night, all Gunsight heard the news, and knew, beyond doubt, that the masked outlaw who had made himself the terror of the section was not the Rio Kid. But who he was was still unknown—though the Kid was resolved that it should be known, before he rode out of the Gunsight country.

THE END.

(Don't miss—"THE RAIDER'S LAST TRAIL!" next week's roaring long complete story of the Rio Kid. It's full of thrills.)

This Week's List of Birthday Dates!

Claim one of our topping gifts if you were born on any of the dates published below!

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