BOYS! HERE'S A NEW CHUM FOR YOU!

The RIO KID!

by RALPH REDWAY

THE FIRST of a Wonderful NEW Series of Roaring Western Tales. Starring an amazing character—THE RIO KID! He's a New Chum—one Who'll keep you Entertained for Hours with His Breathless Escapades and Thrilling Adventures. Make His Acquaintance Right Now!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Trailed Down!

THE Rio Kid lifted his head and listened.

His hand slid to his gun-holster silently.

A minute before he had been sleeping as peacefully as if he lay in his berth in the old bunkhouse at the Double Bar. The chaparral baked under the sun of Southern Texas. Even the cicadas were still. But a sound had come from the llano that warned the Kid of danger.

Still distant, faintly from afar, came the beat of a horse's hoofs on the sun-baked prairie.

The Kid's bronzed face grew grimmer.

His gun was in his hand now as he rose on his knees and peered through the scrubby mesquite to the plain beyond. On the edge of the chaparral the Kid had camped in the welcome shade. His horse, worn down by the long trail, lay sleeping, undisturbed by the sounds that had awakened the alert Kid. With his left hand the Kid drew aside a mass of pendant Spaniard's-beard and cleared his view. Before his eyes—steely-blue, clear, and keen as those of an eagle—lay the burnt llano, stretching endlessly towards the Rio Pecos. In the far distance swam the heat-mists, dimming the view. Close at hand a sweating horseman drove on his panting broncho with quirt and spur.

The Rio Kid's lip curled back from his white, even teeth. He smiled—a smile that was not good to see, had anyone been there in the baking chaparral to see it.

Quietly, still smiling, he rose to his feet.

The chaparral still hid him as he stood and watched the oncoming horseman. But, as if the sweating rider could see the young lithe form standing there, he came spurring on directly towards the spot.

The reason was plain enough. Across the dusty plain lay the trail of the Kid's mustang. Plain enough for the rawest greenhorn to follow, it led to the spot where the Rio Kid had plunged into the shade and stopped to rest.

Louder and sharper rang the tattoo of the galloping hoofs. Closer the rider drew to the dark line of the chaparral that barred the llano.

Under the big Stetson hat the Kid could now make out his face—a hard, grim, bearded face—a face he knew. It was the face of a man who would not have stopped, even had he known—what he probably surmised—that the outcast of the Double Bar Ranch was standing ready waiting for him in the thick mesquite, gun in hand.

"I guess it's you for the long trail, sheriff!" murmured the Kid, and he raised his gun.

The revolver bore full upon the horseman, now only a hundred yards away—and coming closer and closer with every stride of his powerful broncho.

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But the Kid held his fire.

Dark and desperate were the tales told of the Rio Kid, through all the cattle country along the Rio Grande and the Pecos. Boy in years, hard-bitten man in all else, cool and daring and desperate, quicker on the draw than any puncher of the ranches, or any gunman of the river camps, the Kid's life had been a tale of danger and desperate hazard ever since the day when he had pulled out from the Double Bar and become an outcast. Yet he hesitated to fire on a man without warning, though that man was Sheriff Watson, of Frio, and a rope and a branch awaited the Kid if he were taken back to Frio in the sheriff's keeping.

His gun bore on the sheriff, and the man's life hung by a thread. But the Kid did not burn powder. He stepped out of the mesquite into the blaze of the sun and held up his hand.

"Halt!"

His voice rang sharply.

The rider was almost upon him—almost upon the levelled gun that glinted in the blaze.

"The Kid!"

Sheriff Watson pulled in his broncho almost upon its haunches.

Many a time the sheriff of Frio had looked death in the face, but never closer than now.

He knew the Kid's aim—it was known from the Rio Grande to the Stake Plain. The pressure of a finger, and the men of Frio would have been put to the trouble of appointing a new sheriff.

"Don't reach for a gun, sheriff," said the Kid, with a smile. "It would sure be foolish."

Watson did not reach for a gun. He knew better than that. His eyes glinted and his face hardened.

"Light down, sheriff."

Watson slid from his horse.

"And now, hombre, tell me what you want here in the desert," said the Kid, still smiling.

"I want you, Kid."

"I kinda guessed you did, sheriff," grinned the Kid. "What do you want me for?"

"I guess the list is too long to go through," said Sheriff Watson. "Half the hold-ups and shootings that have been going on in Frio county for the last twelve months. I got news of you down to Hueco, Kid, and I came after you to get you. And I'm not going back without you."

"I knew I was seen at Hueco, and I figured it out they'd pass it on to you," said the Kid, with a nod. "And you came after me to get me?"

"Sure!"

"Well, here I am!" smiled the Kid.

The sheriff breathed hard and deep. Six or seven paces from the Kid he stood, towering six-feet-three, gigantic in contrast with the lithe, slim Kid.

"You're not goin' back without me!" mocked the Kid. "You haven't figured whether you're goin' back at all, sheriff. It's my say-so!"

"You're my game, Kid!" said Watson tersely. "If you drill me it will be one more notch agin you, and you'll pay for all when you're roped in."

"I ain't roped in yet even, Watson. You're goin' back—and you're goin' back without me."

The sheriff's knuckly hands clenched.

"You're goin' to sit on that hoss, with a trail-rope to keep you from fallin' off, sheriff; and you're goin' to ride back to Frio with your hands tied," bantered the Kid. "It will give the boys a laugh. I guess your bronc will know the way home."

A quiver ran through the burly frame of the Frio sheriff, and his jaw squared.

"Put down that gun!" he commanded.

The Kid laughed.

"I'm coming for you, Kid!" said Watson grimly. "I've got my duty to do; and I guess I've looked at a .45 afore. I ain't followed you fifteen miles across the desert for nothing! Put that gun down!"

"Come and take it from me!" jeered the Kid! "You can't bluff me, sheriff!"

No more was said.

The burly figure bounded forward, reaching for a gun at the same moment.

Crack!

A flash of fire leaped from the revolver, and the sheriff of Frio, almost with his hands on the Kid, lurched and crashed down into the burnt grass of the plain.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The Kid's Way!

THERE was a rustling in the chaparral. The Kid's mustang, startled by the shot, thrust a shaggy head from the mesquite.

"All O.K., old boss!" said the Kid, laughing.

He thrust the revolver back into its

SHERIFF WATSON—a he-man of Frio Township, Texas, who has sworn to capture the Kid—you'll see how he keeps his vow.

holster and stepped towards the still figure that lay at his feet.

The sheriff of Frio did not move.

His hat had fallen off, and under the thick grizzly hair a streak of crimson ran down over his bronzed face.

The Kid looked at him, as he bent over him with a whimsical smile. He knew exactly what the damage was; to a hair's-breadth he had known where the bullet would touch. He had "*creased*" the sheriff of Frio, as a cowpuncher will "crease" a refractory steer that defies the lariat. The bullet had stripped a patch of skin and a tuft of hair from the sheriff's head, and stunned him. In five minutes or less Sheriff Watson would be himself again, little the worse. But those five minutes were the Kid's.

Even as he bandaged the man's head with his own bandanna, the Kid wondered why he had not put the bullet through Watson's brain. He hardly knew why he had spared an enemy who would never rest from his pursuit while the Rio Kid rode the trails of Texas. But he had spared him, and now he was bandaging his head. But he lost no time. He drew the revolvers from the sheriff's gun-holsters and tossed them into the chaparral. He uncoiled the trail-rope that was looped on the saddle of the bronco, cut a length from it, and bound Watson's hands behind his back.

By that time the sheriff's eyes were open again.

He sat up dizzily, staring at the Kid with uncertain eyes. He dragged at his arms, and realised that he was bound.

The Kid's smiling glance met his wild stare.

"You ain't dead yet, sheriff, by long chalks," laughed the Kid. "You ought to be, by rights. But you ain't."

"You ornery little scallywag!" groaned Watson.

"That ain't grateful, sheriff," said the Kid mockingly. "If I'd downed you for keeps, only the coyotes and the buzzards would have known anything about it. You're getting off cheap, sheriff."

Watson gritted his teeth.

"You creased me," he muttered. "You didn't shoot to kill, durn your hide!"

"If I was to shoot to kill, sheriff, you'd be talking to the angels instead of to me. I laid you out like I used to the steers on the Double Bar."

Watson struggled with his bonds.

"Forget it," grinned the Kid. "It's a good trail-rope, and I guess I can tie knots."

"What have you fixed me up like this for?" demanded the Frio sheriff hoarsely.

"To save wasting lead on you, pard. I'm sendin' you back to Frio. Tell the boys that if they want me they'll have to send a better man than Eben Watson to rope me in."

The sheriff's eyes blazed with rage. He struggled with the rope that bound his arms till the sweat started out on his face, and he panted for breath.

The Rio Kid stood and watched him with smiling amusement.

Watson desisted at last, choking with rage. Almost he would have preferred a bullet through the heart, to the bitter humiliation that the Rio Kid proposed to put on him. But the Frio sheriff had no choice.

"If you're done wriggling like a tarantula, sheriff, I'll fix you up for the home trail," jeered the Kid.

"You ornery little cuss——"

"Can it, sheriff, and save your breath for the ride home. You've got fifteen miles afore you."

"I guess I won't——"

"I guess you will," said the Kid, with a cold, steely gleam in his eyes. "You'll put a leg across that bronc instanter, sheriff."

He grasped the burly man by the shoulder, and with a swing of his arm jerked him to his feet.

The sheriff stood unsteadily, his eyes burning with rage, at the outlaw. The Kid's hand was on his gun.

"Gettin' on that hoss, sheriff?" he inquired.

"Yep!"

The answer was hissed through the sheriff's set teeth.

"I guess you're wise."

With a helping hand from the Kid, the sheriff of Frio mounted the waiting bronco.

The Rio Kid took the trail rope again and ran it round the horseman, roping him to the saddle, and knotting the rope.

Then he took the bridle, and turned the bronco with his head to the north—where, far beyond the heat-mists, the town of Frio lay in the valley of the Pecos.

"I guess the hoss will hit the trail for home, sheriff. You're going back without me." The Rio Kid laughed. "Pray that you don't meet any rustlers

on the trail, sheriff. Sayin' good-bye before you get?"

The sheriff looked down at him from the saddle. The crimson had died out of his rugged face; it was set and hard and bitter.

"You hold the winnin' hand this time, Kid. I'm goin' back to Frio to be laughed at. But, by gum, you'll repent it! From this day on I'll never quit till I get you, dead or alive!"

There was a bitter intensity in the sheriff's voice, a glint of ruthless determination in his eyes.

The Kid looked at him, and for a moment his hand played with the butt of his gun.

But the temptation passed, and he laughed.

"It's you for chewing the rag, sheriff," he drawled. "But you don't scare me worth a red cent. Keep it for the Greasers and the maverick men—you can scare them. Good-bye, sheriff!"

The Rio Kid struck the flank of the bronco with his open hand, with a crack like a pistol-shot.

The bronco started at a trot.

With a smiling face, his hands on his hips, the Rio Kid stood looking after the bound horseman as he went. Smaller and smaller the figure grew in the hazy distance, till it was blurred from sight by a belt of sassafras. Then the Kid turned back to the chaparral, with a light laugh.

"It's us for the trail, old hoss," he said, patting the neck of his mustang. "I reckon that the sooner we're across the Rio Grande into Mexico, the better it will be for my health, old cayuse, if not for yours. There'll be hard ridin' on this trail when the sheriff gets loose."

The Kid, whistling cheerily, saddled up.

But suddenly he stopped, and the cheery whistle died on his lips. His face grew hard and tense.

Softly, silently, he drew the horse out of sight into the cover of a thick clump of trees. The well-trained animal gave no sound. Deep in cover, the Kid peered through leafy branches at the trail which ran through the chaparral, from the dusty plains towards the Rio Grande. There was a jingling of horsemen, a murmur of voices that came nearer, from the south, the direction of the Mexican border. Friends or foes? Not friends—for the Rio Kid followed a lone trail; no rustler had ever called him comrade, and no honest man, since the trouble that had driven him from the Double Bar. To the Rio Kid all comers were foes, or possible foes.

A bunch of horsemen came under his eyes, riding by the tangled path through the chaparral, heading for the open plain. Rough men with ragged chaps and battered Stetson hats, unwashed, unshaven, grim and ugly and desperate to the eye. Every one of them "heeled"—with guns handy in the loose-swinging holsters. From deep cover the Rio Kid watched them, and his lips curled. Outcast and rustler the Kid might be, but he had nothing in common with such as these. Five of them, and the man riding at their head he knew—Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith, so-called from the reward placed on his head by the authorities of the Lone Star State.

The Kid lay very low.

The rustlers were riding to a raid on the Pecos ranches—to run off some outlying bunch of cattle into Mexico. But the Kid, outlawed and hunted even as they were, would have been fair game for them; they would have shot him down for his horse and his guns. Not that the Rio Kid would have shrunk from the conflict, even against such desperate odds. But he would not seek it—Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith and his gang were nothing to him.

With a jingle of bridle and spur, and a murmur of husky voices, the gang of rustlers rode out of the chaparral into the sunny plains. He heard them cursing the sun-blaze as they disappeared.

They were gone, and the Kid led out his mustang into the trail and mounted, to ride the way the rustlers had come.

But he paused, a whimsical grin breaking out on his handsome, mocking face.

The rustlers were riding for the Pecos, and riding at a good speed. What if they came on the sheriff of Frio? He was scarcely a mile ahead of them—and a steed with a bound rider would not travel fast.

"Gee!" murmured the Kid.

He visualised the hard, brutal face of Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith, with a scar running across the cheek—a scar left by a bullet from Sheriff Watson's gun in a struggle long ago.

He paused long.

The mustang twisted round his nimble head, looking up at his rider, as if asking why he did not ride.

The Kid knitted his brows.

"Not our funeral, old hoss," he murmured. "He came after me to get me, and I let him off cheap. Our trail's to the south."

He shook out his reins, and the mustang started. But the Rio Kid's face grew darker with troubled thought, and he drew rein again. At long last he wheeled round and rode to the edge of the chaparral, and sat in the saddle there, his steely eyes scanning the distance in the dusty plain. The way of safety lay to the south, over the Mexican border. But it was to the north that the Rio Kid was looking, and continued to look.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Kid Chips In!

"SHERIFF WATSON, by thunder!"

"You, sheriff!"

There was a roar of laughter as the rough, savage-faced horsemen closed round the sheriff of Frio.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith grinned with glee, the deep scar on his stubbly cheek wrinkling up hideously.

This is the Kid, chaps! The Daredevil of the Texas prairies—the Terror of All.

"You, sheriff!" he chuckled.

Sheriff Watson sat his horse like a statue. He was bound to his broncho, his hands were tied behind his back. He was helpless at the mercy of the border rustlers, and he knew it. The Rio Kid had spared his life, condemning him only to the mockery of Frio when he rode home trussed up on his horse. But Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith was not so merciful. The rustlers laughed and chuckled hoarsely as they closed round the helpless rider, but there was ruthless determination in their faces. The sheriff of Frio, who had hunted them like wolves on the plains and in the sierra, was given helpless into their hands. The whole gang would have hesitated to face him had he been free and armed. But he was powerless now, and there was no mercy for him.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith gripped the bridle of his horse. The sheriff's eyes glinted at him, but he did not speak.

"I guess you've hit up again trouble this time, sheriff," grinned the rustler.

No answer.

"Who fixed you up like this, sheriff?"

The sheriff spoke at last.

"Five hundred dollars to let me loose!"

There was a roar of laughter.

"Sheriff Watson's speaking civil for once," chuckled Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith. "Jest the amount that's offered for me, sheriff, and that you've done your durndest to earn, by gum! Make it five thousand and I guess we wouldn't stand for it. This time we've got you where your hair is short, sheriff!"

The rustler tapped the scar on his bristly cheek.

"Remember that, sheriff?"

"I remember," said the sheriff coldly. "I guess I wish it had gone through your cabeza, you skunk!"

"I guess you'll never have another chance, sheriff. Tell me who fixed you up like this, all ready for us to find?"

"The Rio Kid."

"Oh, gum! Is the Kid in these parts?" exclaimed Smith, with a startled glance round on the dusty plain.

"Far enough away by now!" said the sheriff bitterly. "In Mexico by this time, I guess."

"Fool to leave you kickin', if he had the pull on you," sneered Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith. "I reckon we're not makin' a mistake like that!"

"We just ain't!" grinned another of the rustlers. "You're for it, sheriff."

And the ruffian drew a gun from his holster.

"Nix on that!" snapped Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith.

"Look hyer——"

"Put up that gun, Pete Finn!"

The rustler scowled and cursed, but he slid the gun back into its holster. Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith had his ruffianly gang well in hand.

"I guess that isn't good enough," went on the leader of the rustlers. "What's the good of wasting good lead when there's a rope handy?"

Pete Finn's scowling face cleared, and he chuckled. There was a roar of hoarse merriment from the rustlers.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith waved his hand towards the dark line of the chaparral, a mile or less to the south.

"There's timber," he said. "Hyer's the sheriff and a rope. I guess we hit the back trail to a tree."

"That goes!" grinned Pete Finn.

Smith dragged round the sheriff's horse.

"You get me, Eben Watson?" he bantered. "What became of two of my

pardners who were roped in a month ago?"

"Strung up at Frio," answered the sheriff briefly.

"I knew that. And I guess you are going to be strung up in your turn, sheriff."

"You ornery dog!" muttered the sheriff of Frio hoarsely. "Put a bullet through me, and let it go at that!"

The ruffian laughed savagely.

"Not on your life, sheriff. It's you for the rope and a branch. Ride for the chaparral, boys."

Back the way they had come the rustlers rode, in a grinning, gleeful bunch. In the midst of them, his bridle held by Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith, rode the bound sheriff of Frio.

They rode at last into the shadowy aisles of the chaparral.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith called a halt in a clear patch, where a big ceiba grew amid the trailing mesquite.

"Hyer's the place!"

The rustlers dismounted, and hitched their horses in the chaparral.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith threw his lariat over a level branch of the ceiba a dozen feet from the ground.

The noose was placed about the neck of the sheriff of Frio, and drawn taut. The other end of the lasso was secured to a stump.

The rustlers looked on, grinning, while Smith drew his knife across the rope that bound the sheriff to his bronco.

rustlers started and stared round them in surprise and alarm.

But it was not at any of the gang that the bullet was aimed by the unseen marksman.

The rope twanged and parted, cut in two by the bullet from a gun that never raised its aim.

Even as he was swung off the back of the parting horse, the sheriff felt the cut rope slither down on his face, and he fell into the herbage, half stunned by the fall, the loose rope round his neck.

"Gee! What—who——"

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith spat out an oath.

Every one of the gang had a gun in hand now, and every gun spat fire in

SAVED BY THE KID! Crack! A bullet snapped the rope, and the sheriff fell from the horse into the grass, the noose slipping from his neck. With yells of rage the rustlers swung their guns in the direction of the trees. Crack! Crack! Crack! Then from the shadows came a light laugh—the laugh of the Rio Kid! *(See Chapter 8.)*

His face was hard and set in grim despair.

Through that burning day he had trailed the Rio Kid, and this was the end of the trail. The Kid's gun had spared him—for this! The rope and a branch! Even as he had meted out to many a desperate rustler, so it was to be meted out to him. He did not speak, but in his heart there were curses—curses on the Kid who had doomed him to this. Free and armed, he would have been glad to fall in with Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith and his gang, careless of the odds. If he had fallen, he would have fallen to the bullet or the steel! But now——

Trot, trot, went the hoofs on the sun-baked plain. Mocking jeers and laughter fell unceasingly on the ears of the Frio sheriff as he rode in the midst of the gang.

From the blaze of the sun on the plain they rode at last into the shadowy aisles of the chaparral.

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With his hands still bound behind him, the sheriff sat in the saddle, pale, but calm as a statue. Only a touch was needed now to send the horse from beneath him, and leave him swinging.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith drew back and took his quirt in hand. The bronco stood motionless. The sheriff, his chin dragged up by the taut rope, gave no sound.

"Ready, sheriff?" grinned the rustler.

No word.

Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith raised his quirt, and struck the bronco a sharp blow across the haunches.

The animal started, squealed, and plunged forward. The sheriff swung off its back.

Crack!

From the shadows of the chaparral came the sudden ring of a gun. The

the direction from which the ring of the shot had come.

Crack, crack, crack!

From the shadowy mesquite came a light laugh—the laugh of the Rio Kid. And following his laugh came his fire, and the nearest rustler pitched over, and groaned and lay still.

Sheriff lay dazed, half stunned, while the guns blazed and cracked round him.

"It's the Kid!" yelled Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith, as he caught the light, mocking laugh. "The Rio Kid! Kill him."

And the desperate ruffian led a rush into the thickets where the Kid lay in cover. Three desperate rascals rushed at his heels. But the man who had fallen to the Kid's first fire did not stir.

A lithe form moved in the mesquite, and the crack of the Kid's gun laid

another of the gang on his back, groaning.

Then three were upon him, firing as they came.

The Kid's handsome face wore a smile—a smile more deadly than the blackest frown. Blood trickled down his cheek where a bullet had gone close. But he leaped forward to meet the rushing rustlers, and the spitting bullets flew wild as he crashed at them. And at close quarters the Kid's gun claimed another victim, and Pete Finn lay stretched in the mesquite. And then the heart of Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith failed him, and he dodged back and sprang away, and ran—and the last of his gang ran with him.

The Rio Kid's light laugh rang after them as they fled. But Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith's gun rang out as he vanished into the chaparral, passing the bound sheriff on the ground, and a bullet ploughed into Eben Watson's shoulder. Then the rustler was gone.

"You dog!" panted the Kid, and he stood in the clearing and pumped bullets after the fleeing rustlers.

But Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith was gone.

The Rio Kid shrugged his shoulders. He reloaded his gun—the Kid never took chances. Then he stepped to the sheriff.

A twist of his knife, and the rope fell away from Sheriff Watson's arms.

"I guess you're hit, sheriff."

Watson strove to rise, and sank back again into the grass. His bronzed face was white as chalk.

"You've saved me from the rope, Kid," he said faintly. "I reckoned you was across the river by this time. Why did you chip in, Kid?"

The Kid gave another shrug.

"Quien sabe?" he said, laughing.

He glanced at the fallen rustlers. One of them did not stir; two wounded men were crawling away into the mesquite. They did not trouble the Kid. He dabbed at the blood on his cheek.

"You're wounded, Kid."

"I guess they barked the skin," said the Kid carelessly. "You've got it, sheriff. Let me see."

He knelt by the wounded sheriff's side and examined the hurt. The bullet had gone clean through, and was buried in the earth. The Kid bandaged the wound with deft fingers and stopped the flow of blood. The sheriff, with no sound of pain from his iron lips, watched him in silence.

"I guess you'll pull out O.K., sheriff, if you get to a doctor. That pesky coyote meant to make it keeps for you, but I guess he was in too much of a hurry. You want to travel quick to Frio, sheriff."

Watson smiled grimly.

"I reckon it's the long trail for me, Kid. I couldn't sit a horse, even if you tied me on as you did before, you ornery young cuss!"

The Kid nodded thoughtfully.

"You've said it," he agreed.

"I guess I was swearing death and thunder to you, Kid," said Watson faintly, "but I take it all back. You've saved me from the rope, and I can stand the rest. Give me my canteen before you vamoose the ranch—and take my thanks, Kid."

The Kid eyed him queerly.

"I reckon you couldn't sit that bronc, even if you was tied on," he said musingly. "But I figure it out, sheriff, that you could sit in the saddle with a galoot riding along and holding you up."

The sheriff looked at him.

"You, Kid?"

"Well, what about it?" grinned the Kid.

"There's no doctor nearer than Frio."

"Sure."

"Wash it out, Kid. They'll shoot at sight if the Rio Kid is seen in the streets of Frio."

"They sure will," said the Kid.

He laughed again his light, musical laugh, and bent over the sheriff. With a strength that was amazing in his slim, lithe form, he lifted the heavy man from the ground.

"Boot and saddle, sheriff! You can't afford to waste time—you sure can't!"

Sheriff Watson, like a man in a dream, sat heavily, weakly, in the deep cowboy saddle. He held on with both hands. The big, powerful man was as weak as a child. The Rio Kid glanced round him again, with his whimsical smile. The two wounded rustlers had long disappeared—Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith and his fleeing comrade were far away. The Kid cast loose the tethered horses of the rustlers, and whistled to his own steed. The black-muzzled mustang came pushing through the mesquite.

The Kid mounted.

"We hit the trail now, sheriff."

"Kid," said the sheriff hoarsely, "you're a white man—white all through. But I tell you they'll shoot at sight at Frio, even if you bring me in. You won't have nary chance to chew the rag, Kid. It's death that you're asking for."

"Quien sabe?" said the Kid again. "Lean a bit on me, sheriff. You'll ride O.K.—so. That's right!" He showed his white teeth in a grin at the sheriff as they rode together out of the chaparral, under the westering sun. "Sheriff, I'm taking you to Frio, and if they get me——"

"They sure will, Kid!" muttered the sheriff.

"They say on the Rio Grande, sheriff, that the Kid has as many lives as a cat. But if they get me, and you pull out, sheriff, I want you to remember one thing. I never did what they had up against me at the Double-Bar. Not on your life, sheriff. They got the wrong man, and I was the wrong man."

"Kid!" muttered the sheriff.

"'Nuff said!"

And Sheriff Watson, still like a man in a dream, found himself riding northward across the plain, upheld in the saddle by the strong, untiring arm of the Rio Kid.

* * * * *

The sun was down, a glimmering crescent of moon showed over the black rim of the Pecos hills. They were beginning to light up in Frio. Lamp or lantern glinted here and there in the straggling street of the border town. Only the Red Dog saloon was ablaze with naphtha lamps. Up the dusky street from the duskier plains came two riders, one a burly man, hanging limply in his saddle, the other a boy, supporting the weight of the limp form on the bronco. Outside the Red Dog a dozen cowpunchers stood in a bunch, chewing the rag. One and all fixed their eyes on the two riders that came into the radius of light from the naphtha lamps of the Red Dog.

"Gosh, the sheriff!" roared Hank Hanson, deputy sheriff of Frio, and he rushed into the trail.

White and limp, the sheriff slid into Hank's arms as he was released. For he was insensible now. For the last five or six miles the Kid, with aching arm, had held the unconscious man upright in the saddle. Glad enough was the Rio Kid to be relieved of that burden. Watson lay heavily in the arms of the deputy sheriff, and at the same moment there came a roar of amazement from the bunch before the Red Dog.

"The Kid!"

"The Rio Kid!"

Every hand reached for a gun as he was recognised.

With a whirl and a clatter the mustang spun round, and ere the readiest revolver could be aimed the Kid was riding up the street. Men rushed into the street, loosing off hurried shots as they ran, yelling to one another.

"The Kid!"

"That darned young fire-bug, the Rio Kid! Don't let him get clear!"

Crack, crack, crack!

Thud, thud! rang the hoofs on the hard earth of the unpaved street of Frio. There was a shout as the half-seen figure in the dusk seemed to sway in the saddle. But it was only for a second. The sharp Mexican spurs galled the flanks of the mustang, and the steed leaped to lightning speed. Deep into the shadows beyond the glimmering lights dashed the Rio Kid, and from the darkness of the prairie his mocking laugh floated back to the enraged men of Frio.

Still they pursued him, pumping lead into the darkness, till the faint and fainter hoof-beats died away into the silence of the great llano, and they returned into the camp swearing their disappointment. Though when, later, the men of Frio heard what Sheriff Watson had to tell, some of them were glad that their lead had flown wide.

But little cared the Kid what they thought or felt.

Under the rising moon, a smile on his face, he rode with a loose rein, and carolled lightly as he rode, care-free.

THE END.

(Chaps, you'll meet the Rio Kid again in next week's issue! He's in another thriller, entitled: "The Brand Blotters!" Tell all your pals about this fine series of stories.)

NOW YOU'VE MET THE RIO KID! DON'T YOU WANT TO KEEP HIS FRIENDSHIP? DON'T YOU WANT TO HEAR MORE ABOUT THIS AMAZING YOUNG OUTLAW? THEN READ—

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