

The Rio Kid Rides Again!



CHAPTER I

THE RIO KID lay very low.

He had camped in thick, shadowy chapparal, on the slope above the stage-trail that ran from Apache to Frio. The hot sun of southern Texas blazed down on the chapparal, but it was shady under the branches, clustered with masses of Spaniard's-beard. The Kid had ridden hard that morning, with the sheriff's posse from Frio on his trail. They had trailed him as far as the Huacas: and he grinned as he thought of them hunting for him in the stony gulches up in the hills, never dreaming that he had doubled back, and left them to it. Almost within a riata's cast of the stage-trail, the Kid was in

deep cover, taking a needed rest after hard riding: and he wished the sheriff and his men joy of their hunt up in the hills. The black-muzzled mustang lay in the shade, half asleep: the Kid sat with his back to a trunk, tired but content. He was secure there: they had lost the trail, and would never dream of looking for him so near to Frio: the cow-town on the Pecos where his name was a byword, and where every gun would have leaped from its holster at the sight of the handsome boyish face under the Stetson with its band of silver nuggets. But he gave a little start, and then sat very still, at the sound of horses pushing through the thickets from the slope above.

It was a lonely trail from Apache to Frio. Once a day the little two-horse hack trundled and bumped along the rugged way. Twice or thrice in a day some cow-puncher from the ranches might ride it. But the hack from Apache was not due yet: and no puncher had ridden by since the Kid had camped in cover there. And it was not from the stage-trail that the sound of horses came. It came from higher up the slope. Horsemen were pushing down through the thickets towards the stage-trail below.

The Kid's face set hard, and a glint came into the blue eyes. He did not stir: but his hands were very near the walnut butts of the guns in his low-slung holsters. He had felt sure that he had eluded the chase: that he had left the sheriff of Frio hunting in the Huecas for a vanished outlaw. But if they had, after all, tracked him down—

So still sat the Kid, that a green lizard crawled over his goatskin chaps, unafraid. If the approaching horsemen were the sheriff and his men, there would be gun-play in a matter of minutes. But he hoped not: for the Kid hated gun-play. In every cow-town on the Rio Grande, at every round-up in the valley of the Pecos, wild tales were told of the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw: and only the Kid himself knew that there was no truth in them. Not so long ago he had punched cows on the old Double-Bar ranch, as happy and care-free as any hombre in the outfit: and it was Old Man Dawney's hot and imperious temper, his stubborn refusal to believe that the boy puncher was innocent of what had been laid to his charge, that had driven the Kid outside the law. But the Kid, outlaw as he now was, was no trigger-happy gunman. From the bottom of his heart he hoped that the horsemen, whoever they were, would push by unseeing, and that the walnut-butted guns would be left silent in their holsters.

The tramping and rustling came closer.

The riders were nearing him. The Kid, without moving his head, had a glimpse from the corner of his eye of a Stetson hat, for a moment, among the hanging Spanish moss. But it disappeared again. The riders were passing—within a rope's length of him, but never dreaming that he was there. It was not, after all, the sheriff and his posse: they were still up in the Huecas. Who they were, the Kid did not know, and he cared little, so long as they passed him unseen. And they were passing him unseen. Except for that glimpse of

a Stetson for one moment, he saw nothing of them: but his ears told him that there were four of them, riding down to the trail through the chapparal.

They passed, unseeing: and the tramping and rustling sounded lower down the slope. The Kid expected to hear them ride out on the stage-trail, and ride away. To his surprise, the tramping and rustling ceased, on the very edge of the stage-trail. They were going no further.

"Gee-whiz!" murmured the Kid, inaudibly.

Faint sounds came to him, through the trees and the tangled thickets, of horses being tethered. They had dismounted, and were staying there—for what reason the Kid could not begin to guess. His first guess had been that a party of punchers had taken a short cut through the chapparal, to reach the open stage-trail, bound either for Frio or Apache. But it was not that. They had stopped on the edge of the trail, and evidently intended to remain there, in cover of the trees.

Slowly, a grin dawned on the sunburnt face of the Rio Kid. He guessed at last how the matter shaped. So far as he could see, there was only one reason why any bunch should wait in cover on the edge of the stage-trail. It was a hold-up. They were waiting there for the hack from Apache, due to pass in the afternoon. Likely enough, some rancher who had sold steers at Apache might be returning to Frio in the hack, with a roll of greenbacks, and they aimed to cinch that roll. The Kid grinned sarcastically, and shrugged his slim shoulders.

It was no business of his. Had he been still the cow-puncher of the Double-Bar, it would have been different. He would have horned in as a matter of course. But a hold-up was no concern of an outlaw, hunted by half the sheriffs in Texas, with a price of a thousand dollars on his head. It was sheriff's business, not his. Sheriff Watson of Frio, combing the Huecas for an outlaw who was not there, would have been more useful nearer to Frio, with this gang waiting to hold up the hack on the trail. They could get on with it, for all the Kid cared.

He could hear the sounds of their movements, and in the stillness of the hot afternoon, the murmur of voices came to his ears. They were hardly the length of a lasso away.

"How long we got to hang on here, Two-gun?" It was a muttering voice, but the words came distinctly to the Kid's keen ears.

"How'd I know?" came a growling reply, in a voice the Kid knew. He had heard Two-gun Carter's voice before, more than once, in the streets of Frio, before he had hit the outlaw trail. "Andy Jones don't keep to no schedule. The hearse will be along before sundown."

"We got to wait!" said another voice.

"It's sure worth waiting for." There was a chuckling laugh from Two-gun Carter. "I'm telling you guys that I saw Old Man Dawney packing a roll of twenty thousand dollars, for steers he's sold at Apache—and I had it from

Andy that's he coming back to Frio in the hack. Twenty thousand bucks don't grow on every pecan in the chapparal."

"You said it, Two-gun."

The Kid drew a deep, deep breath, as the muttering voices died away. He could have laughed.

It was Old Man Dawney for whom that bunch of rustlers were waiting by the stage-trail. The boss of the Double-Bar was not a man to be robbed easily. He was the man to pull a gun in defence of his roll. But there were four of the rustlers, and he hadn't a chance if it came to that. Old Man Dawney—once the Kid's boss on the Double-Bar, whose doubting suspicious mind and arrogant temper had driven him out of the ranks of honest men. To him the Kid owed it that he rode wild trails with a price on his head. The Kid owed him a long score. Let him take what was coming to him.

And the Rio Kid settled back against the trunk, indifferent to what might pass on the stage-trail below—determined, at least, to be indifferent.

But it did not last. For the Kid, outlaw as he was, with a rope and a branch waiting for him if the sheriffs trailed him down, was still at heart what he had always been: no gunman, no rustler, but a puncher born and bred. Even as he settled back against the tree, he knew that he could not stand for it. His brow grew dark with gloomy thought. But at length he stirred.

"You sure are loco, Kid!" he muttered, in amused self-contempt. "That's the guy that drove you off his ranch with a gun in his hand, and made an outlaw of you—and you don't need to worry if they cinch his roll, and fill him with lead in cinching it. You sure are plumb loco to horn into this circus. But you always was a bonehead, Kid!"

Bonehead or not, the Kid knew what he was going to do. He made no sound as he rose to his feet: and from Side-Kicker, the black-muzzled mustang, came no sound, as the Kid saddled up: Side-Kicker was as accustomed to caution as his master. Taking the bridle, the Kid led his mustang away through the chapparal, up the slope: and he did not betray his motions by sounds of rustling and brushing as Two-gun and his bunch had done. Silent as a cougar creeping on a branch, the Kid wound his way through the thickets, leaving the hold-up gang further and further behind him. It was not till he had covered a good distance, that he mounted and rode, taking a slanting direction to get down to the stage-trail a good mile from the spot where Two-gun and his bunch lay in cover. Then, at last, the Kid put his mustang to the gallop, riding like the wind in the direction of Apache, to meet the hack as it came.

CHAPTER II

"HALT!"

Andy Jones, driver of the two-horse hack, pulled in so suddenly, that his horses almost rolled back, on the vehicle. That one word was enough for Andy: backed by a six-gun that glimmered in the sunshine, with a smiling face behind it under a Stetson hat. That handsome sunburnt face smiled: but the eyes, cool and clear, had a glint in them: and Andy was not the guy to argue with the man who held the gun! Andy was paid to drive that hack, not to mix up in gun-play with hold-up men: and of all the outlaws in the Lone Star State, the Rio Kid was the one Andy would have cared least to argue with. In all the cow-camps they knew that the Kid could shoot, and that a gun in his hand had never missed.

The Kid, sitting his mustang at the side of the trail, hardly needed to lift his gun. He laughed as the horses floundered under Andy's sudden and vigorous drag on the reins. Andy was in a hurry to assure the Kid that he, at least, was not hosing for trouble: whatever might be the view of the passenger inside the little hack.

"You sure are a good little guy, Andy," said the Kid. "You don't need to be told to go in when it rains, you sure don't."

"Your game Kid," said the stage-driver. "This ain't my funeral, and I'm sure sitting it out."

"Keep to that," said the Kid, as he rode closer to the hack. "If you forget it, Andy, the company will sure want a new driver all of a sudden, and I should jest hate to spill your juice. It's your passenger I want."

That passenger had already put his head out of the window of the hack, revealing a hard, bronzed, bearded face, and a pair of stern glinting eyes under bushy brows. The rancher of the Double-Bar was a hard man, and he looked it. The glinting eyes fixed on the boy rider, and Mr. Dawney gave a start as he recognized a familiar face—a face which he had not seen for a long time, but of which every feature was familiar to him.

"The Kid!" he ejaculated. And Old Man Dawney reached for his gun.

"Don't!" said the Kid, very quietly. His hand was up now, and the long-barrelled Colt looked the rancher fairly in his bronzed, bearded face. The merest pressure of a finger would have spelt the end of the trail for Old Man Dawney, seconds before his gun was out. And the rancher realized it, and his fingers dropped away from the butt.

He fixed his eyes bitterly on the handsome boyish face of the Kid.

"You, Kid!" he said. "You—riding the trails like Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith and his bunch! You holding up the stage! I reckoned you'd come to it! And you had the dog-goned nerve to tell me that you never did what I fired you off my ranch for! You!"

"And I sure never did, feller," said the Kid. "But I ain't here to chew the rag with you, Mr. Dawney. Light down from that hearse."

The rancher did not stir. Old Man Dawney was accustomed to giving orders, not to taking them. His eyes glittered at the Kid, and his hand made a motion again, as if he could scarce restrain his desire to pull a gun.

"You hear me toot?" said the Kid, softly. "You give orders on the Double-Bar, Mr. Dawney. I guess I give them on this trail. You lighting down from that hack, or—!" The trigger stirred.

The rancher gritted his teeth, and stepped out of the hack. He eyed the Kid almost like a wolf, and gave one glance at Andy Jones. But the stage-driver sat still in his seat, chewing tobacco, while he waited for the Kid to get through. If Rancher Dawney figured on help from Andy, he had to guess again.



It was the kid who fired.

"Put up your hands, feller," said the Kid: and slowly, savagely, reluctantly, the rancher raised his hands above his head.

The Kid nodded approval.

"O.K." he said. "You sure got sense, Mr. Dawney. How long is it since you drove me off the Double-Bar with a gun in your fist? I'm holding the gun now, old-timer: and you got to jump when I say jump."

"What do you want?" muttered the rancher.

"Aw, ain't that an easy one?" grinned the Kid. "You been selling steers down to Apache, and you mosey home with a fat roll in your jeans. Ain't I the Rio Kid, the fire-bug of the Rio Grande: the guy to whose tally they put down half the hold-ups in the State, more'n I ever heard of? What you guess I want, you packing twenty thousand dollars, and me holding a gun?"

He laughed aloud.

"How'd you know?" muttered the rancher. "You dare not show your cabeza in Apache, or any other town in Texas—how'd you know?"

"I heard a little bird sing in the chapparal," said the Kid, banteringly. "I'm sure wise to your roll, rancher. Where you pack it?"

"You're not getting twenty thousand dollars from me, you ornery young rustler!" breathed the rancher. "By the great horned toad, I'll have you hunted all over Texas for this, and strung up to a branch."

"I guess they been hunting me some, since I lit out from the Double-Bar," grinned the Kid. "But they ain't put salt on my tail yet, rancher. This hyer minute Sheriff Watson and his posse are combing the Huecas for me, and here I am on the Frio trail, holding up the darndest, orneryest old bonehead in the State of Texas. I'll take a chance on it, rancher—and I'll take the roll. And I ain't waiting, feller."

Old Man Dawney's teeth came together hard. Suddenly, swiftly, his hand dropped to his gun, and he flashed it out.

Bang!

It was the Kid who fired.

The rancher gave a yell, and staggered. His six-gun dropped to the earth, and as he staggered, yelling, his left hand clasped his right. Andy Jones stared from his seat on the front of the hack, but he did not stir. The Rio Kid laughed.

"That sure was foolish, feller," he said, admonishingly. "You ain't quick enough on the draw for it, rancher. But you ain't hurt a whole lot, and there ain't no call to yap like you was telling them about it in Mexico. I guess I shot a gun out of a guy's grip afore, without hurting him any."

The rancher stood almost stuttering with rage. The six-gun had been shot from his hand, and lay smashed in the trail: but beyond the numbing jar of the shock, Old Man Dawney was not hurt. For a moment he had fancied his hand shot away. But there was not even a speck of red on it.

"You—you—you prairie thief—!" he breathed.

"Aw, can it!" said the Kid. "You're wasting time, rancher. You want to hit for home, and get Bud Wash and the rest of the outfit out on the trail to look for me and your dollars. Are you handing over that roll, or do you want me to crease you like an ornery steer, and take it."

Trembling with rage, the rancher, with his undamaged hand, drew out the fat roll that was the price of many fat steers in the market at Apache. In silent fury he handed it up to the boy outlaw on the mustang.

It was a large sum. But the Kid hardly glanced at it. He dropped the roll carelessly into the pocket of his chaps.

"Now I guess you can burn the wind, as soon as you want," he said. "You can drive on, Andy, and carry this ornery old cuss to Frio, to tell them that the Rio Kid ain't jest where their sheriff is looking for him."

"Sure!" said Andy.

The rancher stepped into the hack again, and Andy gathered up the reins. The Kid sat his mustang beside the trail, and watched it go. Andy drove on, and from the window the rancher looked back, with deadly rage in his look, at the handsome figure by the trail. The Kid swept off the Stetson with its band of silver nuggets, in mocking salute and farewell. Old Man Dawney sat back in the hack, still nursing his numbed wrist, his bronzed, gnarled face almost white with rage.

The hack rolled on its way: the boy outlaw disappeared from sight behind it. He passed from Old Man Dawney's vision, but not from his mind. The Kid was riding away with twenty thousand dollars: a heavy loss even to a rich rancher like George Dawney. The sheriff of Frio, was hunting him in the hills fifteen miles to the westward, while he was riding off with the rancher's roll! Old Man Dawney was in haste to reach Frio, to tell them there of his latest exploit of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande, and to set his outfit riding after the Kid. But he was not to reach Frio yet. The hack had rolled on a mile from the spot where the Kid had been left, and was bumping along the rough trail bordered by thick chapparal, when there was another stop.

"Halt!"

For the second time, Andy Jones heard that succinct command. For the second time, he pulled in his horses. He grinned as he pulled them in. It looked like another hold-up; but there was nothing to reward the hold-up men this time: the Rio Kid had cut in before them.

Old Man Dawney stared savagely from the hack, as four figures appeared from the shadowy chapparal: four men with neck-scarfs tied across their faces to mask them, and six-guns in their hands. Two-gun Carter and his bunch had waited long; but the hack had arrived at last. One man covered the driver with a revolver: which was not needed, for Andy was taking it like a lamb, as he had taken it with the Rio Kid way back on the trail.

Two-gun Carter threw open the door of the hack.

Three six-guns were aimed at the man inside. He eyed them savagely.

Without the disguising neck-scarfs, he might have known them: rough-necks of the cow-town of Frio. But their features were well hidden: they did not ride the trails with the reckless hardihood of the Rio Kid.

"Step out lively, Mr. Dawney!" said Two-gun.

Old Man Dawney gave a savage harsh laugh.

"You got wise to it too, that I've been selling steers down to Apache!" he jeered. "Wal, you're too late—I've been robbed already on this trail."

"Step out!"

The rancher shrugged his shoulders, and stepped out.

"Say, you guys, it's a sure thing," said Andy, from his perch. "This caboodle was cleaned out back on the trail, by the Rio Kid—"

"The Rio Kid?"

"Surest thing you know! He cinched Mr. Dawney's roll, and I opine he's half-way to Mexico with it by now."

There were muttered curses under the disguising neck-scarfs. But Two-gun Carter was not the guy to take Andy's word for it, or the rancher's either. He snarled an order, and two of the rustlers grasped Old Man Dawney, and went through his pockets: and then they searched the hack. Not so much as a dollar bill rewarded them. They had to chew on it that the Rio Kid had been first in the field, and that they had waited in their ambush for nothing. There was a chorus of oaths and curses that might have turned the atmosphere blue: but that solace, such as it was, was all that was left to Two-gun and his bunch.

The hack was permitted to roll on again at last, and Andy drove on with his passenger to Frio: leaving four disappointed and enraged hold-up men still cursing their luck and the Rio Kid.

CHAPTER III

SHERIFF WATSON lay back lazily in his rocker, in his office in the cow-town of Frio, nodding in the drowsy heat of the day. His feet, in their big cow-hide boots, rested on the desk before him. On that desk lay a six-gun: a sheriff in a wild cow-town like Frio had need to keep his ironware at hand. But Jake Watson was not thinking of guns or gunplay as he nodded in the rocker, in the hot afternoon. It was a hot day, even for the south of Texas in the summer, and the sheriff was drowsy, tired after long and hard riding.

All Frio lay quiet and slumbrous in the semi-tropical heat of the blazing afternoon. When the sheriff, half-heeding, heard the sound of a horse's hoofs outside in the street, he wondered lazily what guy was bonehead enough to be riding in that blaze of heat, quite uninterested.

Jake Watson was a brawny man of iron muscle; but he had had more than enough hard riding of late. The previous day he had hunted for the Rio Kid

up in the Huecas, a long and weary trail that had led him nowhere. And riding back to Frio late, he had heard Rancher Dawney's tale of the hold-up on the stage-trail: and once more he had ridden out with his saddle-sore posse, looking for the elusive boy outlaw. Not before dawn had the sheriff and his men returned, unsuccessful, fatigued to the bone. The Rio Kid had vanished, with the rancher's roll, snapping his fingers once more at all the Texas sheriffs could do. Old Man Dawney had gone back furious to his ranch: Sheriff Watson notched one more score against the name of the Rio Kid: and there was the end of it: and now Jake Watson was taking his ease in his office rocker, drowsing in the heat of the day, forgetful even of the Rio Kid.

The clatter of horse's hoofs in the rugged street of Frio stopped, outside the wide-open doorway of the sheriff's office. A shadow fell across the bright sunlight in the doorway. Sheriff Watson turned his head idly—but the next moment, he was not idle—he dragged his feet from the desk, with a shrieking of spurs, and they crashed on the floor, as he reached for his gun. But he did not touch the gun. The bluish barrel of a Colt, was looking him in the face, and Jake Watson was not honing for sudden death. He sat in his rocker, and stared with almost unbelieving eyes at a handsome sunburnt face, under the rim of a Stetson hat that was adorned with a band of silver nuggets.

"The Kid!" he stuttered.

The Rio Kid grinned at him.

"You been looking for me, sheriff!" he drawled. "Wal, here I am. You look kinder surprised."

The sheriff was not merely surprised. He could scarcely believe his eyes as he stared at the Kid.

"You—here in Frio!" he breathed.

"Me—here in Frio!" assented the Kid. "A hundred galoots within call, and every one of them honing to draw a bead on me—and here I am, Jake, talking to you nice and friendly and pleasant in your own office, like we was old side-pardners."

The Kid laughed: the low musical laugh the sheriff knew. He was cool—cool as ice—and he had ridden into the cow-town, into the midst of a host of enemies, where every gun would have leaped from its holster at the sight of him. It was like the Kid to take wild chances: but the sheriff could scarcely believe that he had taken so wild a chance as this. Yet here he was—smiling at Jake Watson over the long barrel of the levelled six-gun.

"But you ain't going to give no call, Jake," he went on. "It would be the last yuap you would give on this side of Jordan, if you did! You're going to sit quiet in that rocker of yours, and listen to my say-so. Ain't you?"

Sheriff Watson was wide awake enough now. Under his grizzled brows his steely eyes smouldered at the Kid. Long had the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande defied him, and all that he could do: but this was the climax—holding him up in his own office; the crowning humiliation. Almost the sheriff grabbed

at the six-gun on his desk, to take a desperate chance. But he did not: for he knew that it was not a chance but a certainty.

"You here!" he repeated. "You've played too high this time, Kid. You won't get out of Frio alive."

"Quien sabe?" said the Kid, carelessly. "Say, did you have a pleasant paseo up in the Huecas yesterday, Jake?"

The sheriff gritted his teeth, without replying. At any moment, someone to see the sheriff might have stepped in from the street. Jake Watson longed for it to happen. But the Kid did not seem to care. After all, he had chosen his time well. It was but little past noon, and few if any were stirring in the blaze of the burning sun. Evidently no eye had noted the Kid riding in, or there would have been gun-play already. But if only some guy came in while the Kid was there—!

The Kid laughed, reading the sheriff's thoughts easily in his face. He was watching Jake Watson like a cat: but the corner of his eye was on the open doorway where the sunlight blazed.

"Guess why I've come, Jake!" he said, banteringly.

"If you've come shooting, get on with it," muttered the sheriff. "You got me covered, you darned fire-bug. I guess the shot will bring half Frio on to you, and you'll go up on a branch. Shoot, darn your hide, if that's what you've come for."

"I'm going to surprise you, Jake," grinned the Kid. "I ain't come a-shooting. I come to talk turkey, Jake."

"Aw, can it!" growled the sheriff.

He gave a sudden start, as another shadow fell across the sunlit doorway. The Kid did not start. But his left hand whipped out the second gun from his other holster, and it was up to a level as Hank Hanson, deputy sheriff of Frio, stepped in from the street.

"Say, sheriff," began Hanson. "Great gophers—" Hank Hanson's eyes popped at the Kid, as he suddenly became aware of him.

"Put 'em up, feller!" said the Kid, softly.

Hank Hanson gave one helpless look at the sheriff in his rocker. Then his hands went up over his head.

"The Kid!" he stuttered. "The Kid here! the Kid here—The Rio Kid—in Frio—!"

"Stand over there by the sheriff, Hank, and keep clawing the air," said the Kid. "I ain't here to spill any guy's juice over Jake's office, if I can help: but you got to mind your step."

The burly deputy-sheriff lurched over to Jake, and stood beside him, his hands well up. So long as he was under the Kid's gun, Hank Hanson had no kick coming.

"Now ain't you two guys doing jest as you're told, like you was back with your schoolmarm," said the Kid, pleasantly. "We'll get on fine, so long's

you're so good. Say, Jake, I guess you heard from Old Man Dawney that a fire-bug about my size lifted his roll on the Apache trail yesterday?"

"Sure!" grunted the sheriff.

"You been after that fire-bug?" grinned the Kid.

"I'll get him yet," muttered the sheriff.

"You got him now, old-timer, though you don't seem to be enjoying his company a whole lot," said the Kid. "Mebbe Old Man Dawney mentioned that a bunch of rustlers stopped him, further on the trail, and would have had that roll if it hadn't been cinched earlier."

"Yep!"

"Now I'm going to surprise you!" said the Kid. "I'm telling you, sheriff, that I got wise to them rustlers and their game, and held up the hack afore it got to them, jest to save Old Man Dawney's roll from their grip."

"And you cinched it," said the sheriff.

"I sure did! I got it here now, in the pocket of my chaps."

Jake Watson's eyes blazed, and Hank Hanson caught his breath. There was a bulge in the pocket of the Kid's goatskin chararejos. Was he loco enough to ride into Frio with the plunder on him? If only there came a chance of getting the upper hand of him—!

"Now, you guess why I held up that hack!" went on the Kid. "Spose I'd chirped to Old Man Dawney that there was a hold-up gang on the trail, and that I was telling him for his own good, you figure that he'd have fallen for it?"

"Not so's you'd notice it," grunted the sheriff.

"Right in one!" agreed the Kid. "I guess if I hadn't had my gun on him, he would have had his on me, and I wouldn't have had much time to tell him what a good boy I was. That's why I lifted his roll, Jake. Jest to keep it out of the grip of the bunch that was waiting for it." The Kid laughed. "I reckon, too, that I owe Old Man Dawney a few, and I kinder liked to give him a scare about losing twenty thousand dollars in a lump. But he ain't lost it, Jake! I'm shouting that I lifted it jest to keep it safe."

Jake Watson shrugged his massive shoulders, while Hanson stared curiously at the Kid.

"You don't believe that, Jake?" asked the Kid.

"Not a lot!" jeered the sheriff.

"It's the goods," said the Kid. "That was jest why. You're after me, sheriff, for hold-ups that I never heard of, and for running off steers that I never seen—it's all put down to the tally of the Rio Kid, that never touched a dollar that wasn't his own. But you wouldn't believe that, if I told you from now till the cows come home. But money talks, Jake! Here, you Hank! I got both hands busy, so you take that roll from the pocket of my chaps."

"You don't mean that!" said the deputy-sheriff, staring.

"You talking back?" asked the Kid. "It's sure foolish when I'm getting tired of holding these guns. Jump to it!"

Jake Watson sat and stared as if transfixed. Slowly, unbelievably, Hank Hanson stepped to the Kid, and drew a fat roll from the pocket of the chaparejos. He gazed at it with still unbelieving eyes.

"Wake up, feller," said the Kid. "I sure do enjoy a call on old friends like this, but I got to hit the trail all the same. You count them bills, and see that they pan out right."

Like a man in a dream, the deputy-sheriff ran through the roll of bills, all of high denominations. It was a fortune that the boy outlaw had brought into the sheriff's office. He laid the roll on the desk at last.

"Right?" asked the Kid.

"Every red cent, according to what Old Man Dawney allowed," said Hank. "Say, you gone loco, Kid?"



Swept off his station in mocking farewell.

"Aw, guess again!" snapped the Kid. "Them bucks belongs to Old Man Dawney, and ain't it right and proper for an honest citizen to tote them along to the sheriff to go back to the owner? That's what I come for. Now I guess I'm through and I'm hitting the trail. You wouldn't object if I put your hardware out of reach before I vamoose the ranch?"

Jake Watson and Hank Hanson were not in a position to raise objections, as the Kid, holstering one of his guns, took their "hardware" and tossed it into the street. The guns clattered on the rugged ground. The Kid, framed in the sunlit doorway, smiled at them. He knew that the alarm would be raised the moment his six-gun was no longer looking at them; they were waiting and watching for a chance: the big roll of bills that lay on the sheriff's desk made no difference to that. The Kid had thrown back a fortune, because it was not his own; but he was still the Rio Kid, wanted by all the sheriffs in Texas. The Kid smiled at them, and gave a low whistle. The black-muzzled mustang was at the door in a moment.

"I guess I'll mosey on, sheriff," said the Kid, amiably. "Don't move too sudden, or you might get yours, before you knew what hit you. Next time you feel like a pleasant paseo, Jake, you go riding up into the Huecas for a guy that ain't there. And next time you meet up with Old Man Dawney, tell the old bonehead that Kid Carfax wouldn't touch his pesky dollars if he was down to his last continental red cent. So-long, Jake—keep on the trail till the Frio folk find out that you ain't no earthly good and elect a new sheriff!"

The Kid stepped back into the sunlight, and was gone. There was a jingle of reins and a clatter of hoofs in the sunbaked street.

The sheriff leaped up, with a bound that sent the rocker spinning. He rushed to the door, with Hanson at his heels. The Kid, mounted on the black-muzzled mustang, was galloping down the rugged street, heading for the open prairie; and Side-Kicker was going like the wind. The sheriff shook a brawny fist and roared.

"The Rio Kid! It's the Rio Kid!"

But it was too late. At the end of the street, the Kid half-turned in the saddle, and swept off his Stetson in mocking farewell. Then a touch of the spur, and Side-Kicker was galloping out on the prairie. As the alarm spread, there was mounting in hot haste in the cow-town, mounting and riding of angry men with guns in their hands. Not till darkness fell like a velvet cloak on the wide grasslands of Texas did they return from the hunt—but they returned without the Rio Kid. Far away under the stars the Rio Kid was riding, free and carefree.

THE END