

The Rio Kid Rides Again!



CHAPTER I

THE sun was lay very low:

He had crossed in thick, shadowy clapparel, on the slope above the stage-trail that ran from Apache to Fritz. The hot sun of southern Texas blazed down on the clapparel, but it was shady under the Immortels, crowded with masses of Spanish-bush. The Kid had ridden hard that morning, with the devil's come from Fritz on his trail. They had tramped here as far as the House, and he ground up by thought of them leaving the line in the early golden up in the hills, never dreaming that he had strayed back, and left them to it. Almost under a tree's coat of the stage-trail, the Kid was in

they cover, taking a needed rest after hard riding; and he wished the sheriff and his men joy of their horses up in the hills. The black-headed moustang lay in the shade, half asleep; the Kid sat with his back to a trunk, feet but content. He was scarce three days out on the trail, and would never dream of looking for him on road to Frio; the cow-boys on the Texas where his name was a byword, and where every gun would have leaped from its holder 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 passing through the thickets from the slope above.

It was a lonely trail from Apache to Frio. Once a day the little two-horse pack trodded and bumped along the rugged way. Twice or thrice in a day some one-poncher from the ranches might ride it. But the pack from Apache was not the *pey*, and its poncher had ridden by since the Kid had camped to cover there. And it was not from the stage-trail that the sound of horses came. It came from higher up the slope. Hossmen were pointing down through the thickets towards the stage-trail below.

The Kid's face set hard, and a glint came over the blue eyes. He did not stir; but his hands were very near the walking-horns of the guns in his long-gun holsters. He had felt sure that he had chased the chase; that he had left the sheriff of Frio hunting in the Huachuca for a vanished outlaw. But it may have, after all, tracked him down—

So still sat the Kid, that a green lizard crawled over his gunskin slaps, unnoted. If the approaching hossmen 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 content as one hunter in the outfit; and it was Old Man Dremsey's best and bravest tender, his neighbors refused to believe that the boy hunter was innocent of what had been laid to his charge, that had driven the Kid outside the law. Was the Kid, now, as he now was, was he stage-hopper gunman. From the bottom of his heart he hoped that the townsmen, whoever they were, would perish by mistake, and that the water-hound gun would be left silent in their holsters.

The tramping and rattling came about.

The riders were nearing him. The Kid, without moving his head, cast a glance from the corner of his eye at a Stetson hat, for a moment, among the lapping Spanish moss. But it disappointed again. The riders were passing—within a rope's length of him, but never dreaming that he was there. It wasn't, after all, the sheriff and his posse; they were still up in the Huachuca. What 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 Sarsaparilla 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 chaparral.

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.

"You what?" murmured the Kid, hoarsely.

Four men came to him, through the trees and the tangled thickets, of tamaras being withered. 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 poachers had taken a short cut through the chaparral, so much the wiser stage-trail, toward 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 showed on the parchment 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 back from Apache, due to pass in the afternoon. Likely enough, some rancher who had sold steers in Apache might be returning to Frio in the back, with a roll of greenbacks, and they came to come that roll. The Kid grinned unconsciously, and shrugged his thin 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 looked in as a matter of course. But a hold-up was no concern of an outlaw, trusted 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, combating the Huacos for an outlaw who was not there, would have been more useful nearer to Frio, with the gang waiting to hold up the back 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 hair 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 buy in no saloon. The house 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 Dewey packing a roll of twenty thousand dollars, for steers he's sold at Apache—and I had it time

Andy that's he coming back to Five in the Jack. Twenty thousand forks don't grow on every peck in the chapparral.

"You said it, Two-gun."

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

It was Old Man Gurney 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 tail. But there were four of the rustlers, and he hadn't a chance if it came to that. Old Man Dewsey—once the Kid's boss on the Double-Bar, whose double 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 face 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 catch his rope, and fill him with lead in cooking it. You sure are phish loco to have into this tangle. But you always was a headband, Kid!"

Headband 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 mounting, came no sound, as the Kid stalked up. Side-Kicker was as accustomed to caution as his master. Taking the bridle, the Kid led his mounting away through the chapparral, 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 crowy creeping into a bush, the Kid wove his way through the thickets, leaving the hold-up gang farther and farther behind him. It was not till he had covered a good distance, that he reoriented and rode, taking a starting 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 mounting to the gallop, riding like the wind in the direction of Apache, to meet the buck as it came.

CHAPTER II

"Halt!"

Andy Jones, driver of the two-horse hack, pulled to an accidently stop. His nervous almost rabid look, on the vehicle. That man word was enough for Andy, backed by a six-gun that glimmered in the sunshine, with a smiling face behind it under a brimless hat. That handsome youthful face smiled; but the eyes, cool and clear, had a glint to them; and Andy was not the guy to argue with the man who held the gun! Andy was used to drive that hack, but to mix up in gun-play with hold-up men; and of all the outlaws in the Lower Star State, the 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 cowboy at the side of the trail, hardly seemed to lift his gun. He laughed as the horses bounded 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 having his 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 guess, 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 just hate to quit your job. It's your passenger I want."

That passenger had already put his head out of the window of the hack, revealing a hard, broad, bearded face, and a pair of stern glancing eyes under bushy brows. The rancher of the Double-Bar was a hard man, and he looked it. The glancing eyes fixed on the boy rider, and Mr. Dawson 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 Dawson 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 broad, bearded face. The mere pressure of a finger would have sent the end of the trail for Old Man Dawson, seconds before his gun was out. And the rancher realized it, and his fingers dropped away from the butt.

He fixed his eyes intently 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 taking up the stage! I reckoned you'd come to it! And you had the big-guns! Come or tell me this, you never did what I told you off my ranch for! You?"

"And I can never do it," said the Kid. "But I can't see no time the way with you, Mr. Dewey. Light down from that horse."

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

"You can't see time?" said the Kid, softly. "You go contrary on the Double-Bar, Mr. Dewey. I guess I give time on this trail. You lightning down from that back, now?" The trigger clicked.

The trigger grated his teeth, and tugged out of the bank. He eyed the Kid almost like a wolf, and gave one glance at Andy Jones. But the stage-driver was still in the seat, showing concern, while he waited for the Kid to get through. If Fletcher Dewey signed up help from Andy, he had to quit soon.



(Fletcher Dewey was dead.)

"Put up your hands, feller," said the Kid, and slowly, earnestly, unnecessarily, the rancher raised his hands above his head.

The Kid nodded approval.

"O.K.," he said. "You sure got some, Mr. Dewsey. How long is it since you drove me off the Double-Bar with a gun in your belt? I've killed the gun cow, 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 sailing every dime in Apache, and you money change with a fat rib in your jeans. Ain't I the Rio Kid, the live-long of the Rio Grande; the guy to whom 'ally they've got down half the hold-ups in the State, more'n I ever heard of? What you want I want, you packing twenty thousand dollars, and not holding a gun?"

He laughed aloud.

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

"I heard a little bird sing in the chapparal," said the Kid, innocently. "You sure who is your roll, rancher. When you pack it?"

"You're not getting twenty thousand dollars from me, you sorry young rascal!" bawled the rancher. "By the good blessed lord, 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. The hypocrite Sheriff Watson and his posse are combing the Hincas for me, and here I am on the Frio trail, holding up the dumbest, stupidest old bearded man in the State of Texas. I'll take a shiner on it, rancher—and I'll take the roll. And I ain't waiting, feller."

Old Man Dewsey's teeth came together hard. Staleness, swiftly, his hand dropped to his gun, and he fished 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 buck, but he did not stir. The Rio Kid laughed.

"That sure was foolish, feller," he said, offensively. "You ain't much enough on the draw for a rancher. But you ain't lost a whole lot, and there ain't no call to strap 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 staring with eyes. The six-gun had been shot from his hand, and lay smashed in the trail; but behind the mounting jar of the shock, Old Man Dewsey was not hurt. Was a moment he had fished his hand that way. But there was not even a speck of red on it.

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

"Aw, cut it!" said the Kid. "You're wasting time, rancher. You want to let the horse, and get that Wash and the rest of the outfit on the trail to look for me and your dollars. Are you handing over that roll, or do you want me to cross you like an empty steer, and take it."

Trembling with rage, the rancher, with his undamaged hand, drew out the fat roll that was the prize of many fat steers in the market at Apache. As soon as he handed it up to the boy outlaw on the Mustang.

It was a large roll. But the Kid hastily glanced at it. He dropped the roll cautiously into the pocket of his chaps.

"Now I guess you can have the wind, as long as you want," he said. "You can drive on, Andy, and carry this empty old roll to Fred, to tell them that the Rio Kid isn't just where their sheriff is looking for him."

"Garn!" said Andy.

The rancher stepped into the back 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 anxiety right in his look, at the handsome figure by the trail. The Kid swept off the Mustang with its head of silver suggest, it snorting steam and farewell. Old Man Dewsey sat back in the back, still nursing his mangled wrist, his forehead, gaunt face almost white with rage.

The back rolled on its way, the boy outlaw disappeared from sight behind it. He passed from Old Man Dewsey's vision, the seat from his mind. The Kid was riding away with twenty thousand dollars, a heavy iron coin to a rich rancher like George Dewsey. The sheriff of Fred, was hunting him in the hills fifteen miles to the westward, while he was riding off with the rancher's roll! Old Man Dewsey was so hasty to reach Fred, 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 Fred yet. The back had rolled one mile from the spot where the Kid had been left, and was tramping along the rough trail bordered by thick chapparal, when there was another stop.

"Halt!"

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

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

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

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

Without the slipping rock-scarf, he might have driven them rough-neckly off the premises of Frio. But their features were well hidden. They did not take the trail with the reckless hardbood of the Rio Kid.

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

Old Man Dawney gave a savage lurch back.

"You got wise to it now, that I've been selling steers down to Aguila!" he growled. "Well, 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 cowboy was cleaned out back on the trail, by the Rio Kid—"

"The Rio Kid?"

"Surest thing you know?" He pointed Mr. Dawney's roll, and looked at it half-way to Mexico with it by eye.

There were muttered curses under the slipping rock-scarf, but Two-gun Carter was not the guy to take Andy's word for it, or the rancher's either. He started an order, and two of the riders grasped Old Man Dawney, and went through his pockets: and then they examined the book. Not so much as a dollar bill remained there. They had to chew on it that the Rio Kid had been true in the field, and that they had waited in their ambush for nothing. There was a stack of notes and coins that might have turned the suspicious character that takes, such as it was, was all that was left to Two-gun and his bunch.

The book was permitted to roll on again at last, and Andy drove on with his message to Frio: leaving four disappointed and annoyed hold-up men still staring their back and the Rio Kid.

CHAPTER 10

STEWART WATSON lay back lazily in his rocker, in his office in the downtown. Soft Frio, maddening in the drowsy heat of the day. His feet, in their big cow-side 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 six-shooter at hand. But Jake Watson was not thinking of guns or gunplay as he cracked 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 shimmering in the semi-tropical heat of the blazing afternoon. When the sheriff, half-awake, heard the buzz of a horse's hoofs outside in the crowd, he wondered lazily what guy was foolish enough to be riding in that heat of day, quite unsheltered.

Jake Watson was a heavy 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 Howas, a long and weary trail that had led him nowhere. And riding back to Frisco late, he had found Raulover Dewdney's tale of the hold-up on the stage-trail, and once more he had ridden out with his saddle-worn 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 over none of all the Texas sheriffs could do. Old Man Dewdney had gone back furious to his ranch. Sheriff Watson scratched 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 today, drawing in the heat of the day, forgetful even of the Rio Kid.

The clatter of horse's hoofs in the rugged street of Frisco 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 slyly—but the next moment, he was not sly—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 bleach beard of a Kid, was looking him in the face, and Jake Watson was not knowing for sudden death. He sat in his chair, and stared with almost unbelieving eyes at a handsome southern face, under the rim of a Stetson hat that was adorned with a band of silver nuggets.

"The Kid?" he stammered.

The Rio Kid grinned at him.

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

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

"You—how in Frisco?" he breathed.

"Me—here in Frisco?" answered the Kid. "A hundred gallons water will wash every one of them looking to draw a bead at me—and here I am, hain't, talking to you nice and friendly and pleasant in your own office, like we was old side-partners?"

The Kid laughed; the low musical laugh the sheriff knew. He was cock-eyed as he—and he had ridden into the cow-town, into the name of a town 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—coming at Jake Watson over the long beard of the levelled dragoon.

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

Sheriff Watson was wide awake enough now. Under his pinched brownish stare eyes considered at the Kid. Long had the law outlaw of the Rio Grande defied him, and all that he could do, but this was the climax—taking him up in his own office, the crowning humiliation. Almost the sheriff gabbled

at the six-gun on his desk, to take a desperate chance. But he did not. 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."

"Upon what?" said the Kid, curiously. "Say, did you have a pleasant party up in the Haines yesterday, Jake?"

The sheriff ground 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 town of the burning sun. Evidently no eye had noted the Kid riding in, or there would have been some 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 shined.

"Guess why I've come, Jake?" he said, haughtily.

"If you've come shooting, get on with it," muttered the sheriff. "You got me covered, you started too-hey. I guess the shot will bring half Frio on to you, and you'll go up on a branch. Smart, damn your hide, if that's what you're 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, son of!" growled the sheriff.

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

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

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

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

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

"Stand over there by the sheriff, Hank, and keep clearing the air," said the Kid. "I ain't here to split any guy's joint over Jake's office, if I can help; but you got to stand your stop."

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

"Now ain't you two guys doing just 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 Dewey that a long-leg about my case lifted his roll-on the Apache trail yesterday?"

"Sure?" grinned the sheriff.

"You been after that long-leg?" 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 Dewey mentioned that a bunch of rustlers stopped him, farther on the trail, and would turn out that roll if a haidn't been touched earlier."

"Yes?"

"Now I'm going to surprise you!" said the Kid. "I'm riding you smart, but I got wise to them rustlers and their game, and held up the hazy where I got to them, just to save Old Man Dewey's roll from their japs."

"And you touched 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 grin in the pocket of the Kid's gaudy chaps. Was he too smooth to ride into Frix with the plunder on him? If only there were a chance of getting the upper hand of him—!

"Now, you guess why I held up that bank?" went on the Kid. "Spese I'd slipped to Old Man Dewey that there was a hold-up going on the trail, and that I was taking him for his own good, you figure that he'd have fallen for it?"

"Naw-ee! you'd notice it," grinned the sheriff.

"Right is you!" agreed the Kid. "I guess if I haidn't had my gun in 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. Just 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 Dewey a few, and I kindly liked to give him a case about being heavy-handed docters in a larp. But he ain't lost it, Jake! I'm showing that I lifted it just 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 bit!" grinned the sheriff.

"It's the goods," said the Kid. "That was just why. You're after me, sheriff, for hold-ups that I never heard of, and for running off mares that I never seen—it's all you 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 to the next some more. But money talks, Jake! Here, you think 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 true?" asked the Kid. "It's sure foolish when I'm going mad of taking that japs. Jump to it!"

Like Watson sat and stared as if transfixed. Slowly, unbelievably, Head Harnum stepped to the Kid, and drew a fat roll from the pocket of the chamois. He gazed at it with still unbelonging eyes.

"Wake up, filly," said the Kid. "I sure do enjoy a roll on old fronts like this, but I got to hit the trail all the same. You cover those ribs, and see that they ain't cut right."

Like a steam in a dream, the deputy-sheriff ran through the coil of hills, all at high decomposition. It was a fortune that the boy's roll had tumbled into the sheriff's office. He laid the roll on the desk at last.

"Right?" asked the Kid.

"Every rib cut, according to what Old Man Dimesy shows," said Hank. "Say, you gone loco, Kid?"



Some of the boys in the Kid's bunch.

"Aw, guess again?" sneered the Kid. "Them books belongs to Old Man Dewsey, and ain't it right and proper for an honest citizen to tote them along to the sheriff to get back to the owner? That's what I want for. Now I guess I'm married, and I'm hitting the trail. You wouldn't object if I put your hands way out of reach before I ransack the ranch?"

Jake Watson and Hank Henshaw were not in a position to raise objections, as the Kid, holstered one of his guns, took down "hardware" and tossed it down the street. The guns clattered on the rugged ground. The Kid framed in the vault doorway, smiled at them. He knew that the alarm would be raised this instant his signal was no longer looking at them, they were waiting and waiting for a chance—the big roll of bills that lay on the sheriff's desk made no difference to that. The Kid had driven 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-smeared inventory was at the door in a moment.

"I guess I'll money out, sheriff," and the Kid, amiably. "Don't worry too sudden, or you might get scared, before you know what hit you. Next time you feel like a phizical power, Jake, you go riding up into the House for a guy that ain't there. And next time you meet up with Old Man Dewsey, tell the old leonard that Kid Curfew wouldn't touch his penny dollars if he was down to his last continental out cent. So-long, Jake—keep on the trail till the Fry folk find out that you ain't no earthly good and elect a new sheriff!"

The Kid slipped back into the twilight, and was gone. There was a jingle of coins and a clatter of books in the deserted 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-smeared mustang, was galloping down the rugged street, heading for the open prairie; and Side-Kicker was going like the wind. The sheriff shook a frowny fist and ranted.

"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 smoking farewell. Then a bunch of the gang, and Side-Kicker was galloping out on the prairie. As the alarm spread, there was mourning in hot lanes in the cow-towns, mourning 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 untried.