



The Thousand-Dollar Kid!

By RALPH REDWAY

THE FIRST CHAPTER HUNTED DOWN!

THE spattering of shots from the prairie startled the Rio Kid from his siesta. The boy outlaw of the Rio Grande lay deep in ferns, resting lazily in the heat of the Texan day. Overhead, the tangled boughs of the chaparral shut off the blaze of the sun that burned with tropical heat on the open prairie. The Kid lay at ease in the ferns, his head resting on his saddle. Near by the grey mustang cropped the herbage.

Save for the quiet crop, crop of the horse, and the chirrup of a cicada in the thicket, all was silent and still in the drowsy heat of midday.

The Kid had been thinking, half-dreaming, of old days on the Double-Bar Ranch; old days when he had ridden with the Double-Bar bunch before he had been outlawed and a price put on his head. But as that sudden spattering of shots broke the drowsy silence, the mustang raised his head from the grass and laid back his ears—and the Rio Kid leaped to

One thousand dollars is the reward offered for the Rio Kid. But the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande is a wily customer to catch—as a treacherous gunman discovers to his cost!

his feet, his hand grasping a gun.

Thud, thud, thud!

Faint from afar, then closer and louder came the hoof-strokes of a galloping horse.

"Shucks!" murmured the Kid, as he listened. "I guess the galoot that's riding that cayuse is sure riding it hard."

The Rio Kid had camped on the edge of the chaparral. A dozen steps, and he was looking out over the open prairie that stretched from the dusky wood, mile on mile, towards the distant Rio Pecos. Keeping in cover of the trees, tangled with masses of pendant Spaniard's beard, the Kid looked out over the sunlit plain, wondering who was riding so hard in the blaze of the sun.

A horseman was spurring towards the chaparral. His broncho, thick with dust, caked with sweat, was on the point of exhaustion—only the savage urging of whip and spur drove him on. The Kid's brows contracted as he looked. To save his life, the Kid would never have driven an exhausted horse so mercilessly.

But it was to save his life that the horseman was spurring. Over a grassy fold of the prairie behind three Stetson hats were bobbing. Three riders were on the track of the fugitive, and gaining on him at every leap of their horses, in spite of his savage spurring and lashing whip.

The Rio Kid looked on grimly.

The fugitive had lost his hat in his wild flight. The blazing sun beat down on his face and tousled head. The Kid knew that dark, black-bearded face, the mouth that was like a gash, the hard, savage eyes set close together.

"Rube Smith!" murmured the Kid. "Shucks! I guess them jaspers yonder will be raking in that five hundred. Sure thing!"

The fleeing broncho staggered, and seemed about to fall. A savage hand on the rein steadied him, and he panted on towards the chaparral. Bang, bang, bang! came from the riders behind. They were in full sight now, firing on the fugitive as they rode him down.

The Kid made no movement.

Rube Smith was making a desperate effort to reach the chaparral. Close as his pursuers were, he had a chance of escape once in the tangled woods and thickets. But he would never reach it—the Kid could see that. At every stride he expected to see the over-strained broncho pitch over in the grass.

The Kid's look was dubious. For a hunted man he could feel sympathy; he had been hunted himself, and had known what it was to ride for his life with deadly foes spurring on his trail. But he had little feeling for the desperate bandit who was fleeing from the Sheriff of Plug Hat and his men.

All along the border Rube Smith was known for his desperate deeds—a gunman, a rustler, a cow-thief, a ruthless killer, with a reward of five hundred dollars on his head. Every cowman in Texas would have been glad to see Rube Smith swung up to the branch of a cottonwood, and the Rio Kid would not have been sorry.

Crash!

Within a dozen yards of the spot where the Kid stood, screened by hanging lianas, on the edge of the chaparral, the over-driven mustang crashed suddenly to the earth.

The rider fell heavily.

The Kid saw him strive to rise, and sink back again, helplessly. One leg was pinned under the fallen horse.

Rube Smith lay at the mercy of his pursuers. There was a shout of



From the green wall of the chaparral came a sudden blaze of firing as the Kid's guns roared. With lead whizzing round their heads, the sheriff and his men wheeled their horses and rode madly back the way they had come.

triumph as the Plug Hat men rode on to secure him.

Then the Kid woke suddenly to action.

"Bad man" the outlaw was—the most lawless and desperate border ruffian in Texas. But the Kid felt a stirring of sympathy as the ruffian lay at the mercy of his foes. He would not see him taken.

From the green of the chaparral came a sudden blaze of firing as the Kid's walnut-butted .45's roared.

Bang, bang, bang!

The sheriff of Plug Hat, riding a few yards ahead of his men, gave a yell as the Stetson spun from his head. His followers reined in their horses as the lead whizzed by their ears.

Bang, bang!

For a second the three riders stared

at the green wall of the chaparral, with the whizzing lead buzzing round their heads; and then they wheeled their horses and rode madly back the way they had come. Plying whip and spur, they dashed away over the prairie, riding for their lives.

The Kid grinned as he threw lead after them.

The bullets went close, grazing here an arm, there a shoulder or an ear. The Rio Kid could place his lead where he liked. Not one of the sheriff's men was hit; but every one of the three figured that he had had the closest call of his life as he rode frantically out of range of the hidden marksman.

They vanished across the grassy plain, nothing doubting that the fleeing bandit had led them into an ambush from which they had narrowly escaped.

The Kid, his smoking guns in his hand, stepped out of the trees and advanced towards the fallen bandit.

Rube Smith had given up his efforts to drag his pinned leg loose. The horse did not stir. It was death-stricken as it fell, and it lay, an inert mass, its weight pinning the bandit's limb, crushing it into the earth. Lying on his side, raised on an elbow, the bandit dragged a six-gun from his belt, his eyes glaring over the barrel at the Rio Kid as he came out of the chaparral.

"Drop it, feller!" ordered the Kid. "You pesky jay, don't you savvy that I've jest saved your neck—though it sure wasn't worth saving! Drop it, hombre."

The Kid's gun looked full in the face of the panting bandit.

"The Rio Kid!" breathed Rube Smith.

"Sure!"

The bandit's savage eyes glared at him over the six-gun. But he knew—none better—that the Rio Kid's aim never failed. A glitter came into the Kid's eyes.

"Drop it, you durned coyote——"

The six-gun sagged into the grass.

"I guess it's your say-so, Kid," said Rube Smith hoarsely; and he dropped the gun.

"You've said it," agreed the Rio Kid.

He picked up the bandit's revolver and, with a swing of his arm, tossed it away over the tree-tops into the chaparral.

THE SECOND CHAPTER

IN CAMP!

THE wattled jacal was built in the heart of the chaparral, by a little stream that flowed and rippled amid tangled mesquite and pecan and

post-oak. It was a flimsy hut, but shelter enough for the Rio Kid.

He was not anxious to draw attention to himself. The encounter with the sheriff's men from Plug Hat was not pleasing to him for that reason.

Whether they had seen him or not as he fired on them from the chaparral he did not know, but if they had they would spread the news that the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande was on hand. The Kid called himself a gink for having chipped in to save Rube Smith from a well-deserved fate.

And he had the gunman on his hands now. Without a horse, with his leg hurt, and disarmed—the Kid had seen to that!—the gunman was helpless. The Kid had brought him to the jacal where he camped, and the bandit lay now on a pile of skins in the little hut.

Night brooded over the chaparral.

It was densely dark, hardly a gleam of starlight penetrating the tangled vegetation. Outside the doorway of the jacal a low camp-fire burned on which the Kid had cooked his supper—and his guest's.

Little as he liked Rube Smith, and though he called himself a gink for having saved him, the Kid's hospitality was boundless. The hunted man was welcome to a share in the shelter of the jacal and to a share of the Kid's provender.

The Kid would be glad enough to see the last of him, and while he stayed he could not trust him an inch, but he was welcome to stay if he liked. He was a hunted man, hunted for his life, and that was enough for the Kid.

"Grub, feller!" called out the Kid cheerily, when the flap-jacks and bacon and beans were ready.

Rube Smith crawled from the bed of skins.

His leg had been hurt where it had

been pinned under the dead bronco ; but the Kid had examined it and found that no bones were broken. It seemed to the Kid that the bandit was making much of a slight injury, though Rube Smith, strong and savage and desperate, was hardly the man to play the invalid.

He sat on one side of the little fire, and ate his supper with voracious appetite. While he ate he stared at the Kid in the ruddy gleam of the fire.

" You figure it's safe to light a fire hyer, Kid ? " he asked.

" Sure ! It won't be seen from the plains," answered the Kid. " I reckon I'll stamp it out, though, afore I turn into my blankets."

" I guess I never reckoned I'd meet up with you, Kid," said the bandit. " Lucky for me you was around here. Them guys had me dead to rights when you horned in."

" They sure had."

" I guess I'm powerful obliged, Kid," said Rube Smith, his shifty eyes on the handsome, sunburnt face across the fire. " But what's the big idea in taking my hardware off me, feller ? "

" You're sure safer without it," said the Kid. " You might get a hunch to pull a gun if you had one, and that would mean sudden death for you, feller."

Rube Smith laughed uneasily.

" I guess I wouldn't pull a gun on you, Kid, arter you saved me," he said. " You can sure trust me for that."

The Kid smiled, and made no reply. He trusted Rube Smith about as much as he trusted a rattlesnake.

" Well, I reckon I don't want a gun while I'm camping here," said Rube Smith. " You're sure a white man, Kid, to stand by a guy like this. Say, what you doing in this country ? "

" Lying doggo," the Kid answered briefly. " There's a lot of guys want to meet up with me, bad, but I ain't pining to see them. What you been doing on the Pecos, feller ? "

Rube Smith did not answer that question. He ate bacon and beans in silence.

His supper finished, he half-rose, and sank back again with a faint gasp.

" My leg's sure bad ! " he said. " Mebbe you'll give me a hand back into the shebang, Kid."

" Sure ! "

The Kid helped the ruffian back into the jacal, and Rube Smith sank down on the bed of skins with a faint groan.

The Kid, in the shadows of the hut, looked at him curiously. Again, it was borne in upon his mind that the bandit was making much of his injury, more than the hurt to his leg warranted.

The man's record was a black one, and the Kid knew that he was none too good for any treachery. He was unmounted now, and for the sake of the Kid's horse he would have been capable of repaying the boy outlaw's service with a bullet through the head. The Kid was quite aware of it.

He wondered whether it was the bandit's game to give him an impression of being helpless in order to make some attempt on him while he slept that night. Rube Smith was none too good for it, and a stone or a billet of wood might have sufficed for dealing with a sleeping man.

The Kid smiled at the thought. He slept like a weasel, and if the bandit had any idea of taking him by surprise when he was in his blankets he was likely to meet with a surprise himself.

" You are all right now, feller ? " asked the Kid.

"I guess so. You turning in?"

"I reckon I'll let you have the shebang," said the Kid. "I'm taking my blankets into the chaparral."

"You sure don't trust a guy, Kid."

"Not a whole heap!" said the Kid coolly, and picking up his blankets and slicker, he left the jacal.

Rube Smith's eyes gleamed after him in the gloom.

The Kid laid down in his blankets in the thickets, by the side of his mustang.

But he did not sleep.

The camp-fire died out, and all was dark, save here and there where a gleam of starlight came through the tangled branches.

Night, full of the strange, eerie sounds of the chaparral, lay like a dark cloak round the camp of the Rio Kid.

He had lain by the mustang more than an hour, when there was a faint sound from the jacal close at hand.

The Kid smiled in the darkness.

His hand was on the walnut butt of a six-gun. He had given the fugitive bandit help and shelter, and if Rube Smith was meditating treachery the Kid was prepared to give him hot lead, with no more compunction than if he had been a prowling wolf.

Lying silent in the thicket the Kid listened. He heard the bandit leave the jacal, and there was no sound of the dragging of an injured leg. He smiled again. His judgment had been correct; Rube Smith's leg was bruised but it was not disabled. He was moving easily and freely enough now.

The Kid gripped his six-gun hard. He fully expected to detect the ruffian stealing towards him in the darkness with murderous intent.

But to his surprise there was no sound of the bandit's approach. For some minutes there was silence—he

knew that the ruffian was listening. Then there were faint sounds receding, and the Kid realised that Rube Smith was leaving the camp.

The Kid whistled under his breath.

Why? There was no reason why he should not have left the Kid openly, at any moment he liked. Why had he affected to be disabled, and why was he stealing away softly in the darkness? The Kid reflected on that problem for a few moments. What it meant he did not know—except that it was more than likely that it meant treachery of some sort.

The Kid, quietly leaving his blankets, moved silently through the thickets; and as Rube Smith picked his slow and cautious way through the gloom of the chaparral there was one that followed behind him, unseen, like a flitting phantom in the shadows of the night.

THE THIRD CHAPTER

BLACK TREACHERY!

"YOU, Rube!"

"I guess so, Jake Saunders."

"You're dog-goned late."

"You been waiting?"

"Since sundown!" growled the rough-bearded man who leaned on the trunk of the cottonwood, deep in shadow, the glow of his cigar indicating where he stood to the eyes of the bandit who came creeping from the thickets.

Rube Smith stopped under the shadowy branches of the tall cottonwood, half a mile from the jacal where the Rio Kid's camp lay. Jake peered at him in the gloom.

"I been waiting since sundown," he repeated. "I reckon I'd have hit the trail mighty soon, Rube. You allowed you'd be here to meet up with me at dark."

"I guess it was a chance whether

I met up with you at all," growled the bandit. "The sheriff of Plug Hat got track of me, and I had to ride for my life!"

Jake whistled.

"I guess they'd have cinched me," went on Rube Smith, "but the Rio Kid horned in, and threw lead at the Plug Hat guys, and I got away. He's fixed up in a jacal in the chaparral, lying doggo. He allows that there ain't a chance of any galoot roping in the thousand dollars that's offered for him."

"Gee!" muttered the other.

"That's why I kept you waiting," went on the bandit. "I didn't figure on letting the Kid know I had a pard meeting up with me here."

"He ain't wise to it?"

"Not by long chalks, he ain't! I've left him in his blankets, and I

guess he won't open his eyes till sun-up."

"He's a spry galoot, that Kid! If he spotted you getting away——"

"He didn't!" grinned Rube Smith. "He took his blankets out into the chaparral; he reckoned he wasn't safe too near to me in the dark. He sure was right; I've got an old grouch agin him, and if he'd left me a gun——"

He gritted his teeth.

"What's the game, then?" asked the other. "I can sure fix you up with a gun; but you don't want to go to gun-play with the Kid. He's a bad man to crowd."

"I ain't crowding him, I guess." The bandit paused a moment. "That Kid's worth a thousand dollars, Jake. I sure can't walk into Plug Hat or any other cow-town and tell them



Before Rube Smith could draw his gun a rim of cold steel was jabbing against his cheek. "Forget it, feller!" came the cool voice of the Rio Kid. "You draw that gun and you're a dead coyote!"

where to cinch him. I reckon it would be shooting on sight if I did."

Jake chuckled

"It sure would," he assented. "I guess they'd rather have you than the Kid, Rube."

"That's so. But they ain't wise to you, Jake—no guy in this section knows that you work with me. You can walk into any cow-town on the Pecos; you wouldn't be much use to my outfit if you couldn't. All they know of you is that you're a puncher on the Sunset Ranch. They ain't wise to it that you're in with my bunch——"

"If they was, I guess I shouldn't be here chewing the rag with you," grinned Jake. "I should sure be strung up on a limb."

"You get me?" muttered Rube Smith. "You hustle into Plug Hat, and put the sheriff wise that you know where to lay hands on the Rio Kid. He sure will jump at the chance of roping in that pesky firebug. Bring the sheriff and his men around hyer at dawn, and they'll have the Kid jest where they want him. They can surround his camp and close in on him, and he won't have a dog's chance of getting clear. You get me?"

"Sure!"

"It's a thousand dollars," muttered the bandit. "You rope in the dollars, Jake—easy as falling off a log. We divide afterwards."

"Looks a sure thing," said Jake.

"It's jest pie!" said Rube Smith hoarsely. "The Kid ain't got a suspicion. He don't trust me any, but he ain't wise to it that I've got a pard here—and a pard that can show up in any cow-town without being known as one of my outfit. It's jest pie."

"You've said it!" agreed Jake.

There was an eager muttering of voices as the bandit gave his confederate the description of the spot where the jacal was built by the little stream.

"I guess I know the place," said Jake Saunders. "I been all through this chaparral. I reckon I could find it with my eyes shut now you've put me wise. You sure the Kid will be there?"

"It's a cinch! He won't miss me till dawn—and then, if he does, how's he to get wise to this racket? He knows I daren't show up in any town in Texas. He don't know about you."

"You ain't going back?"

Rube chuckled hoarsely.

"Not by a jugful! I reckon the Kid might get suspicious when the Plug Hat guys come around, and he might let me have the first bullet. And I sure don't want the Plug Hat galoots to find me along with the Kid—they'd be powerful pleased to string me up on the same branch, I reckon. Nope—I ain't going back. You hit for Plug Hat now, jest as fast as your cayuse can raise the dust, and you'll get the sheriff by dawn. I'll see you again to-morrow at sundown. I guess I can camp here safe; it's more'n half a mile from the Kid's camp, and they'll come to it from the other way, with you guiding them."

"Sure!" assented Jake.

"Lend me a six-gun, and beat it."

A few minutes later there was the sound of a horse pushing through the thickets, followed by the ringing of distant hoofs when Jake Saunders reached the open plain and galloped for the cow-town.

Rube Smith stood under the cottonwood, smoking a cigarette, and holding in his hand the six-gun Saunders had given him. His grip was hard on

the butt of the Colt, and a savage light burned in his eyes. His thoughts were of the Rio Kid and the temptation was on him to return to the jacal, now that he had a weapon in his hand, and give the boy outlaw "his."

"Dead or alive!" muttered the bandit aloud. "They want him dead or alive—and I guess Jake would cinch the reward if they found him dead. And they'd be surer of finding him—with a bullet through his heart, dog-gone him! I've sure a hunch to go back——"

But the bandit shook his head. No doubt the Rio Kid would be securely roped in when the jacal was surrounded by the sheriff of Plug Hat and a score of determined men. But gun-play, single-handed, was another matter.

Rube Smith shook his head and thrust the six-gun into his belt. With such black treachery afoot, it was not healthy to return to the Rio Kid's camp. Safer to camp where he was, skulking in hiding till the boy outlaw was a prisoner in hands that were not likely to loosen him once they had fastened their grip on him. It was an easy thousand dollars, the bandit reflected.

Silent he stood, staring with unseeing eyes into the dim shadows—wondering afresh which course it would be more profitable, for himself, to pursue.

Something that stirred in the shadows made the bandit start and drop his hand again to the gun he had thrust into his belt. But before he could draw it a rim of steel was pressing against his neck, and a soft, pleasant voice said in his ear:

"Forget it, feller! You draw that gun and you're a dead coyote!"

The heart of the bandit missed a beat as he heard the voice of the Rio Kid.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER

IN HIS OWN SNARE!

THE Rio Kid smiled pleasantly in the shadows of the cottonwood branches at the startled, scared face of Rube Smith.

The bandit eyed him desperately.

The Kid, whom he had deemed sleeping in his camp half a mile away, was there. The Kid had trailed him when he left the jacal. How much did he know?

Rube Smith's fingers closed convulsively on the butt of the six-gun. But it was death to draw it, and he did not venture. The Kid, with his left hand, relieved him of the gun and tossed it away in the darkness. His face was still smiling, but it was a grim and deadly smile.

"You—you trailed me?" muttered Rube Smith hoarsely.

"You've said it."

The Kid laughed softly.

"I allowed you was a pizen coyote, Rube Smith! I sure reckoned I was some gink to get you away from the sheriff of Plug Hat. Say, you're going to take a little journey with me. We're going back to camp."

"Why?" hissed Rube Smith, between his teeth.

"I sure ain't so tired of your company, feller, as you are of mine," smiled the Kid. "I reckon I'll take a cinch on your paws before we start, and, if you raise any objections, Rube, you want to remember that this six-gun is mighty likely to go off sudden!"

The ruffian stood still while the Kid tied his hands behind his back. In the gloom, he could see the smile on the Kid's face, and the boy outlaw's tone was pleasantly mocking. But the fear of death was in the heart of the bandit who had sought to sell the Kid to his enemies in return for the saving of his life.

Taking the ruffian by one bound arm, the Kid led him away through the chaparral, in the direction of the jacal.

Rube Smith stumbled on by his side.

"Your laig's sure a whole lot better'n it was," said the Kid, with gentle sarcasm. "Say, you was sure fooling me, Rube! But I guess I wasn't quite so fooled as you allowed."

The bandit panted.

"You're wise to it, Kid—I know that. You heard me chewing the rag with Jake Saunders!"

"Every word," drawled the Kid, "You poor fish! I wasn't six feet from you all the time!"

"Then you know——"

"I guess you ain't got a lot more to tell me," admitted the Kid.

"Dog-gone you!" hissed Rube Smith. "What are you taking me back to your camp for? If you're going to drill me, you gol-darned cuss——"

"Who's going to drill you?" said the Kid, in a tone of mild surprise. "This infant sure ain't!"

"You ain't?" breathed Rube Smith.

"Sure not."

"Then what's your game?"

"I guess you'll be wise to that pronto."

The Kid led his prisoner on by tangled paths. Rube Smith tramped and stumbled by his side, powerless in his hands, savagely surmising what his fate was to be. As soon as he knew that the Kid was wise to his treachery, he had expected to be shot out of hand. But the Kid did not intend to use his gun. What, then, did he intend?

The Kid did not choose to explain. In silence, he led the bandit through the gloomy chaparral, and they

reached the jacal by the little stream. There was a stirring in the thicket, and Side-Kicker looked out at his master. The Kid paused to pat the glossy neck of his mustang.

"I guess we'll be hittin' the trail mighty soon, old hoss," said the Kid. "You, Rube Smith, you hump it into the shebang."

Rube Smith stopped, and faced the Kid with a desperate light in his eyes.

"Look here, Kid!"

"Get into the shebang, I'm telling you."

"You dog-goned cuss!"

"I guess I ain't got a whole lot of time to chew the rag with you, Rube Smith," said the Kid amiably. "I got to hit the horizon afore the sheriff of Plug Hat horns in with his posse. You get inside."

With a grasp on the bandit's shoulder, the Kid drove him into the wattled hut. There, with a length cut from his trail-rope, he bound the outlaw's feet fast together.

Rube Smith lay on the earth, staring up at the Rio Kid with eyes that scintillated like a snake's.

The Kid bent over him and examined his bonds carefully, and rose, as if satisfied. Then, from the doorway of the jacal, the Kid looked up at the stars through an opening of the tangled branches.

"Two hours to dawn," he remarked.

"I guess I ain't got a whole lot of time. But Side-Kicker can sure cover a lot of ground in two hours. The sheriff of Plug Hat is going to be some disappointed when he horns in here with your pard, feller. You give him the Rio Kid's respects, and tell him he's welcome to follow on my trail if he likes, if he's longing for Plug Hat to get a new sheriff. You get me?"

Rube Smith panted.

He understood now.



As the Kid stepped out of the jacal a torrent of savage oaths from the bandit followed him. He glanced back, amused. "Say, ain't you honing to enjoy that little surprise party you fixed up for me?"

As the Kid stepped out of the jacal, a torrent of savage oaths from the bandit followed him.

He glanced back, amused.

"You sure can cuss some, Rube," he said. "Say! Ain't you honing to enjoy that little surprise party you fixed up for me? Gee-whiz! I guess I'll tell the world you can cuss some! This here talk ain't good for Side-Kicker to hear, it sure ain't! I'm hitting the trail, and if cussing makes you feel better, feller, you can sure cuss all you want!"

The Kid saddled and packed his mustang, and led Side-Kicker away through the chaparral. The brushing and rustling died in the distance; and Rube Smith, breathing vile curses, struggled with his ropes in the jacal. Far away on the edge of the chaparral the Rio Kid mounted the grey mustang and rode away under the stars

that were paling at the approach of dawn.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER

THE SHERIFF'S PRISONER!

"NOT a word, you guys," breathed Long Bill Haines, sheriff of Plug Hat.

Dawn was glimmering in the chaparral by the banks of the Rio Pecos. A faint light spread amid tangled branches and dusky bushes; faint, but enough to light the Plug Hat men on their way. Ten armed men, guns in hand, were with Long Bill Haines, closing in on the camp of the Rio Kid. With them came Jake Saunders.

Glad enough had Long Bill been to leave his bed and call up his posse on the news that the Rio Kid was at hand. The previous day, Rube Smith had escaped him; but the boy