OVERWHELMING ODDS AGAINST HIM!

The Rio Kid is used to facing fearful dangers, and combating overwhelming odds. But he finds he needs all his resource and pluck to meet the new enemy in the Los Pinos mining camp!

THE RIO KID! by RALPH REDWAY

This week:
"THE RIO KID'S GOLD MINE!"

ANOTHER POWERFUL WESTERN YARN, FEATURING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Some Strike!

LOS PINOS hummed with the news.

Cassidy, who kept the Red Eye Saloon, had a crowd in his place morning, noon, and night. They discussed one topic, and one only—a topic of which no man in Los Pinos ever seemed to tire.

It was the biggest strike since Los Pinos had had a local habitation and a name. News had come into the gold camp many a time of a rich strike in the sierra; within an easy reach of Los Pinos there were a score of mines working and paying, and in every canyon and dusky gulch for many a long mile prospectors hunted for pay-dirt. Many a man had struck luck; many a dusty pilgrim had shown rich nuggets over the bar of the Red Eye. But the new strike eclipsed them all.

The Gambusino Mine was some proposition, Cassidy told his patrons across the bar; it had the Yellow Dog beat to a frazzle, and the Yellow Dog was a rich mine—hitherto the richest in the valley. And the man who had located it and staked it out, and claimed and registered it with all due formality, was a mere kid—some boy from Texas, a puncher who had come out to Arizona prospecting, Cassidy had heard. A boy puncher, dropping into luck like this on his first gold-trail—it made the mouths of the Los Pinos men water.

Los Pinos lay in the wide, shallow canyon, looking out on the Red Desert. From the windows of Cassidy's place the desert could be seen, stretching far and wide from the base of the hills. The Red Desert—the Jornada de la Muerte of the old Spanish days; a "Journey of Death" then, a journey of death now. On the edge of the arid desert Los Pinos had been a little settlement in the Mexican times, incessantly raided by the Apaches, the Navajos, the Comanches; but even in those old dangerous days hardy gambusinos had settled there, hunting for gold in the foothills of the Gila Mountains.

Those days were long gone. The Mexican border lay to the south now; the golden land of Arizona had long been reft away from the sons of the Spanish conquerors. There were still Mexicans in the town, but they were few. Men from all the States gathered there; not one voice in ten still spoke the musical Spanish on the streets of Los Pinos. Indian raids had vanished into the past; the citizens of Los Pinos would have smiled or stared at the idea of Apaches or Comanches coming down on the camp on the war-path. Apaches and Comanches—what were left of them—were shut in reservations, save for a few desperate gangs that wandered in the desert.

Los Pinos was a busy camp. All through the day the stamps roared; even at night the graveyard shift kept the machinery going at the Yellow Dog. Noise was so incessant that it was disregarded; had an accident stopped the stamp-mills, the silence would have startled Los Pinos like a thunderclap. Busy as the town was, the railroad did not reach within twenty miles; the difficulties of construction were great. Newspapers were old when they reached the camp, and gold-dust was still legal tender, as in the days of '49. Every man in Los Pinos packed a gun; and Rube McCoy, the town marshal, had been elected town marshall for the good reason that he was lightning on the draw.

Now Los Pinos was agog with the news of the Gambusino Mine. Why a Texas puncher had given his bonanza a Spanish name no one knew; how he had discovered it was equally unknown. But men who had seen specimens from the mine pronounced that it was a wonderful strike, and that young Carfax—that was the puncher's name—would be one of the richest mine-owners in Arizona if the Gambusino panned out as it looked like doing.

And many a gunman who loafed round Cassidy's bar wished from the bottom of his heart that he had happened on young Carfax before the boy from Texas had legalised his claim to the mine. But it was too late to wish that now; young Carfax was the owner of the mine, and it was known that he had thousands of dollars in the Los Pinos Bank, and not a man in the camp ever dreamed that young Carfax had ever been known along the Rio Grande and the Pecos as the Rio Kid, and that in far-off Texas there was still a reward of five hundred dollars offered for him, alive or dead.

Men who had seen him were not likely to guess that he ever had been an outlaw, and the Kid kept his own secret. Perhaps his heart ached sometimes for the wide grasslands and the dusky chapparals of his own country, for a sight of the silvery waters of the Rio Frio, for the old bunkhouse at the Double Bar, and a ride with the bunch.

But coolly and deliberately the Rio Kid had thrown his old life behind him. Texas and its boundless prairies was a sealed book to him now! Never again did he think of looking on the rolling waters of the Rio Grande, never again did he think of riding to the round-up with the Double-Bar bunch. And he had many things to console him. His new life was within the law; in Arizona no sheriff's hand was outstretched to seize him, and within the law he prospered as he never had dreamed of prospering outside it. If there were times when the Rio Kid would have

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given the Gambusino Mine for a day's ride on the banks of the Frio, he shrugged his shoulders and dismissed the thought.

And the excitement of the big strike was still strong upon him. Fifteen miles from Los Pinos lay the mine he had discovered and located and claimed, and that was now his. It lay in the Golden Canyon on the edge of the desert; often the hot winds from the Red Desert swept along the canyon, scattering impalpable dust. Already fifty or more timber shacks had been run up; already thirty men worked in the mine, thirty names were on the Kid's pay-roll. The nearest mine was half a mile away—an abandoned shaft that belonged to the Arizona Consolidated Company—a powerful company that owned much of Los Pinos in mines and buildings, and was rumoured to own the town marshal also.

The Kid was his own *mine manager*; he enjoyed it with a boyish enjoyment. He had had a frame-house put up near the mouth of the mine. Fixings had been brought up on the backs of mules at enormous cost; the Kid did not care for the cost. His bonanza was turning out gold faster than he could have spent it had he thrown it away with both hands. Within half a mile of the spot where the Consolidated had sunk large sums and failed to make good the Kid was picking up a fortune.

Sometimes, when he watched the miners changing shifts, he wondered whether it was all a dream—whether he would wake up some morning in the old bunkhouse at the Double Bar.

He had saved the life of a Mexican gambusino, a gold-seeker whose name even he did not know, in the Red Desert, and the Mexican, shot down by treachery, had made the Kid his heir, giving him the map that located the mine in the Golden Canyon—the mine that the Kid had named after him as well as he could.

Fortune had smiled on the Kid, and it seemed like a dream. Only a few weeks ago he had been riding the black-muzzled mustang to the west, seeking fortune, and the fortune had fallen upon him like this. It was still novel enough for the Kid to enjoy it, though often he closed his eyes on the wealth that was his, and saw a vision of spreading grasslands and grazing cattle.

The Kid knew something about mining, but not much. He was his own manager, but he had picked out a good foreman, and Jud Clay had named his own salary—that he had not named three times the figure proved that Jud was a square man. The Kid was careless in such matters. He was going to be one of the richest hombres in Arizona, but he had not lost the easy ways of the cowpuncher with money. It was still easy come and easy go with the Rio Kid.

So far little machinery had been put up at the mine; the ore went on wagons to the stamp-mills at Los Pinos to be crushed, and it crushed richer than any other ore that went to the mills. A deep adit had been driven into the sloping hillside, and pay-ore had been stoped out in stacks, as Jud told the Kid. There was no need to sink a shaft; the level adit reached the rich heart of the mine.

"It's sure some bonanza!" Jud told the Kid, for the hundredth time. "And I guess you'll be a millionaire if the Consolidated let you."

And the Kid grinned.

He was not afraid of the Consolidated, though there were many men in Los Pinos who were afraid of it.

"I guess the Consolidated cuts no ice with me, Jud," he answered.

Jud waved his grimy hand towards the abandoned workings, visible half a mile away across the canyon.

"That's where the company sunk thirty thousand dollars, and gave it up at the finish," he said. "I guess the Consolidated won't like you striking rich in the canyon where they sunk dollars and failed."

The Kid laughed again.

"I allow that they can like it or lump it," he remarked. "This hyer mine belongs to me, don't it?"

"Sure!" assented Jud.

"And there's law in Arizona?"

"Some!"

"Then what can the Consolidated do, even if they don't like me striking it rich where they slipped up on it?"

Jud Clay shrugged his shoulders.

"The Consolidated keep inside the law," he said. "But you can sure do a heap of things inside the law. I guess they'll buy you out."

"I guess I won't sell."

Jud smiled.

"You're new to the mines," he said. "If the Consolidated decide to take over the Gambusino Mine, I guess they'll take it over. They've bought up half the mines round Los Pinos. Galoots who don't sell when the Consolidated want to buy are liable to meet with accidents."

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid. "Is that within the law, you Jud?"

"Money talks," said Jud.

The Rio Kid chuckled.

"You figure out that if I refuse to sell, an accident may happen to me?" he asked.

"Yep."

"Sort of shooting accident?" grinned the Kid.

"Mebbe."

"I can sure shoot a little myself," remarked the Kid. "I kinder reckon that if an accident happens, it won't be to me. And the Consolidated can go and chop chips, Jud."

"I guess I've put you wise, Mr. Carfax; but you got to learn," said the mine foreman. And it dropped at that, the Kid still laughing. As yet, at least, the Arizona Consolidated Gold Mining Company had no terrors for him. He dismissed them cheerfully from his mind, and gave no thought to any scheme that might be hatching for roping in the Rio Kid's bonanza.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
No Sale!

"SENOR!"

"Spill it," said the Kid.

A Mexican half-breed did the chores in the Kid's frame-house. The Kid was coming in from a long ride, and he was taking the grey mustang round to the stable himself, when the Mexican came to him. The Kid might be a rich mine-owner now, but he was still cow-puncher enough to look after his horseflesh himself.

"A caballero come see the senor," explained the half-breed.

"A visitor?" yawned the Kid.

"Si, senor."

"Waiting?"

"Si, senor. It is the Senor Drew, of Los Pinos."

"Drew?" said the Kid. "I guess I don't know the name."

"It is the agent of the Arizona Con, senor."

The Kid whistled.

"Tell him I'll be along."

"Si, senor."

The Kid rubbed down his mustang before he went to the house. He was not keen to see Mr. Drew, the Los Pinos agent of the Arizona Consolidated Gold Mines, and if the man had waited he could wait a little longer. The Kid remembered now that he had heard the name—it was a name of power in Los Pinos. Jas Drew represented the all-powerful company that had Los Pinos in its pocket. His word was as good as law in the mining town. It was because he was big gun—powerful medicine, as the Kid termed it—that the Kid let him wait. He knew, without being told, why Jas Drew had come out to the Golden Canyon, and the Kid had no intention of "talking turkey" to the boss of Los Pinos. From what he had heard of the man he did not like him.

But when he came into the frame-house the Kid's manner was civil. A slim, steady-eyed man in store clothes rose from a chair.

"Mr. Carfax?" he asked.

"Sure," assented the Kid.

"I'm Drew."

The agent of the Con spoke as if his name was enough; he was used to carrying things with a high hand in the valley. But the Kid shook his head seriously.

"Drew?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"I don't get you," said the Kid.

"Agent of the Arizona Con," added Drew, biting his lip.

"I guess I've heard of that crowd," assented the Kid. "So you're the agent? Sit down Mr. Drew, and tell a man what you've come about."

The agent of the Con sat down. His keen eyes were on the Kid's face, reading him.

"I'm here on business of the company," he said.

"Yep?"

"I've waited some hours for you, Mr. Carfax."

"Now I'm to home," said the Kid cheerily. "spill it, feller."

Jas Drew's dark brows contracted a little. It was evident that he did not like the free-and-easy mode of address of the puncher from Texas.

"The Consolidated are making you an offer for your mine," he said tersely.

The Kid smiled.

"Thanks; but I ain't selling."

Drew smiled, too—a pitying smile. This young Carfax was, he concluded, a cow-puncher who knew something about cows, but nothing at all about the ways of big combines in the business world. He did not even know that he had to sell if the Con wanted to buy.

"My Company offers fifty thousand dollars," he said, as if the Kid had not spoken.

The Kid roared:

"That's generous! I figure on taking more than that out of the mine every year!"

"It's a good sum for a new mine, hardly proved as yet," suggested Drew.

"I guess if it wasn't proved the Con wouldn't be offering a hatful of money for it," said the Kid good-humouredly. "Cut it out, Mr. Drew. I ain't selling to the Con or anybody else."

"Name your price, then."

"Nix," said the Kid. "I ain't tired of the stunt yet. I'm sure some gold-miner when I get going. If I sell, I shan't sell to the Con. I reckon they've got too big a grip on this section already."

"You will sell," said Drew quietly. "The offer remains open for three days, Mr. Carfax."

"Three years won't make any difference to me."

"After three days a thousand dollars will be taken off the figure daily, and you will lose money when you sell."

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"I reckon I've mentioned I'm not selling."

"Oh, come off!" exclaimed Drew, showing signs of anger. "You're a greenhorn from the cow country, but you sure ought to have hoss-sense enough to know that you've got to sell!"

"And who's going to make me?" queried the Kid quietly, but with a glint in his eyes.

"The Con."

The Kid snapped his fingers.

"That for the Con and its agent!" he answered. "The Con cuts no ice with me, feller! I ain't selling!"

Jasper Drew rose to his feet.

"Take advice from your foreman, or from any man who knows the ropes in Los Pinos," he said coldly. "Any galoot will tell you you've got to sell. The Con don't take no for an answer."

"I guess they got to take it in this case!" smiled the Rio Kid. "I've sure said no, and that goes!"

Drew made a step to the door, but he turned back.

"You're a kid-puncher," he said, as if compassionately. "You don't savvy what you're up against. If you don't sell, you won't be allowed to work the mine. You'll have to shut down. You might even meet with an accident in the canyon. I'm warning you for your own good."

"Keep your warnings till I ask for them," said the Kid contemptuously. "I've sure run into rustlers and durned thieves before, and they never put it over me. You're threatening me, feller, and I don't stand for that. Beat it while you're safe."

Drew stared at him hard, and walked out of the house. The Kid, from the window, saw him mount his horse and ride away to Los Pinos.

His brow was thoughtful as he watched the agent disappear by the trail up the canyon.

"They made me an outlaw in Texas, because Old Man Dawney made a mistake about the galoot that pinched the pay-roll!" he murmured. "But I reckon if I had pinched it, I'd be a better man than that hombre. I reckon I've hit up against rustlers on the Rio Grande that didn't deserve stringing up so much as that galoot and his crowd. I'm sure new to big business in the West; but I'm learning something. I was a gink to let him go without knocking his nose through the back of his cabeza."

Then the Kid laughed.

He was aware that any man in the gold country who stood up against the all-powerful Consolidated needed to know how to take care of himself. But the Rio Kid was accustomed to taking care of himself; and on second thoughts, as his brow cleared, he was glad that he had let Jas Drew ride away without having had his nose knocked through the back of his head.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Rough Stuff!

THREE days passed—and a week followed them.

The time of grace had expired; and no word had come from the Kid to Mr. Drew in his office on Main Street at Los Pinos.

The Kid had, in fact, almost forgotten Jas Drew.

He would have forgotten him totally, perhaps, but for the forebodings of his foreman, Jud Clay; to which he listened with a smile, but with respect, for Jud had been a mining man in Arizona long before the Kid's eyes had opened on the world at all. Jud was an honest man,

the Kid knew that; and he knew he was lucky to get such a foreman; he trusted Jud absolutely in mining matters, but he listened incredulously to what Jud had to tell him of big business in the gold country and its methods.

"They own the Yellow Dog in Los Pinos, right in the town," Jud told him. "That was the big noise in these parts till you struck the Gambusino, Mr. Carfax. How do you reckon they got the Yellow Dog?"

"Located it," suggested the Kid.

"Locate nothing! The Con never locate! They buy proved mines."

"Then I figure they bought it?"

"Man wouldn't sell—an ornery cuss like you, Mr. Carfax. But after he was picked up at the bottom of a mine with his neck broke, his relations sold."

"You want me to believe they gave him the rough stuff like that, Jud?"

"Sure!"

The Kid laughed.

"That hombre Drew sure don't look as if he could break the neck of a jack-rabbit," he said.

"Not in his lifetime," said the foreman. "But he's got plenty of rough-necks on his pay-roll, Mr. Carfax."

"What was the town marshal doing? I've heard he's some hombre."

"The town marshal draws his salary from Los Pinos, and three times as much from the Arizona Con."

"Oh, shucks!" grinned the Kid. "You sure want me to take it that a big mining company is no more than a bunch of rustlers."

"A bunch of rustlers has nothing on the Arizona Con, Mr. Carfax," said Jud Clay. "If you won't sell, watch out!"

"I guess I'm watching out."

"Where are you going to-day, sir?" The Kid was standing beside the black-muzzled mustang as he talked to his foreman.

"Jest a paseo up the canyon."

"Look out for falling rocks. A rock fell on Hank Wilson when he wouldn't sell out to the Con."

A NARROW SHAVE! As the Kid appeared in the doorway a sharp crack came from the shadows, and he felt the wind of a bullet. Bang! The next moment the Kid's .45 roared and from the darkness came a piercing yell.
(See Chapter 3.)

The Kid roared, and he was still laughing as he rode up the canyon, past the old abandoned shaft, and out of sight of the Gambusino. That the Arizona Con, through Jas Drew, would get hold of the Gambusino Mine by any kind of trickery, if they could, the Kid little doubted: but he did not believe that they employed "rough-necks" to beat up rivals in the mining business.

The Kid cantered along cheerily in the sunny morning. He liked a solitary ride up the canyon, to the top of the divide, which reminded him of days in the rocky Huecas of old.

He rode through a narrow winding gulch, where the walls of rock were only a few feet from his horse's flanks on either side; and he had already forgotten Clay's warning.

It was a whinny from his mustang that first apprised the Kid of danger.

It was not the first time that his horse had saved his life in the dangerous days and nights that the Rio Kid had known.

The Kid came sharply out of a reverie and looked about him; and then, as Clay's warning came back into his mind, upward.

"Jerusalem!"

From the high, steep side of the gulch, where it almost overhung the horseman, a gigantic rock came rolling and bounding.

For a fraction of a second the Kid froze as he saw death rushing down on him with the speed of lightning.

Only for a fraction of a second. Then his spurs dashed into the mustang's flanks, and the horse leaped frantically on—a leap for life.

He was barely in time.

Crash!

Two yards behind the mustang's swishing tail the huge rock crashed on the earth, splitting to a thousand fragments.

The Kid dashed on.

His nerve was of iron; but his bronzed face was white under its tan. His heart throbbed.

He pulled in his mustang a minute later, under a scrubby bunch of pines that grew in the gulch, and wheeled round. His keen glance swept the high side of the canyon where the great rock had come whirling down. Had that huge mass become unloosened by chance—had it fallen by chance just as the Kid was riding underneath?

The Kid's teeth were set, his eyes gleaming fire. Had a man's head shown among the rocky ledges of the gulch side his gun was ready to speak. But there was no sign of an enemy. If a human hand had sent that rock hurtling down the treacherous enemy had hunted cover at once.

For many long minutes the Kid sat his horse there, watching; but the gulch was still, silent, deserted.

"I reckon it was just chance!" the Kid muttered; but his face was very thoughtful as he rode onward at last.

When he rode homeward he rode by a different route.

Jud Clay came to supper with the Kid in his frame house that night, as was his custom. The Kid told him of the falling rock.

"They're beginning," was the foreman's comment.

"You figure that it was a rough-neck behind that rock?" asked the Kid.

"Sure."

"With Jas Drew at the bottom of it?" asked the Kid, with a sparkle in his eyes.

"You've said it."

"I guess I'll make sure before I call on that hombre," said the Rio Kid in a

GETTING AT THE TRUTH! The Kid's gun roared, and the bullet passed between the gunman's arm and his ribs, and smashed on the rock behind him. Starbuck gave a convulsive start. "You're asking for it," said the Kid quietly. "Now tell me, who put you on my trail?" *(See Chapter 4.)*

drawl. "If I get him fixed for fair, I guess he will learn how heavy a quirt can be, with a Texas puncher's grip on it."

"You want a front place in the Los Pinos cemetery, for sure," said Jud.

The Kid shrugged his shoulders.

He said good-night to Jud Clay at the porch of the frame house, with the stars twinkling overhead, and lights glistening from the row of miner's shacks near the adit of the Gambusino. Just as he stepped back, a sharp crack came, like a bark from the shadows of the night, and he felt the wind of a bullet on his cheek.

Bang!

The Kid's .45 roared like an echo of the rifle-shot. From the darkness came a piercing yell.

"He's got him!" panted Jud.

The Kid was running for the direction of the shot and the cry. From the shacks a dozen miners came swarming.

Twenty yards from the Kid's porch, a Mexican lay on the earth, and his black eyes rolled wildly at the Kid and the foreman. Jud stared at him and stared at the Kid.

"You're sure some hombre at shooting, Mr. Carfax," he said, in an awed voice. "I never even saw a shadow——"

"I guess the flash of the rifle was enough," said the Kid coolly. "That dago has got his."

The Mexican shivered and lay still. The Rio Kid stared down at him, coolly, curiously.

"Search me!" he said. "I want to know why that hombre took a pot-shot at me at my own door, Jud."

"Ask the Con," said the foreman.

"It sure begins to make a galoot suspicious," said the Kid, and he walked to his house, with a frowning brow.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The Kid Means Business!

THE Rio Kid lay low for some days.

He was thinking it out.

Jas Drew had warned him, as well as others, that accidents were liable to happen to prospectors who refused to sell out their claims when the "Con" wanted to buy. The Kid was beginning to believe it.

He was not thinking of selling. On the Rio Grande and the Pecos, in the old days, the punchers had been used to say that the Kid was a bad man to crowd. If he had been determined before, his determination was now like iron. But he could see that Jud Clay, and, indeed, every man on his pay-roll at the Gambusino Mine, believed that the Con were after him, and that they would get him.

Miners who came back from a jamboree in Los Pinos reported that it was common talk at Cassidy's place there. The falling rock and the midnight shooting had been talked of, and Los Pinos drew its own conclusions—the same conclusions that the Kid was drawing now.

But he wanted to be sure before he acted. The respectable board of directors of the Arizona Consolidated Gold Mining Company, sitting in respectable state at far-off Tombstone, no doubt knew nothing of the company's peculiar methods. The president of the company probably knew, and told his colleagues little if anything; indeed, his instructions to Jasper Drew, at Los Pinos, were no doubt vague—only clear enough to be understood. The Gambusino Mine was to come into the ring; methods were left to the Los Pinos agent, who did not need telling what to do. The president of the great company—a prominent man great in Western politics—would not want to be told details—would probably refuse to hear them. Jas Drew was paid a big salary to do his work and hold his tongue. The Kid was beginning to understand.

In locating his mine in Golden Canyon the Kid had been cornered by a gang of thief-Apaches from the desert, and he had had one of the closest calls. He was beginning to understand now that a mine agent in store clothes, with a boiled shirt and a clean-shaven face, might be as ruthless as any Apache in the Red Desert, and more dangerous. But the Rio Kid was a bad man to crowd.

Every day the camp in the canyon was growing. It was going to be a town if nothing happened to stop its growth. The number of shacks had grown to a hundred, a store had opened, a timber saloon was building. A two-horse hack ran every day from Los Pinos with passengers, news, and baggage. Every day a line of wagons wound away down the canyon with stacks of ore from the Gambusino Mine, with teamsters cracking their long whips, heading for the stamp-mills at Los Pinos.

Loafers and gamblers, Chinese washing-men, all sorts of pilgrims, drifted in daily, along with prospectors seeking for other lucky strikes in the canyon. Among that motley crew Jud told the Kid that there were sure spies sent by Jas Drew to watch his movements, and the Kid had no doubt of it. One of the latest arrivals was Bud Starbuck, a professional gunman, and upon him the Kid cast a keen eye more than once. If the Con agent had sent a gunman to shoot him up, the Kid was more than ready for gun-play. But if Starbuck was "after" Kid Carfax, as all the camp suspected, he gave no sign.

That was the state of affairs when the Kid rode out of camp one day and

trotted away carelessly down the canyon. He had let it be known that he was riding over to Los Pinos that morning, and he rode away with his quirt under his arm, humming a tune.

But a mile out of the camp the Kid dismounted and concealed his mustang in a clump of junipers. Then he clambered to the top of a high rock, and, keeping in cover, watched the trail. And a grim smile curved his lip as he saw, in the far distance, a horseman coming on, and recognised Bud Starbuck.

"That galoot's sure got business outside the camp, jest at the same time as me!" grinned the Kid.

He descended from the rock. From the distance he heard the clatter of hoofs, and knew that the gun-man was spurring at a gallop to overtake him. Keeping in cover of the junipers where he had hidden his mustang, the Kid waited for the pursuer to come abreast. At this point the trail was only a few yards wide, with irregular rocks stacked on either side of it. The Kid had chosen the spot with care. Faster and faster came the clatter of hoofs, and the gun-man came galloping into sight. He was almost level with the bunch of junipers when the Rio Kid stepped out, with a six-gun at a level and his eyes glinting over it.

"Put 'em up!" called the Kid.

Starbuck stared at him with startled eyes. The six-gun covered him, and he knew what he had to do. He dragged in his horse and put his hands up over his head, his eyes glinting at the Kid.

The Kid stepped towards him, with a smile.

"What's this game, Mr. Carfax?" asked Starbuck, between his teeth. "Is this a hold-up?"

"Jest that," agreed the Kid. "You followed me from the camp, hombre."

"I guess I never knew you'd left. I was riding to Los Pinos."

"You wasn't after me—with the big idea of shooting me in the back on the trail?" grinned the Kid.

"No; I've no trouble with you!"

"Wasn't you sent along to my camp to make trouble, you durned lobo wolf?"

"You've got it wrong, Mr. Carfax," said the gun-man. "I sure never knew you was on this trail."

"You figure that I'm making a mistake?" asked the Kid, with an air of doubt. "I sure allowed that you was after me."

"Forget it, Mr. Carfax, nothing of the sort," assured Starbuck.

"I allow you may be all right," said the Kid, and he lowered his revolver. "You can put down your paws."

He stepped back, with a careless air. The gun-man lowered his hands, and with the same movement jerked a six-gun from his holster and threw it up to fire.

Bang! It was the Kid's gun.

The Kid had been watching, fully expecting that move, and he fired from the hip without lifting his gun.

There was a yell from Starbuck as the bullet from the .45 crashed through his shoulder, and his drawn gun dropped from his hand with a clatter on the rocks.

"You was quick, hombre," smiled the Kid, "but not quick enough. Why, you lobo, I knew your game, and was fooling you on. I reckon I wanted to make you show your cards before I pulled trigger on you. Get off that hoss!"

The gun-man was swaying in the saddle, his face deadly white, blood streaming down his arm. He almost fell from the saddle, and the Kid kicked his horse and sent it galloping on.

"Let up!" muttered the gun-man hoarsely. "You've got me beat! Let up!"

He staggered against a boulder.

The fear of death was in his eyes as he stared at the Kid.

"You was after me!" grinned the Kid.

The gun-man nodded; it was useless to deny now.

"Who put you on my trail?"

"Nobody!" muttered Starbuck. "I was jest arter you because you shot up Two-gun Peters, who was a pard of mine."

Bang!

The Kid's gun roared again, and the bullet passed between Starbuck's arm and his ribs, and smashed on the rock behind him. The gun-man gave a convulsive start.

"You're asking for it, hombre," said the Kid quietly. "I'd shoot you like a coyote, but I reckon I want you to talk. The next bullet takes your ear off. Who put you on my trail?"

The gun-man panted. He saw that the Kid would be as good as his word.

"Jas Drew," he muttered thickly.

"I reckoned so," assented the Kid. "This is the third time Jas Drew has handed me the rough stuff, and I figure that it's going to be the last. You was going to report to him after you'd shot me up?"

Starbuck nodded.

"Where?" asked the Kid.

"Cassidy's place in Los Pinos," breathed the gun-man. "Jas Drew is always there at nine o'clock."

"Well, you're not going on to Los Pinos—you've sure got nothing to report," grinned the Kid. "You can crawl away, you lobo wolf—but chew on it that if you ever try to pull a gun on me again it will be the last time you ever touch one. I guess I'll keep your appointment with Mr. Drew."

"You may as well put a bullet through my head as let on to Jas Drew that I've given him away," muttered Starbuck.

"I guess I'm telling him nothing—I ain't talking to him with my tongue! I've got a quirt to talk to him with," chuckled the Kid. "This galoot Drew seems to have Los Pinos scared stiff; but he don't scare me worth a red cent. You can bet it, you durned coyote!"

The gun-man stared at him.

"You're goin' into Los Pinos to quirt Jas Drew?" he muttered.

"Sure."

Starbuck laughed hoarsely.

"I guess if you beat up Jas Drew you won't tell them about it at your camp afterwards," he said.

"Quien sabe?" said the Kid carelessly.

He called to his mustang and leaped lightly into the saddle. The wounded gun-man stared after him as he rode down the trail, and laughed again.

The Rio Kid knew that he was riding into danger, but his handsome face was care-free as he rode, and he hummed the tune of a Mexican fandango. Only when the lights of Los Pinos gleamed from the dusk ahead the Kid halted and carefully examined his guns. Then he rode on, with the roar of the never-ceasing stamp-mills in his ears, into the lighted street, and dismounted at Cassidy's place and hitched his horse to the rail. Cassidy's place was waking up for the evening, and the saloon was crowded when the Rio Kid strolled in—and there was a general stare and buzz of interest as the cow-puncher mine-owner appeared. Cassidy gave him a nod of welcome from behind the bar, and spun forward bottle and glass.

"Soft for me!" drawled the Kid.

It was a quarter to nine. The Rio Kid lounged on the bar and idly sipped lemonade while he waited for the agent of the Arizona Consolidated to enter.

THE END.

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