THE RIO KID RETURNS HOME!

The shining waters of the Rio Frio and the green rolling plains of Texas call to the Rio Kid—and although there are countless enemies awaiting him there, the Kid trails back to his old country!

TRAILING BACK!

OUR ROARING LONG COMPLETE WESTERN YARN, STARRING THE RIO KID—BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Kid Horns In!

"THE Kid!"

Sheriff Watson, of Frio, stared, rubbed his eyes, and stared again. It seemed to the burly sheriff of Frio that his eyes must have deceived him.

But they had not deceived him.

It was the Rio Kid, handsome, sunburnt, and smiling, who stood in the doorway of his office fronting the plaza of the little cow-town on the Rio Frio. It was the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw wanted by half the sheriffs in Texas; long absent from his old haunts, but unchanged, now that he had come back to them. The Frio sheriff stared blankly, taken utterly by surprise. He was so astounded that he forgot to reach for a gun.

Watson had not forgotten the Rio Kid, neither had the town of Frio, or the ranchers along the banks of the Pecos. The Kid's reputation, while he rode the Texas trails, and camped in the Texas chaparrals, had been too gaudy for easy forgetfulness. Still, the Kid had slipped out of mind. For a long time he had not been seen or heard of.

It was said in the cow camps that the Kid had ridden out of Texas across the Staked Plain to try his luck in a new country. And there were many who wished him well, for whatever the Kid might be, he was a white man with all his faults, a good friend and a fair foe. And at the Double-Bar Ranch, at least, there were many who opined that the Kid never had had justice.

Many tales were told in the bunk-houses and the round-up camps of the Kid's wild ways. Many more were told of his sudden vanishing from the country that had known him. Some vague rumour had reached the Rio Frio of the Kid in the gold country of Arizona. And it was said that he had been seen up in the cow country of Montana, and that he had hit trouble in the sheep ranges of Wyoming.

But such rumours were vague. And many guessed that the Kid had gone on the long trail—shot up, at last, in some rookus, quick on the draw as he was—or scalped by the apaches in the Staked Plain. And as no sure news came of him, and he was never seen in his old haunts Sheriff Watson came to believe that the Kid really had gone over the range at last, and that he would never drop his hand on his shoulder and rope him in, as he had sworn to do. And now there stood the Kid, as large as life, smiling at the astounded sheriff from the open doorway of his office in Frio.

The sheriff, smoking a Mexican cheroot in the drowsy heat of the afternoon, his feet on his desk, his rocking-chair tilted back, had heard a horseman ride up and dismount outside. Not for an instant had he dreamed that the horseman was the Rio Kid; the horse, the famous black-muzzled mustang, that had carried the boy outlaw through so many dangers. When he turned and saw the Kid the sheriff stared open-mouthed. It was the Kid, or his ghost. And the sheriff of Frio almost believed that it was his ghost.

"The Kid!"

Watson stuttered the words. He could scarcely believe that it was not a vision that would vanish if he rubbed his eyes.

The Kid grinned. The sheriff's stupefied amazement seemed to entertain him. He swept off his Stetson hat in ironical salute.

"The Kid!" repeated the sheriff of Frio.

He remembered now, and reached for a gun. Before his hand touched the butt, a blue-grey barrel was looking him in the face, with the Kid's lithe finger on a trigger.

"Forget it, feller!" said the Kid laconically.

The sheriff forgot it promptly. The Rio Kid was smiling and good-humoured. He had seldom been seen otherwise. But only the slightest pressure of his finger was needed to send a bullet crashing through the brain of the Frio sheriff. And Watson was not asking for sudden death. The glint in the Kid's steady eyes rather belied the smile on his face.

The Kid stepped into the office. Still in blank amazement the sheriff watched him; for it was broad day. The sun was shining down on dusty Frio. Men rode in from the prairie trails with clinking spur and bridle. Outside the Red Dog across the plaza a poker-party sat at a table under a red-striped awning. At any moment a caller might drop in to see the sheriff, at any moment a bunch of cow-punchers might ride up at any moment the sheriff's man, Abe, might come into the office. And the Rio Kid had ridden in into the midst of hundred dangers as coolly as if he had the freedom of every town in Texas, and was standing there, smiling at the sheriff who had sworn to take him, dead or alive, and who had placed a reward of a thousand dollars on his head. The Kid's nerve was well known; but this capped the stack.

"I've sure got your goat, just a few, sheriff," smiled the Kid. "You wasn't expecting a galoot about my size to mosey in."

"It's really you, Kid!" gasped the sheriff.

"Little me, back from my travels, sheriff. I guess I could tell you a whole lot, if you wanted to hear the story. I've sure humped into a goldarned heap of things since I lit out from Texas."

"You've come here to give yourself up?"

The Kid laughed.

"Do I look like it?" he asked banteringly.

The sheriff breathed hard.

"You're sure a cool cuss, Kid! You always was, I allow. But you won't get away with it this time. You've moseyed into Frio, and I guess you won't find it so easy to mosey out again."

"Quien sabe?" said the Kid, shrugging his shoulders. "I'm taking chances, I guess. But I always was a galoot to take chances. I've come back to Texas, sheriff. And I guess I wanted to see you again, and talk turkey to you. That's why I'm here. Any objection to parting with your hardware?"

With the Kid's walnut-butted gun looking him in the eye the sheriff was not disposed to state objections. The Kid leaned over and jerked the Colt from his belt, and tossed it into a corner behind a box. The sheriff gave no sign. He was disarmed; but the Rio Kid had horned into the midst of a hundred foes, and Watson did not believe that he would get away with it. He waited.

The Kid lounged across to the sheriff's desk and sat on it, facing the burly Frio man. His manner was careless and easy, yet it was to be noted that where he sat he could keep an eye on the window and on the open door, as well as on the sheriff. The Kid was taking big chances; but he was as wary as a cougar, as watchful as a lynx. He sat on the desk and swung

his legs in their baggy goatskin chaps, and smiled at Watson.

"Sort of 'sprised?" he remarked.

"Yep!"

"Did you reckon I'd hit the trail for good?"

"I reckon I began to think that you was wiped out in some rookus, Kid. You been out of Texas, at any rate."

"You've said it. I figured on staying out, too," said the Kid. "But you know my record, sheriff. I hit trouble wherever I camped. Not that I've got any kick coming. I've piled up a good-sized roll."

"Hold-ups?" asked the sheriff.

The Kid's eyes glittered for a moment.

"Hard work with pick and spade," he said. "I made my roll in the gold country, and I reckon I'd be there still owning a big mine, only a gang of hoodlums got on my trail. You want to believe, sheriff, that when I lit out of Texas I let up on the old game, and started fresh——"

"Oh, shucks!" said the sheriff.

"Honest injun, old-timer!" said the Kid. "I'm last from New Mexico, where I stopped a piece to round up a gang of rustlers that had been robbing the ranches on the Rio Bajo."

"Sho!"

"You ain't taking that in?"

"Not to any great extent," said the Frio sheriff sarcastically. "You're a born fire-bug, Kid. And there's only one thing that will stop you from hunting trouble, and that's a long rope over a branch."

"Have it your own way," drawled the Kid. "I'm giving you the straight goods. But have it your own way. Anyhow, I didn't horn in here to tell you what an all-fired angel I've growed. No, sir, I've come here to talk turkey."

The sheriff's glance wandered to the open doorway, and the blaze of sunshine without. Then it returned to the Kid.

"Spill it!" he said.

"I've come back to my own country," said the Kid. "I've ridden far, and I've ridden wide; but I'm telling you, sheriff, that this old country was calling me back all the time. I've stood over the Big Canyon of the Colorado, and I reckon I saw the old Huecas. I've listened to the Missouri, and heard the waters of the Rio Frio. I knew I'd come trailing back at last, and now I've come. But I ain't come on the war-path, sheriff. I ain't come a-shooting. No, sir! I've come on the peace trail."

The sheriff stared.

"Meaning?" he asked.

"I never wanted to be an outlaw," said the Kid, and his voice was deep and grave now. "I was driven into it. You know that Old Man Dawney, of the Double-Bar, got the goods on me, all through a mistake, and I guess he's owning up to that mistake now. I reckon I was wild, hunted down for a thing I never did, and that all the Double-Bar knows now that I never did. I reckon I ran wild, some—as I guess any galoot might have in my place.

"A pilgrim has to live, sheriff, and I was driven off the ranches. Things were put down to me that I never did, once I was riding the trails—hold-ups that I'd never hear of; shootings that I'd never dreamed about. I reckon if anything happened between the Rio Grande and the Pecos, it was said in the cow camps that it was the doing of the Rio Kid. I never heard half of it."

The sheriff's face was grim.

"You know that, sheriff! You know how they stack a heap on to a man when he ain't there to deny it, and can't be. You know they've landed on my shoulders the doings of half the gunmen and fire-bugs in this part of the State."

"Likely enough!" said the sheriff. "I guess if you hand in your guns, you'll get a fair trial at the county seat."

The Kid laughed.

"I guess the reputation they fixed on me would have hanged half a dozen galoots my size," he said. "I never rustled a cow in my life; but there's a dozen ranchers ready to swear that I've driven their herds. Big men—with the judge and jury in their pockets. I've never held up a galoot on the trail—but a heap of galoots who've been held up would swear that I was the pilgrim that went through their rags at the end of a gun. Your trial at the county seat don't cut any ice with me, sheriff."

The sheriff of Frio made no rejoinder. His glance wandered to the doorway again. Would no galoot ever mosey in?

"All the same, I'm done with outlawry if I'm let," said the Kid. "That's what I've come to tell you, sheriff. I've come back to my own country; but I give you my word that I ain't come a-shooting. Any man on the

ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS! That's the reward offered for the capture of the Rio Kid—and you can bet there are many good and bad men out to earn it. But it's a far from simple matter even to trail this elusive boy outlaw, let alone catch him.

old Double-Bar will tell you that I'm a slave to my word. You give me a wide miss, sheriff, and I ain't troubling you any. Give me a chance to prove that I never was the fire-bug that folks believed. Leave me alone, and you'll see me live quiet and peaceful." The Rio Kid's voice was vibrating with earnestness now. "Give a galoot a chance, sheriff. You can work it, if you like. You're boss of the law in this section. Your word goes a whole lot in the county town. You can leave me in peace on the Rio Frio, if you want. You can give me the chance I'm asking for to prove up. What do you say?"

The sheriff eyed him.

Always at the bottom of his heart he had had a sort of liking for the bold and handsome Kid, keenly as he had sought to rope him in and hand him over to a hard fate. The Kid's appeal found an echo in the sheriff's heart. But his bronzed, bearded face was hard and uncompromising.

"It's no cinch, Kid," he answered. "I guess you mean what you say—while you're saying it. But sooner or later you'd break out again, and ride wild on the trails. I guess I ain't the power to do what you want—if I wanted to. And——"

"And you don't want?"

"Nope! I stand for the law, and the law wants you. I'm on your trail, Kid, to take you dead or alive, and I tell you so with your gun looking me in the face," said the Frio sheriff. "Pull trigger if you like."

"I guess if I let drive a bullet through your cabeza, Jake Watson, it wouldn't let any hoss-sense out at the hole!" said the Kid bitterly. "I tell you once more that I've come back here peaceful, only asking to be let alone and to live quiet. I tell you I never wanted to be an outlaw, and you and the rest made me one. Do you stand for keeping me one?"

"I stand for the law," said the sheriff stubbornly, "and the law wants you, Kid, and the law's going to have you, if I can work it."

"You're a hard man, Jake, and a dog-goned gink!" said the Kid.

There was a silence.

The Kid, with his gun resting on his knee, as he sat on the desk, looked thoughtfully at the sheriff of Frio.

He had come there, into the midst of a hundred dangers to "talk turkey" to his old foe. He had talked in vain.

Once an outlaw, always an outlaw! The Kid had come back to his own country with hope in his heart, only to find that all things were unchanged, that every man's hand was against him, and his hand against every man's, as of old. Hard and bitter grew the handsome face of he Kid.

Sheriff Watson eyed him stolidly. He was at the boy puncher's mercy, and he half expected a shot from the walnut-butted gun that rested on the Kid's knee. But the Kid was not the man to shoot down an unarmed enemy. He knew now, if he had doubted before, that he had no ruth or mercy to look for; that the sheriff of Frio would hunt him, as he had hunted him of old, so long as he stayed in the Frio country. And the Kid intended to stay.

But the black cloud passed from his face, and he smiled. His light and mocking manner returned.

"I guess I've wasted my time talking turkey to a hard-faced cuss like you, Jake Watson," he said. "I reckon I'll git. You want to remember that if you make a move, hombre, they'll be needing a new sheriff in Frio. I——"

He broke off as a shadow darkened the open doorway. Abe Harrigan, the sheriff's man, stepped in from the sunlight. In the sudden change from the bright sunshine to the dusk of the office, Harrigan did not for the moment see the boyish figure perched on the desk.

"Sheriff, there's a critter tied up to the rail that's powerful like that mustang that the Rio Kid used to ride!" he exclaimed. "It's sure powerful like—— Thunder!"

"Put 'em up!" said the Kid's soft voice.

And Abe, glaring in amazement at the mocking face over the levelled revolver, gasped:

"The Kid! Great gophers!"

And his hands went up promptly over his head.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The Kid's Defiance!

THE Rio Kid slid from the sheriff's desk. Abe Harrigan eyed him open-mouthed. The sheriff, still seated in the rocker, watched him. He had hoped that his man might

A RECKLESS DEFIANCE! "You, Poker Pete!" rapped out the Kid. "Take down that bill!" Poker Pete hesitated and backed away a pace. Then he took down the bill. The Kid's gun was not to be argued with. *(See Chapter 2.)*

come in—and Harrigan had come, only to put up his hands under the Kid's gun. The sheriff's look was bitter, but he was cool-and patient. It was unlikely that the reckless Kid would get away from the crowded cow-town alive and free, especially if there was shooting to alarm the town. If Abe succeeded in getting in one shot——

But Abe's hands were above his head, and he was not thinking of drawing a gun. He knew the Kid's deadly aim and lightning quickness too well for that. Abe was taking it like a lamb.

"I guess it's time I was getting," drawled the Rio Kid. "But I'm sure glad to see you again, Abe, before I vamoose the ranch."

"If I'd knowed!" muttered Abe.

The Kid laughed.

"You sure saw my critter hitched on the rail—you might have guessed, Abe. But you never was bright."

"It's your say-so now, Kid," said Abe, with a glitter in his eyes. "Pile it on all you want. I ain't kicking so long as you hold the drop."

"Sit on that desk."

Abe sat in the place lately occupied by the Rio Kid. The Kid had not even troubled to disarm him. Abe was free to draw and try his luck, if he liked. But he did not.

"Ain't it a pleasure, old friends, meeting again like this?" smiled the Kid. "'Member the last time we met, Abe? You lighted on me in the chaparral, and I made you dance with bullets chippin' your boots. You sure danced like a greaser at a fandango."

Abe gritted his teeth and did not answer.

"But I reckon I can't hang on talking over old times," sighed the Kid. "I got to be riding. Sheriff, you've still got my proposition afore you. You giving me the same answer?"

"Yep!"

"I came trailing back peaceable," said the Kid. "But if you're gone on making it war, I'm your antelope, sheriff."

Watson made no reply to that. His eyes were longingly on the doorway. At a distance he could see a group of cowpunchers riding across the plaza towards the Red Dog Saloon. Had they guessed what was passing in the sheriff's office they would have come whooping down on the scene. He had only to raise his voice and give a call. But it would have been his last shout on earth, and the sheriff did not call.

"If you want war—by the great horned toad, you shall have it!" said the Kid. "I guess I'll make you tired of trailing me, sheriff. I guess I'll make Frio sit up and howl till they let up! Get out of that rocker!"

The Kid was not smiling now.

His face was grim, his eyes gleaming, his lips set. His offer of peace had been refused, and the Kid was on the war-path. In his present mood the lives of the sheriff and his man hung on a thread—and they knew it.

Watson rose quietly from the chair.

"Back to Abe—pronto!"

The sheriff backed up to Harrigan.

"Abe, you'll take off his neck scarf, and tie his paws behind him," said the Kid. "Make it a good job; my eye's on you, hombre. You try any shenanigan with me, Abe, and look out for a quick trip across Jordan!"

"It's your say-so!" repeated Abe sullenly.

He took the sheriff's neck scarf and bound Watson's hands behind his back. The sheriff's eyes met his; but Abe dared not regard the mute appeal. Trifling with the Rio Kid just then was equivalent to playing with a jaguar in the chaparral. The sheriff's wrists were securely bound together.

"Now hand over your own rag!"

With Abe's own neck scarf the Kid bound Harrigan's hands behind him. The gun was still in Abe's belt, but he made no attempt to touch it, even when the Kid holstered his own Colt.

The Kid surveyed them grimly.

They stared at him, their faces white with rage and humiliation. What would all Frio say when they were found like this—roped up like refractory steers in the sheriff's own office? The Kid picked a trail-rope from a hook on the wall and ran it round the two of them, binding them together back to back. Then he stepped back to the doorway.

"I'm sure hitting the trail now, sheriff," he said. "You ain't changed your mind, old timer?"

"I'll run you down, and see you hanged up on a cottonwood, as sure as shooting, Kid!" said the sheriff hoarsely. "I'll make it last sickness for you before the sun sets again on the Frio!"

"Quien sabe?" grinned the Kid.

He turned and looked into the street. A burly puncher was coming across to the sheriff's office. The Kid recognised Bud Wash, foreman of the Double Bar Ranch—in old days the Kid's foreman. Bud Wash was coming directly to the office, and the Kid stepped into cover inside at once.

"Not a yaup!" he said quietly to his prisoners. "There'll be shooting here if you give so much as a toot, you-uns!"

The heavy tramp of the puncher was heard in the porch.

"You to home, sheriff?" called out the foreman of the Double Bar.

The Kid's gun touched the sheriff's ear.

"Tell the galoot to step in."

For an instant Watson set his teeth, determined to resist. But the next moment he called out in a choking voice:

"Sure! Step in, Bud!"

The burly puncher stepped in.

"Hands up, Bud!"

"Waal, I swow!" ejaculated the foreman of the Double Bar, staring blankly at the Kid. "You back again, Kid?"

"Yep!" The Kid smiled at his old foreman over his gun. "Put 'em up, Bud; I'd sure hate to spill your juice over the sheriff's floor!"

"I guess I ain't gunning arter you, Kid," said Bud coolly. "Holy smoke! What you been doing here? Ha, ha!" The foreman of the Double Bar roared with laughter as he stared at the sheriff and his man.

"I guess I can take your word, Bud." The Kid dropped his gun into the holster. "I'm hitting the trail now. Adois!"

He walked out of the office to his horse.

"Draw, you fool!" panted the sheriff as soon as the Kid was outside. "Get him as he mounts, you moss-head!"

Bud Wash looked at him coolly.

"I guess I ain't pulling on the Kid," he answered. "I reckon he could have fixed me up like you if he'd wanted, him holding the drop. I ain't pulling on the Kid any."

"You dog-goned gink——"

"Aw, cut it out, sheriff!" said the Double Bar foreman.

There was a clatter of hoofs outside. The Kid was riding.

The sheriff and Abe struggled madly with their ropes. Bud Wash grinned and stood in the doorway looking out. No man on the Double Bar Ranch was disposed to take a hand against the Kid, once their comrade in the bunk-house on the ranges. Bud Wash watched him with cool interest and hoped that he would get clear.

But the Kid did not seem in a hurry to get clear. The open trail lay before him, but the Kid was not riding for the prairie. He rode across the plaza to the Red Dog. There was a roar of voices from the saloon as the boy outlaw drew rein in front of the building. The poker party outside the Red Dog leaped to their feet; from door and window a dozen startled faces looked.

"The Kid!"

"The Rio Kid!"

The horseman looked at the startled crowd with a smile. The gun in his hand was half-raised.

"You sure know me, fellers," he said. "Yep, it's the Rio Kid come trailing back. I've sure been to see the sheriff, and I guess I've left him in his office roped up like a steer."

"Gee-whiz!"

"I've come back," went on the Kid. "But I ain't come a-shooting if Frio lets me alone. That's what I want to tell you galoots. Give me a rest, and I'll give you a rest. But if any galoot here is hunting for trouble with me, let him hop out into the street—and here I am, pronto!"

There were twenty men staring at the Rio Kid, and every man in the crowd packed a gun. But no gun was touched. The boy outlaw's audacity seemed to have taken away the breath of the Frio men. And the half-raised gun in his hand spelled danger. The Kid's eye was wary; no man who had reached for a gun would have been likely to get it away from his belt under the watchful eye of the Kid.

"No galoot looking for a leetle rookus?" asked the Kid. "I'm sure glad to hear it. Gents, I've come trailing back peaceable, and I guess I'll never burn powder along the Rio Pecos if I'm let alone."

He lifted his gun and pointed with the muzzle to a notice that was nailed on the wall of the saloon beside the door. It was an old frayed bill—frayed by wind and weather—but the wording on it was still readable, and it was to the effect that five hundred dollars reward was offered for the Rio Kid, dead or alive.

"You, Poker Pete!" rapped out the Kid.

Poker Pete, the proprietor of the Red Dog, backed a pace.

"Take down that bill!"

"Aw, forget it, Kid!" protested Poker Pete. "That there bill was posted by the sheriff."

"Take it down!"

Poker Pete hesitated a moment; then he took down the bill. The Kid's gun was not to be argued with.

"I guess I'm waiting to see you tear it up!" remarked the Kid.

Poker Pete tore the bill across and across.

"That's good!" The Kid waved his gun cheerily to the staring crowd. "Adois!"

He wheeled his mustang and galloped away.

The Frio crowd stared after him breathlessly. Three or four men reached for their revolvers.

Bang, bang!

Bullets were flying as the Kid swept round the corner of an adobe building and vanished. There was a rush after him—in time to see the Kid galloping out on the open trail on the prairie.

The Kid looked back, waved his Stetson hat, laughed, and galloped on; and the grassy plains swallowed him from sight. The Kid was gone, and there was a rush of the crowd across the plaza to the sheriff's office.

Bud Wash was untying the sheriff and his man, and that process was completed under twenty pairs of staring eyes, twenty grinning faces.

"That Kid is sure some lad!" chuckled Poker Pete. "He sure got you this time, sheriff!"

Watson made no reply. His bronzed face was white with rage. The moment he was free he dashed out for his horse, and without waiting to call any to follow him galloped furiously out on the prairie.

The sun had set by the time he rode back into Frio, dusty, fatigued, and with a look on his face that warned the Frio men to ask no questions. But they knew that he had not found the Rio Kid.

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THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Trapped!

"IT'S a cinch!"

Sheriff Watson, of Frio, spoke between his teeth. He stood in the thickening dusk of the deep canyon, in the heart of the sierra Huecas, and stared at the gleam of flickering flame in the distance. Against the dusk of falling night, and the black of pine-clad hillsides, the distant camp-fire gleamed and flickered; and the sheriff of Frio knew that he had trailed down the Kid at last.

The sheriff and his posse had been riding and trailing hard. There were seven men in the party in the Huecas canyon, standing by their horses staring at the distant fire. Abe Harrigan, who had the keenest eye for a trail of any man on the banks of the Pecos, had picked up the track of the grey mustang again and again.

Some of the party wondered at the wary Kid having left a trail at all; they had ridden out of Frio with little hope of tracking him, for the Kid was as elusive as a will-o'-the-wisp. But they had found the trail, and followed it into the very heart of the lonely sierra, amid rocky arroyos, and deep, black barrancas and tangled pines. And now, in the distance, they saw the flicker of the lonely camp-fire, and knew that they were in sight of their goal.

"I guess he's our mutton, sheriff!" said Abe. "He sure ain't 'wise' to it that we're on his trail, or he wouldn't be burning a fire. He sure reckons that he's safe up here in the Huecas."

"He sure does," agreed the sheriff.

"We ain't roped him yet," said Pecos Pete.

The sheriff gritted his teeth. Since the episode in his office at Frio, Jake Watson had thought of nothing but the roping in of the Rio Kid. All Frio had laughed over his discomfiture; they were laughing still. Only the capture of the Kid could wipe out that bitter humiliation. The Kid had come trailing back to his own country, only to find bitter vengeance there. And vengeance now, was in the sheriff's hand.

"You galoots want to watch out," he said quietly. "We've got him cornered; but it will mean shooting. I guess the Kid will put up an all-fired fight. Shoot when you see him, and shoot to kill!"

"Sure!" assented the posse.

They were not likely to stand on ceremony with the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. Once the Kid had a gun in his hand, even seven to one would not be long odds.

"He can't get clear," went on the sheriff, his eyes fixed on the distant flicker. "I know this country—I've been over it afore, many's the time, arter the Kid. This here canyon ends up agin a wall of rock that a fly couldn't climb over. There ain't any way out except this way. We've got him. He sure figures that he's safe here—and I reckon we've got a chance to catch him napping. That camp-fire looks like it. But watch out."

"You bet!"

"Leave the cayuses here. I guess he'd hear them on these rocks. Keep your guns handy."

The horses were tethered; and the sheriff and his men proceeded up the canyon on foot. Every man gripped a gun in his hand, his eyes on the alert. It looked as if the elusive Kid was trapped at last; but in dealing with the Rio Kid a galoot needed to keep his eyes peeled. Softly, cautiously, in the thickening darkness, the Frio men trod on the rocky way, closer and closer to the flickering fire that burned at the head of the canyon.

The canyon narrowed, as they advanced, to a mere gorge. So narrow, that in one place, a narrow neck between high rocks, they had to walk in single file. Beyond the narrow neck, the canyon opened out again, a basin enclosed by high and inaccessible cliffs. In that narrow neck the Kid could have held the whole force at bay with ease had he known they were coming. The sheriff breathed more freely when they were through, and treading wider space again. Closer and closer they drew to the camp-fire.

Pine cones and branches burned cheerily at the foot of a rock. By the fire lay a still figure in a blanket. In the firelight they could see it clearly, and the sheriff caught his breath. The elusive Kid, so long hunted in vain, had been caught napping at last—asleep, with his foes stealing on him in the shadows!

Closer and closer the sheriff's party drew, gun in hand, ready to pull

trigger if the still form in the blanket stirred. But it did not stir. And at last Sheriff Watson, with blazing eyes, ran forward, and jammed his gun to the sleeping form and shouted:

"We've got you, Kid! By the holy smoke, we've got you at last!"

Every gun in the party was aimed at the recumbent form. Abe Harrigan tore the blanket aside; and every trigger was ready to rise at a movement from the Kid. The next moment there was a roar of rage from the sheriff. As the blanket was dragged aside it was not the Rio Kid that was revealed. A log lay by the fireside—and it was the log that the blanket had covered.

"Gee-whiz!" gasped Pecos Pete.

"It ain't the Kid!" stammered Harrigan.

"Fooled!" muttered the sheriff. "Fooled by that dog-goned Kid! But he kain't be fur off—come daylight, we'll hunt him out of the rocks——"

"Hark!" said Abe.

Far down the canyon, the way the posse had come, sounded the crashing of galloping hoofs. The sheriff started and bent his head to listen.

Beyond the narrow neck of the canyon the horses had been tethered, while the Frio men crept on to the Kid's camp. The galloping, echoing through the dusk of the sierra, told what had become of the tethered horses—and told where the Kid was.

"Great snakes! He's stampeded the cayuses!" hissed the sheriff.

He rushed away down the canyon. His men followed him fast. Twenty miles from Frio, in a rough country, they had lost their horses—and the sheriff foamed with rage at the knowledge.

The galloping died away into the silence of the night, while the sheriff and his men were still panting down the canyon towards the narrow neck. Suddenly from the darkness of the gorge, came the flash and the ring of a revolver.

"He's there!" panted Abe.

The sheriff almost raved. The posse, creeping on to the camp-fire had passed the Kid in the darkness; left him behind them in cover. And he had stampeded the horses in the lower canyon; and now he was in the narrow gorge—their only way of egress—holding it against them. Again the revolver barked from the darkness, and it was followed by the sound of the Rio Kid's voice.

"Halt, you 'uns! I guess any galoot that moseys a step further will get his, sudden!"

"You durned gink!" raved the sheriff.

The sheriff gripped his gun convulsively, and started forward. Abe Harrigan caught him by the arm.

"Let up, sheriff! It ain't good enough!"

Watson shook his hand roughly off. In his rage he had lost all prudence, and he rushed into the gorge, firing wildly as he rushed. From the gloom of the narrow neck came a single shot, and the sheriff pitched over on the rocks and lay groaning. And his men, who had been following, halted again and retreated. In the gorge the groans of the sheriff died down to a low mumbling.

The mocking voice of the Rio Kid rang from the shadows of the gorge.

"You 'uns coming on?"

There was no answer from the Frio posse.

The Kid was master of the situation; and the Frio men could only wait for dawn, and what chance daylight might afford them. As they waited there came a sound of crawling, mingled with gasping and muttering. From the gorge the wounded sheriff of Frio crawled back to his waiting men.

From the gorge came no further sound, and the Frio men wondered whether the Kid was gone. But they did not venture to enter the gorge to ascertain. They waited grimly till the sun rose on the Huecas.

Then a cautious advance was made into the rocky, winding gorge; but no shot greeted them as they came. The Rio Kid was gone—and had been long gone. His trail, if he had left one, was useless to seek; the posse were dismounted now, and their leader was wounded; it was futile to figure on following the Kid on foot. Many a long mile away their horses were grazing on the plains. The sheriff, his wound bandaged, his bronzed face white with pain and rage, gave the word to hit the trail for Frio.

In a litter made of pine branches, the wounded sheriff was carried on the shoulders of his men, tramping long, weary miles under a blazing sun

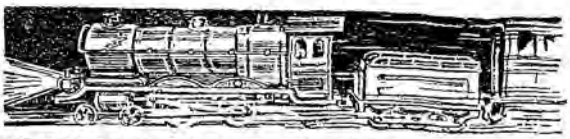
It was past midday when they reached Frio; and all the cow-town turned out to see them come in.

Through a crowd of grinning faces the weary posse trailed down the street of Frio.

Afar, in the sierra, the Rio Kid smiled as he rode the grey mustang by lonely trails.

THE END.

(Next week's Western thriller is entitled: "THE THOUSAND DOLLAR KID!" Don't miss it, boys!)



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