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The POPULAR

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EVERY TUESDAY. 2d.

AND THIS IS WHAT THE RIO KID DID TO THE SHERIFF!

AN OUTLAW RIDING WITH JUSTICE!

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THE TRAIL OF TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS!

A ROARING LONG COMPLETE YARN OF ADVENTURES IN TEXAS, STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
No Luck!

SHERIFF WATSON dropped from his dusty horse, tired and weary, threw the reins over a post, and strode heavily into his office on the plaza at Frio. Worn and dusty from long trailing and hard riding, the sheriff of Frio sank into his rocker with a grunt of relief. He sat there staring grimly out into the plaza, where the shadows were lengthening as the sun sank behind the Huecas in the west.

Dusty horsemen who had followed him into the cow town dispersed in various directions, in quest of rest and refreshment.

The town of Frio had been waiting eagerly for the sheriff's return; and now he had returned the Frio men did not need telling that he had been unsuccessful. In the Red Dog saloon, among the groups that stood about under the cottonwood-trees on the plaza, there was sarcastic comment on the activities of the sheriff of Frio. Not only had the Rio Kid beaten and baffled him, defied him, and escaped him, but now a gang of Mexican raiders from over the border had carried off plunder almost under his nose, snapped their fingers at him and ridden off in triumph. In the matter of the Rio Kid, perhaps, it was not to be wondered at; the Kid was as elusive as a will-of-the-wisp, and Jake Watson was not the only sheriff in Texas whom he had defied and beaten to a frazzle. But it got the goat of all Frio to think that a gang of Mexican bandits should ride away with a sack of ten thousand dollars belonging to the Frio Bank, and snap their swarthy fingers at pursuit and at the law. There were many men in Frio who opined that Jake Watson was losing his grip, and that what the Frio country wanted was a new sheriff who could handle things better and maintain the law.

Jake Watson, weary to the bone, thick with the dust of the trails and the mud of the arroyos in the Huecas, knew the trend of the discussion on the plaza, as well as if he had heard what was said. His brow was black and bitter. There had been a time when he had had a soft corner in his tough heart for the Rio Kid, a sort of sneaking admiration for the boy outlaw who threw a laughing defiance in the face of all the cow country. But defeat and humiliation had worked a change, and his feeling towards the outlawed puncher was now very like personal hatred. He longed to get a rope on the elusive Kid; he ached to look into the handsome, laughing face over the levelled barrel of a six-gun. The Kid had offered him peace, and when his offer was rejected he had allowed that he would make Frio sit up and howl; and he was doing it. Had not all his time and energy been devoted to the hunting of the Rio Kid, the sheriff told himself bitterly, Sonora Jose and his bandits would never have been able to make their swoop in the Frio country, and get away with the loot.

But it was less of the Kid, than of the hold up that had taken place that morning, that the sheriff was now thinking. All through the blazing day he had trailed and spurred in the rocky arroyos and barren slopes of the Huecas, only to learn at last that he had gone on a false trail; that the bandits he sought were not there, and never had been there. Men were still out on the trails hunting for sign of them; but the sheriff knew that there was little chance, now, that they would be seen on the Texas side of the Rio Grande. While he had been hunting them in the Huecas, they had had ample time to ride south to the border and escape into their own country.

There was a step in the doorway; and the sheriff turned his black scowl upon the man who entered; a fat man in store clothes. Banker Fray was almost the only man in Frio who wore store clothes; the only man within a hundred miles who wore a plug hat. Generally Herman Fray was a quiet and grave man; but he looked neither now. His fat face was red, his eyes glinting, as he whisked into the sheriff's office. His look, as he fixed it on Jake Watson, was angry and accusing.

"News?" he rapped.

"None!" grunted the sheriff.

Herman Fray gesticulated with angry excitement.

"Ten thousand dollars!" he panted. "Ten thousand dollars taken from the hack by that gang of greasers, and you tell me there is no news! The driver brought in information that they had struck to the west after robbing the hack—they're hiding in the Huecas——"

"I reckon they was fooling Spot Peters," grunted the sheriff. "They ain't in the Huecas, and never was. I reckon it was a blind, their headin' west, and they struck south for the Rio Grande, arter all."

"And you've let them go?"

The sheriff snarled.

"I've been in the saddle ever since Spot brought in news of the hold-up. I guess I've got men out huntin' for sign of them. They may have hit for the Staked Plain, or they may have gone south. If they've gone south, they're in Mexico afore this."

"And the sack of greenbacks with them!" howled Herman Fray.

"Sure!"

"And you——"

"Let up!" growled the sheriff. "Quit chewing the rag, Herman Fray! I guess I'm tired, some; but I'm ready to take the trail agin the minute I get news of them Mexican fire-bugs. Let up!"

The Frio banker stamped out of the office. The sheriff's glance followed him gloomily. A dusty horseman dismounted outside and strode in. It was Pecos Pete, one of the sheriff's men.

"I reckon we've hit their trail, sheriff," said Pecos Pete. "We sure picked up the trail of ten critters head-

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in' south. Spot Peters allows there was nine in the gang, and they took one of the hosses from the hack. I reckon that trail belongs to the bunch you want."

Jake Watson, fatigued as he was, was out of his rocker with a bound.

"That's sure good news, Pete," he said. "If Sonora Jose headed south for Mexico, as I reckon he did, he had to make for the ford of the Rio Pollo—the river's in his way, and it's in flood—there's no crossin' except at the ford. Tell the boys to git fresh cayuses and saddle up."

"I reckon if they hit direct for the ford, sheriff, they're across the border in Mexico by this time," said Pete.

"Mebbe. But it's a long stretch from the Pollo to the Rio Grande, and suthin' may have stopped them, or their cayuses may have given out." The Frio sheriff was ready to catch at a straw. "It's cow country the other side of the Pollo, and they'd have to dodge the ranches—and they might run into a bunch of punchers. There's a chance, anyhow."

"A mighty slim one," said Pecos Pete.

The sheriff rapped out an oath.

"Tell the boys to saddle up fresh horses, and quit chewing the rag!"

"Sure!"

Ten minutes later, the sheriff and his men were riding out of Frio to the south. A crowd gathered to stare after them as they went, with a shaking of heads. No man in Frio believed that Jake Watson would be in time to overtake the bandits if they had headed south early in the day. Hard riding was futile on the trail of desperate fugitives, well-mounted, with a long start. The Frio men doubted, but hoped for the best. For the robbery of ten thousand dollars belonging to the Frio Bank hit many of the citizens of Frio—many had doubts whether the cow-town bank would pull through after such a loss; Herman Fray's looks were not reassuring. And if the cow-town bank "went up" many a man in Frio was likely to lose his roll. One thing was certain, that if those ten thousand dollars were not recovered, Jake Watson's days as sheriff were likely to be numbered.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Met on the Prairie!

THE Rio Kid lifted his head from his blankets and listened.

High over the rolling prairie sailed the full, round moon; glinting on waving grass that glistened like silver.

But in the clump of pecans and sassafras where the Kid had camped, all was dark.

Close by the Kid, the black-muzzled mustang lay asleep; but the mustang had awakened at the dull booming sound that echoed through the night and lifted his head, as his master had done.

The Kid listened intently.

From the prairie, vast in shadow and silver under the moon, the dull distant sound came—louder and louder with every moment. It was the galloping tramp of many horses. Horsemen were riding through the night—riding down from the north at full gallop. Closer came the sound of the thundering hoofs, booming through the silence; and the Kid calculated that there were not fewer than a dozen riders in the bunch. And the Kid shook off his blankets and rose, and his hand went to his belt, shifting the holsters of his guns a little nearer to his reach.

The Kid had camped down in that clump on the prairie at sundown, and slept the peaceful sleep of an infant; his slumber was never broken by the knowledge that men hunted him far and wide. But the Kid awakened instantly at the sound of danger, with all his senses on the alert. That day the Kid had faced, and beaten, a gang of Mexican bandits; buckled to his belt was the bag of ten thousand dollars in greenbacks that he had taken from Sonora Jose. But the horsemen who were riding down from the north were a different proposition, the Kid was well aware. They were not Mexicans; they might be a bunch of cow-punchers, but the Kid opined that they were the sheriff's posse from Frio. And if Jake Watson and his men were at hand, it was up to the Rio Kid to keep his eyes peeled and his guns handy.

Gallop! Gallop!

The thudding hoofs came closer.

"Quiet, old hoss!" the Kid murmured to the black-muzzled grey mustang. But the word was not needed; the mustang lay still and silent.

The Kid moved through the thickets, and, keeping in cover, looked out on the moonlit prairie. Black, moving shadows broke the silvery glimmer to the north—figures of hurried riders in Stetson hats, spurring. Whoever the bunch were they were riding hard, riding as if for life. A slow grin came over the face of the Rio Kid.

"Jake Watson and his hombres," he said to himself. "I reckon they've got wise to it that the greasers headed for the ford of the Pollo, and they're on the trail hours too late."

The Kid chuckled.

The situation struck him as amusing. He had held up the gang of bandits at the ford, shot down Sonora Jose, and taken from him the bag of ten thousand dollars. Hours too late, the sheriff of Frio was on the track, riding hard when hard riding could no longer serve. Long before this the bandits would have splashed through the waters of the Rio Grande and escaped into Mexico without their plunder, which was in the Kid's keeping.

But the situation was not likely to continue amusing if the sheriff of Frio came on the Rio Kid. Well he knew that Jake Watson would have let all the bandits on the border escape him for a chance of roping in the Kid. The bunch of horsemen were heading directly for the clump of pecans where the Kid had camped, and if he rode out of it on the other side he would be full in their view in the moonlight. Jake Watson was long hours too late to catch the bandits, but it looked as if fortune had given him a chance of catching the Rio Kid. The grin died off the Kid's sunburnt face, and he whistled softly. Closer and closer came the bunch of rapid riders.

But they were heading for the ford of the Pollo, ten miles south of the Kid's camp; they were not likely to stop at the clump of trees, the Kid reflected. He had only to lie doggo till they had passed. They were riding hard in the hope of yet catching up with the retreating bandits, and were not likely to halt by the way. There was no reason why they should ride through the patch of trees and thickets; their way lay past it on the open plain. The Kid realised that he had only to keep his presence there a secret; which was easy enough in the deep dark cover of the thickets.

The Kid was right in his surmise. Closer and closer came the bunch of horsemen; but they were sweeping by a dozen yards from the clump. Not within that distance would the nearest of them pass, the Kid figured, as he watched them from cover. And he waited and watched quietly. They were abreast of the clump now; a minute more and they would be sweeping away past it to the south, riding on with whip and spur for the ford of the Pollo. But it was the unexpected that happened. Under the Kid's eyes, not thirty feet from the trailing mass of Spaniards-beard that hid him, one of the horses stumbled, with its foot in a gopher hole, and the rider was pitched heavily from its back. There was a heavy thud as he struck the earth.

Three or four of the riders, not noticing the accident in their wild haste, galloped on without turning their heads. But the rest reined in, with a clattering of hoofs and a jingling of bridles. The stumbling horse had recovered his footing, but the man who had fallen lay like a log. As the riders reined in round him, he struggled to a sitting posture, his Stetson rising into the Kid's view over the waving grass.

"Thunder! You sure came a sock-dolager, sheriff!" the Kid heard the voice of Pecos Pete.

A curse from Jake Watson answered. He struggled up, but sank down again. The crash on the hard earth had half stunned the sheriff of Frio.

"You hurt bad, sheriff?" asked Abe Harrigan.

"I guess I'm shook up some!" growled the sheriff. "But I ain't made of putty, I reckon—there ain't nothing broke! Ride on, you galoots! What you stopping for and wasting time? Beat it, pronto!"

"But you——" said Pecos Pete.

"Ain't I shouting that I ain't hurt?" snorted the sheriff. "And if I was, ain't you arter them Mexican fire-bugs, durn your pesky hide! Beat it, you guys, and I'll follow arter you. Beat it, dog-gone you!"

The crash to the earth had not improved the temper of the Frio sheriff. His men rode on at his word, dashing away at a gallop to the south after those who had already almost disappeared. Sheriff Watson sat in the grass, grunting and grumbling savagely. He was shaken and winded, and not in a state to remount his horse and resume the wild ride for some minutes at least. He staggered to his feet at last and stood unsteadily, staring south. Far in the dimness of the plains Stetson hats bobbed over silvery waving grass, vanishing towards the distant Rio Pollo. From the blackness of the pecan clump the Rio Kid grinned at the man who had been left behind.

The sheriff turned to his waiting broncho at last.

"You durned ornery cayuse!" he growled. He limped to the broncho. "I guess you got to put it on some now; I sure reckon you're goin' to jump lively, if a quirt can make you! Dog-gone you!"

"Forget it, sheriff!" said a soft, silky voice.

Sheriff Watson spun round with a yell of amazement. A lithe figure had darted from the shadows of the pecans, and the sheriff of Frio spun round to see a six-gun, with the Rio Kid's handsome, mocking face grinning at him over the levelled barrel.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Whip-Hand!

"PUT 'em up, Jake Watson!"

The Kid was smiling, his eyes were dancing. But there was no jesting in his voice, and no jest in the levelled revolver with a finger on the trigger. Jake Watson, with black rage in his face and in his heart, lifted his hands above his head at the order of the boy outlaw, his eyes burning at the Kid from under his contracted brows.

"You're sure a wise man and a good little man, sheriff!" mocked the Kid. "You got your paws up jest in time to save your cabeza. Though dog-gone my boots if I know why I don't let drive a bullet through your ornery skull and be durned to you."

"Shoot, you gol-darned fire-bug!" hissed the sheriff of Frio. "Shoot, you pesky scallywag!" The sheriff stared furiously after his men, vanishing far in the dim prairie. If they would hear a shot and return to rope in the Kid, it was worth going down under the boy outlaw's bullet. But that thought was only for a moment. They would not hear or heed the crack of a Colt in the thunder of many hoofs, even if it reached so far; and if they rode back they would not find the Rio Kid. And the sheriff, who for a second had been *tempted to reach for his gun, even with* the deadly muzzle looking him in the face, gave up the idea and kept his hands over his head.

The Kid's face was grim; he could read in the enraged looks of the Frio sheriff the thoughts in his mind.

"Forget it, Jake Watson," he said quietly. "I guess I've got you dead to rights. You've sure moseyed right into my hands, sheriff, and you're my mutton. Keep them paws in the air, you gol-darned jay!"

The sheriff stood with his hands up, his breast heaving with rage. Not for a moment had he dreamed of a meeting with the Rio Kid on the prairie; all his thoughts had been concentrated on the gang of Mexican bandits, and the slim chance that remained of riding them down before they escaped across the border. Had he surmised—had he only dreamed—that the Kid was at hand—— Again he was tempted to risk all and clutch at a gun; and again the certainty of sudden death deterred him. Death itself would have been almost welcome to the enraged sheriff could he have seen the Rio Kid a prisoner in the hands of his men when he fell. But his men were far—riding far and fast, vanishing in the dim distance at his own order. He was alone with the Rio Kid on the boundless prairie, at the boy outlaw's mercy, and throwing away his life would buy him nothing. He kept his hands over his head, his teeth gritting with rage, his eyes blazing.

The Kid watched him coolly.

"You've got me, you durned fire-bug!" said the sheriff at last in a low, sullen growl. "It's your game—gol-darn you! If my men had been hyer——"

"I guess if your galoots had been hyer, sheriff, I shouldn't have shown up so spry!" grinned the Kid. "But when you was left, I reckoned I'd like a leetle chinwag with you. I guess I'll borrow your hardware, sheriff, if you ain't any powerful objection."

Still keeping the sheriff covered, finger on trigger, the Rio Kid stepped closer, and with his left hand detached the gun from Watson's belt. With a sweep of his arm he tossed it away into the waving grass at a distance.

"Now I reckon we can have a little pow-wow, all friendly and peaceable, sheriff," said the Kid.

"Dog-gone you!"

"Aw, can it, sheriff!" jeered the Kid. "What's the good of cussing? It won't buy you anything." He lowered his revolver, but it was ready to rise again at a hostile movement. His manner was mocking and bantering. "I've sure got you dead to rights, Jake Watson! And what's the matter with

stringing you up to a branch yonder, like you'd do to me if you knew how?"

Jake Watson breathed hard.

"I ain't asking you for nothing!" he answered, through his set teeth. "Shoot if you durned well like! I'm on your trail till one of us goes up the flume, Kid Carfax; and if I live, I'll see you swinging on a branch yet!"

"That sure ain't wise talk, sheriff, with my gun so handy!" grinned the Kid. "You're asking for your ticket for soup, feller!"

A glare of rage and defiance was the Frio sheriff's answer.

"You're a hard man, Jake," said the Kid, "as tough as hickory, I guess! When I came trailing back to the Frio country I wanted to come peaceable, as I told you, and you wouldn't have it. I guess I allowed I'd make Frio sit up and howl—and you've sure howled some since then, sheriff. I guess I'm plumb loco not to drive a bullet through your cabeza here and now! But it ain't my way, and I reckon you're wise to that."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"But you ain't hunting me like a lobo wolf, sheriff, without getting something back on your little self!" he went on. "I'll sure make you tired of trailing me afore you get through!"

"I'll see you strung up yet!" snarled the sheriff.

"*Guess again!*" *jeered the Kid.* "Why, you ornery cayuse, you couldn't string up one side of me! You can't even rope in a gang of Mexican greasers what held up the hack nigh under your pesky nose! I guess Banker Fray will wait a big piece before you bring back the ten thousand dollars you're trailing."

Sheriff Watson started, staring at the Rio Kid.

"What do you know about that?" he snarled.

"A whole lot, sheriff!" chuckled the Kid. "Why, I watched the hold-up this morning and I sure headed off the greasers at the Rio Pollo ford and got the greenbacks you're after!"

The sheriff gave almost a yell.

"The thunder you did!"

"Jest as I'm telling you, sheriff," said the Kid nonchalantly. "Your men can ride hell-for-leather to the ford, but they won't find any greasers—I sure reckon Sonora Jose and his gang are across the Rio Grande by this time. And Jose has got a bullet from my six-gun to carry along with him, to remind him of the Rio Kid, and I've got the dollars!"

The sheriff's face was a picture of amazement and doubt and wonder.

"*You've got the dollars?*" *he stuttered.*

"Sure!"

"You got the ten thousand in greenbacks that them dagoes lifted from the McCracken hack?" the sheriff gasped.

The Kid tapped a leather bag that was buckled to his belt. The sheriff stared at it with amazement. It was the little sack of greenbacks that the Mexican bandits had taken from the hack, he knew that. And it was in the hands of the Rio Kid! Amazement held the Frio sheriff dumb.

The Kid laughed lightly.

"I reckon you'd never get your paws on them greasers, sheriff; and if you did you wouldn't rope in the dollars. I guess I was before you."

The sheriff's eyes were fixed on the little sack. There were desperate thoughts in his mind. Pursuit of the Mexican raiders was futile now; even their capture, if it was still possible, meant little when their plunder had passed into other hands. It was defeat for the Frio sheriff again—defeat once more at the hands of the Rio Kid.

From the sack that contained ten thousand dollars in paper money the sheriff's eyes went furtively to his horse. His rifle was on the bronco, in its case strapped to the saddle. If he found one chance in a thousand of grasping that rifle, or driving a bullet through the Rio Kid's heart and seizing on the sack of dollars, the Sheriff of Frio would take that chance. He breathed hard and deep.

"Forget it, Jake." The Kid seemed to read what was passing in his desperate thoughts. "This hyer is my game, and you lose, sheriff!"

The Kid stepped to the bronco, drew the rifle from its case, and dropped it to the ground. There was a cracking sound under his heavy heel as he stamped. The sheriff muttered a curse. His last hope was gone.

"I reckon I want you to get on that cayuse, sheriff," said the Rio Kid.

"What's your game, you durned rustler?"

"I guess you'll be wise to that later," drawled the Kid. "Jest at present it's my say-so, and you're *coming* for a leetle pasear with *me*, sheriff!" His bantering tone changed to one of sharp menace. "Get on that cayuse!"

The sheriff, gritting his teeth, mounted the bronco. The Kid took the scarf from his neck.

"Put your paws together, sheriff!"

For an instant the sheriff did not stir, but the glint in the Kid's eyes warned him. He put his hands together, and they were bound with his own neck-scarf.

The Kid whistled, and the black-muzzled mustang came trotting out of the pecans. Mounting the mustang and taking the sheriff's reins, the Rio Kid rode away across the prairie to the north towards Frio. Jake Watson, with rage in his heart, rode beside the boy outlaw whom he had hunted, a prisoner in the hands of the Rio Kid.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Return of the Sheriff!

POKER SMITH, of the Red Dog Saloon, was the earliest riser in the cow town of Frio the following morning. Poker, as a matter of fact, had not slept well. Most of the profits of the Red Dog were banked in the Frio Bank, and the hold-up by the Mexican bandits worried Poker a whole lot. It was opined up and down Frio that if the trail of the ten thousand dollars did not end successfully, *if the cow-town bank suffered that* heavy loss, payment would be suspended. The bank's failure would hit many men in Frio hard, but Poker Smith it was likely to hit the hardest.

The proprietor of the Red Dog Saloon had had a bad night, and perhaps that was why he awakened early in the sunny morning at the sound of clattering hoofs in the dusty street of Frio, and at the sound Poker leaped from his bed.

All Frio knew that the sheriff and his men were burning the trail through the night on the hunt for the bandits, and if the early horseman was a galoot with news Poker wanted to hear the news without delay. Poker Smith ran to his window, dragged it open, and stared out into the street, glimmering in the early sunrays.

What he saw made him stare harder. Poker Smith rubbed his eyes and stared again.

A horseman was coming up the street to the plaza from the prairie trail. But it was such a horseman as Poker Smith

had never seen ride into the cow town before. The horse, evidently tired, came on at a walking pace, unguided by the rider—unguided, but heading for home from its own natural instinct. The rider sat backwards in the saddle, his back to the horse's head. All that Poker could see of him as he came on was his Stetson hat, his grey woollen shirt, and his hands that were tied behind him with a neck-scarf.

"I swow!" ejaculated Poker Smith, in amazement.

As the bronco paced nearer he made out that the rider's legs were tied under the horse with a length of trail-rope. Hand and foot the man was tied, backwards on his horse.

Poker Smith dragged on his clothes and rushed down to his door. He tore the door open and ran into the street. He had not seen the rider's face, but there was something familiar in the outlines of the figure, to Poker Smith's eyes. But it could not be the Sheriff of Frio who had ridden back to town in such a style—it surely could not!

Standing outside the saloon Poker Smith watched the oncoming horse. The rider's head twisted round, and Poker saw a bronzed, bearded face, white with rage under its tan. It was the sheriff.

Poker burst into a roar of laughter. Sheriff Watson had returned from the trail of ten thousand dollars, and this was how he had returned. Other doors were opening now along the irregular street and the plaza.

"Waal, carry me home to die!" roared Poker Smith. "If this hyer don't beat the hull deck! Say, sheriff, is that you?"

Jake Watson gave him a glare of fury.

"Cut me loose, you galoot!" he hissed. "Cut me loose, you jay!"

The saloon-keeper roared again.

"But who fixed you up like this, sheriff? Ha, ha! You sure never let a gang of greasers fix you up that a-way!"

"Quit chewing the rag, and cut me loose!" yelled the sheriff fiercely.

"Hang on a piece while I get a knife!" gasped Poker Smith; and he went back into the saloon, chuckling.

Sheriff Watson sat his horse. The broncho had halted before the saloon, and stood there, the sheriff almost writhing on his back.

This was the retaliation of the Rio Kid; this was how the Kid had sent him back to Frio; and the sheriff could have wished that the boy outlaw had shot him through the heart instead.

Perhaps mercifully, perhaps carelessly, the Kid had started him into the town at dawn; and the sheriff hoped that he might be released before all Frio had gathered to gaze on his shame and humiliation. But that hope was delusive.

Three or four pairs of eyes had seen him, from windows and doors, and like wildfire the news ran through the cow town. Men, half-dressed, buckling belts or hitching suspenders, came pouring in to the street, every face on the grin.

It seemed to the hapless sheriff that all Frio was turning out early that morning to look on his discomfiture. He cursed under his beard as he waited for Poker Smith to reappear with a knife to cut him loose.

Round him surged a crowd, gathering thicker and thicker every moment. Loud laughter awoke all the echoes of the plaza.

"It's sure the sheriff!"

"You have been hunting the Rio Kid, and finding him?" yelled a mocking voice, followed by a roar of laughter.

The sheriff crimsoned with rage. His eyes blazed at the crowd of derisive faces. But he did not speak. He could not. His face was choked by fury.

Poker Smith came out at last, a bowie in his hand. He stepped up to the sheriff, grinning. Amid loud laughter he sawed at the trail-rope that fastened Jake Watson's legs under the bronco.

"The sheriff has sure hit trouble!" chuckled Lewson, the storekeeper of Frio. "He ain't brought back them dollars, you-uns!"

"He sure ain't!" said Poker Smith. "There, you can git off'n your cayuse now, Jake."

He gave the sheriff a helping hand from the horse's back. Then he sawed through the neckscarf that was knotted round his wrists. The sheriff's own neckscarf was missing; evidently it was that which had been used to bind his hands.

RETURNING THE PLUNDER! The Kid unfastened a leather bag from his belt. Banker Fray's eyes fixed on it, astonished, startled. "Kid!" he gasped. The Rio Kid tossed the sack to the banker. "Count the dollars, feller," he said. "There's ten thousand there those greasers took!" (*See Chapter 5.*)

There was a roar of inquiry from all the crowd; but the sheriff said no word. But the name of the Rio Kid passed from mouth to mouth. The fury that blazed in the sheriff's face at the mention of that name confirmed the surmise of the Frio crowd.

Free at last, the sheriff strode away to his office, still without a word. He left the plaza echoing with laughter behind him.

"That Kid is sure some lad!" chuckled Poker Smith. "I guess the sheriff will be as mad as a hornet!"

Mad as a hornet hardly described Sheriff Watson's state when his door hid him at last from the mocking eyes of Frio. That morning the sheriff was not seen in public.

Banker Fray, who came to his office for news, was refused admittance.

It was not till noon that the sheriff's men rode in, weary and dusty from the trail, with a tale of failure.

They had found no trace of the fleeing bandits, learning nothing of them. They had missed their leader; and they were amazed to learn that he had returned to Frio; and still more amazed when they learned how he had come back—tied on his horse with his face to the tail.

Who had done it they could not say; but no one doubted that the sheriff had fallen in with the Rio Kid on the prairie and had come out at the little end of the horn.

Sheriff Watson hid his rage and humiliation behind closed doors. He knew that all Frio was rocking with laughter. The thought was in his mind to resign his place, and to ride out of the Frio country, never to return. But he drove that thought away.

The Rio Kid had shamed him in the eyes of all the Frio country; he knew that the story would spread along the Frio and the Pecos, to be greeted with yells of laughter in every bunkhouse for a hundred miles. But the Rio Kid should pay at long last! In his rage and shame the Frio sheriff swore it with many an oath that he would give the boy outlaw no rest, day or night; that he would trail him, with tireless vengeance, till he should see the outlawed puncher strung up to the branch of a cottonwood.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Pony Up!

"HALT!"

Herman Fray, the banker of Frio, pulled in his horse, the buckboard rocking in the hurry of his halt. Three miles out of Frio, where the trail ran through a belt of cottonwoods, a horseman pulled out of the trees, with a sharp command on his lips and a six-gun in his hand to enforce it.

Herman Fray, banker and auctioneer and real-estate agent—a man was many things in a cow town like Frio—was not a fighting-man; but had he been one of the hardest cases in Frio he would scarcely have ventured to reach for a gun, with the Rio Kid's smiling face looking at him over a levelled barrel.

He dragged at his reins, and the buckboard stopped; and the Kid rode closer, with a cheery nod to the banker.

"Mornin', feller!" greeted the Kid.

Fray eyed him grimly.

He was on his way to McCracken; and all the Frio citizens who had seen him drive away in his buckboard, guessed what his mission was—to make an attempt to raise money in McCracken to tide the bank over the crisis.

Fray had not seen the sheriff since his return; but he had heard of that return, and he had no longer the faintest hope that Jake Watson would trail down the ten thousand dollars.

"I guess you're wasting your time, Kid!" said Herman Fray coolly. "I guess about ten dollars is my limit; and that ain't worth your while!"

"And you the richest man in Frio!" bantered the Kid.

"With too much hoss-sense to carry dollars on this trail, after what happened yesterday," answered Fray. "You've sure missed your chance, Kid; you should have horned in on this trail yesterday."

The Kid laughed.

"You dog-goned gink!" he said. "Do you figure that I've stopped you to go through your rags?"

"I guess it ain't for the pleasure of hearing me chewing the rag!" answered Fray sarcastically.

"Sure!" assented the Kid. "I got business with you, Herman Fray!"

"Come to the bank in Frio," said Fray. "That's my place of business, Kid. There's a heap galoots would be pleased to see you come!"

"You've said it!" grinned the Kid. "They sure would, and Jake Watson the most of all, I reckon, after the way I sent him home!"

"Then it was you?" said Fray.

"It sure was, feller. I guess I warned the sheriff that I'd make him sit up and howl; and I reckon he's howling now, some! But that ain't what I've stopped to tell you, Herman Fray. Keep your dollars in your pocket, you all-fired jay," added the Kid contemptuously. "They say a heap of things about me, but no galoot can say that I ever held up a man on the trail and cleaned him out. No, sir. That ain't my business with you. I've been lookin' for a chance to see you outside Frio——"

"I guess you're seeing me now," said Fray. "Get it up, Kid; I'm due in McCracken early!"

"I reckon the sheriff ain't brought you back them dollars that the greasers rustled off the hack yesterday?" grinned the Kid.

Fray scowled.

"He sure ain't!" he replied.

"Then ain't it lucky for you, and for a heap galoots in Frio, that a pilgrim about my size was cavorting around when them greasers hit the horizon with the sack of dollars," said the Kid.

The Frio banker stared at him.

"I guess it wasn't my business," went on the Kid cheerily; "but I wouldn't stand for Texas dollars going across the Rio Grande in the claws of a gang of greasers! I jest had to horn in!"

The Kid unfastened a leather bag from his belt. Banker Fray's eyes fixed on it, astonished, startled.

"Kid!" he gasped.

The Rio Kid tossed the sack into the buckboard.

"Count the dollars, feller!" he said. "I ain't asking you for a receipt; this here piece of business is quite unofficial. But see that the dust is all there, hombre!"

For a moment the Frio banker stared at him spellbound. Then mechanically he picked up the leather sack. With shaking fingers he turned out the contents, and with staring eyes counted over the wad of notes. Then, gasping for breath, he looked at the Kid again.

"Got it right?" asked the Kid carelessly.

"There's ten thousand dollars in this sack," said the banker.

"Ain't that right?"

"Sure!"

The banker looked at the bag of bank-notes again, and again he looked at the Rio Kid.

"You got this off the bandits, Kid?"

"Yep! I gave Sonora Jose a bit of lead in exchange!"

"You're handing it back to me?"

"Ain't it yours?"

"Sure!" Herman Fray stared at the Kid. "Kid, they say a lot of hard things about you; but I reckon most of them don't fit. Kid, why didn't you ride away with this bag of dollars?"

"You've got me guessing!" grinned the Kid.

He waved his Stetson to the astonished banker, wheeled his horse, and rode away into the cottonwoods.

Herman Fray stared after him blankly till he was out of sight. Then he took up his reins, swung round the buckboard, and drove back to Frio in a cloud of dust.

That night Frio buzzed with the news—the most startling news that had ever spread through the cow town. The trail of ten thousand dollars had ended, and it was the Rio Kid, the outlawed puncher who was hunted for his life, who had roped in the dollars from the Mexican bandits and sent them back where they belonged. In the cow town by the rushing waters of the Frio it was a nine days' wonder.

THE END.

(What do you think of the Kid, chums? A fellow in a thousand, eh? He's at his best in next week's roaring yarn of the West, entitled: "THE VENGEANCE OF CHIEF MANY PONIES!" Take a tip, and make sure of your copy now!)

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