THE RECKLESSNESS OF THE RIO KID!

When all the countryside is out after him, isn't it just like the Rio Kid to court danger by staying on in the section, instead of making a break for a new country and freedom?

OUR ROARING LONG COMPLETE WESTERN TALE, FEATURING AN AMAZING BOY OUTLAW, THE RIO KID!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Dangerous Neighbours!

THE Rio Kid lay close.

The Kid feared no foe, or any number of foes; and, if need had been, he would have faced Sonora Jose's gang with careless defiance, and relied upon his six-guns and his unerring shooting to pull him through. But there was no need, and the Kid, reckless as he was, had no hunch to hunt for unnecessary trouble with a crowd of greasers. He lay low, and watched the Mexicans through the thick foliage of the ceiba; ready for trouble if it came, but with no intent to seek it.

They had camped down in the timber island in the early morning. There were nine of them—Sonora Jose himself, copper-skinned, black-haired, black-bearded, with gold earrings in his dusky ears, and eight other Mexicans or half-breeds. They were one of the toughest crowds that the Rio Kid had ever seen. Savage as jaguars, armed to the teeth.

They had staked out their bronchos under the trees, and were lolling in the grass, or leaning against tree-trunks, rolling endless cigarritos and smoking them, muttering to one another in their own soft and musical language.

Sonora Jose, on the edge of the timber, was watching the plain. And the Kid, in the branches of the big ceiba that overlooked almost the whole extent of the timber island, watched them, and wondered what their game was.

The Kid had camped in the "motte" overnight. It was the noise of the arrival of the Mexicans that had awakened him in the dawn, and caused him to turn out of his blankets—quietly and cautiously. The crowding of a bunch of horsemen into the timber spelled danger for the Kid. He had fully expected to find that it was Sheriff Watson, of Frio, with his posse.

Leaving his mustang hidden in the thickets, the Kid had climbed the big ceiba to get a view of the newcomers, and now he was watching them, and wondering. He knew the black-bearded ruffian with the earrings. Sonora Jose was well known on both sides of the Rio Grande. Brigand on the Mexican side, cow-thief on the Texas side, Sonora Jose was wanted by Texas sheriff and Mexican alcalde.

The Kid wondered what he was doing here, within ten miles of Frio, so far from the border. That the swarthy gang were there on the trail of plunder, he did not need telling. They had taken cover in the timber, and were waiting. While his men lolled and smoked, Sonora Jose was watching the plain—for what?

It was not the Kid's funeral. Was he not himself an outlaw, hunted as hard as Sonora Jose, or harder? All the Kid had to do was to lie close till the swarthy gang had gone, and leave them to their trail, whatever it was. Had they found him in the lonely timber island they would have killed him for his horse and guns.

But they clearly had no suspicion that anyone was in the clump of timber excepting themselves, and the Kid was safe enough so long as he lay doggo. But there was a thoughtful shade on the Kid's handsome, sunburnt face. It got his goat to see a gang of Mexican brigands on Texas soil and if it was Texas cows they were after, the Kid had a feeling that he would take a hand. He was an outlaw, hunted far and wide, with a price on his head; but he had a feeling that he would never see Texas cows driven across the Rio Grande by that gang of swarthy cutthroats without chipping in.

But, after all, it was not likely that they were after cows. In the broad daylight, many a long mile from the border, Sonora Jose could never hope to drive off a herd of long-horns in safety. It wasn't cows, the Kid reflected. But if it was not, it was difficult to figure on what the Mexicans were there at all for. They were in a country that was not healthy for them. The Kid knew how gleefully any bunch of cow-punchers in the Frio country would have saddled up and packed their guns for a chance of wiping out Sonora Jose and his gang.

And at last the Kid, thinking it out, guessed what the game was. Sonora Jose, on the edge of the motte, staring across the prairie, was watching the trail by which the hack ran to Frio—the two-horse hack that came up from McCracken, with letters and parcels and passengers, and sometimes with a sealed bag of greenbacks for the bank at Frio. It was the hack for which the crew of swarthy outcasts were waiting. There was to be a hold-up on the trail.

The Kid knew it now. Once he had thought it out, he had no doubt. Still he wondered a little. More than once the hack from McCracken had been held up, but there was seldom much loot to be gleaned, nothing that was worth the while of Sonora Jose and his gang—unless—— On the occasions when the money was brought up from McCracken to the Frio Bank it was worth anybody's while. So it came into the Kid's mind further, that to-day there would be a bag of greenbacks on the hack, and that Sonora Jose had wind of it.

The Kid, hidden in the thick foliage, shrugged his shoulders. It was no business of his. A cowman born and bred, he could never have stood by idly while Texas cows were driven over the border by Mexican cattle-thieves. But the Frio Bank was nothing to him. Herman Fray, the banker at Frio, was nothing to him—or less than nothing.

It was Sheriff Watson's business to protect the bank and its money, and the Kid grinned at the thought. Sheriff Watson and his men were hunting for the Rio Kid, hunting him far and wide, by prairie and chaparral and sierra. Let them hunt—while this gang from across the border held up the hack and cleaned out the sealed sack consigned to

the bank. The Kid had no call to chip in.

Some time that sunny morning the hack would pass, coming into view on the plain, from the trail that ran through a wide tract of post-oaks. It was booked to reach Frio at noon, but it never was on time, and there was no telling when it might appear.

The Mexican gang had settled down to wait, and until the hack came they would not go. The Kid had to wait, too, unless he was to reveal his presence to the greasers—which meant shooting, with nine to one in the fight. The Kid, extended at ease on a thick branch of the ceiba, his back resting in a fork of boughs, waited.

"Pronto!"

The word came suddenly from Sonora Jose.

In a moment the idle inactivity of the gang was at an end. The Mexicans leaped from the grass, and ran to their horses.

The Kid, in the thick branches, could not see out over the prairie. But he knew now that the hack had come in sight on the trail from the post-oaks. The trail ran on at a distance from the timber island, winding across the rolling prairie to Frio.

Sonora Jose spoke rapidly to his followers in Spanish. The greasers scrambled on their bronchos. Rifle in hand, they rode out on the prairie, and left the timber behind. Then the Rio Kid slid down from the branches of the tall ceiba. Standing on the edge of the motte, where Sonora Jose had stood a few minutes before, the Rio Kid looked out across the waving grass.

The whole scene was spread before his eyes now.

From the post-oaks the hack had emerged, and was out on the open, grassy plain. The gang of Mexicans, galloping and spurring, were sweeping down on it in a bunch. The hack-driver had whipped up his horses, and the hack was going at a tearing speed now, jolting and bumping over the rough ground, in a frantic attempt to escape from the swooping gang of riders. It was a hopeless attempt; the driver had no chance at all: but he was doing his best to get clear.

Bang, bang, bang roared the rifles, the Mexicans firing from the saddle. The shooting was wild. The Kid's lip curled as he watched, with utter contempt for the shooting of the greasers.

Much of the lead flew yards and yards wide. But some of it went home, and one of the horses traced to the hack suddenly pitched over, dragging down the other as it fell. The vehicle rocked and pitched and almost overturned, coming at last to a standstill. Then, with a wild yell, and a rattling of banging rifles, the Mexicans rode up and surrounded it. The Rio Kid, on the edge of the timber island, still watched.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The Hold-Up!

SPOT PETERS, who drove the McCracken hack, sat and lifted his hands over his head, calmly chewing tobacco. His business was driving, not fighting with Mexican fire-bugs, and, having done all he could to elude them, Spot let it go at that. He put up his hands like a lamb, and grinned serenely at a savage-faced brigand who levelled a rifle at him.

"Forget it, greaser," said Spot Peters. "I ain't worrying you any. Get on with it, hombre!"

And the greaser grinned and lowered the rifle.

There were three passengers inside the hack, and their hands were already over their heads, without waiting for command. The rifles of the numerous gang of hold-up men could have riddled the vehicle with bullets and there was no chance of resistance.

At a word from Sonora Jose the passengers stepped out and lined up beside the trail, their hands over their heads. The traces were cut, and the uninjured horse roped in by one of the greasers. Spot Peters and his passengers were booked to finish their journey on foot—when the hold-up men were done with them. The hack would remain where it was till fresh horses were brought. Ten miles on foot to Frio would give the raiders ample time to ride clear, before the sheriff and his men could get on their trail.

But the passengers, expecting the raiders to go through their pockets, were agreeably disappointed. It was not such small fry that Sonora Jose was after. Sonora Jose, outlaw and cut-throat and brigand, was still, in his own estimation, a caballero, and rifling pockets was beneath him. It was bigger game that Sonora Jose was after. Moreover, he was in hot haste now. Now that the hold-up had taken place, the sooner the gang were off the scene the better it was for their health. Lonely as the prairie was, a cow-puncher might have ridden into sight, or a horseman on his way to or from Frio. The raiders could not be too swift.

"The money for the bank," said Sonora Jose. "Pronto, hombre!"

Spot Peters stared.

"I guess you're mistooken this time, feller," he drawled. "There ain't nothing on this here hearse but them passengers and their truck."

"Pronto!"

"I guess I'm telling you——"

Sonora Jose lifted his rifle and placed the muzzle to the driver's side, pressing it hard on Spot's ribs.

"The money for the bank," he said. "If you are tired of life, senor——"

"I guess not, greaser!" answered Spot, still in an easy drawl. "They ain't told me what's in the sack, but it's yourn, as you're so pressing."

He stooped and removed the rug from under his feet, lifted a little, sealed sack, and handed it to Sonora Jose.

"It sure gets my goat to see them greenbacks headin' for Mexico!" he sighed. "But I ain't arguin' about it, hombre. They pay me for driving this here hack, not for packin' a gun. It's your say-so."

"Gracias!" said Sonora Jose with sarcasm, as he took the leather bag.

It disappeared under the folds of his serape.

Spot shrugged his shoulders.

"I reckon they told me in McCracken to watch out for the Rio Kid on the trail," he said. "But I never figured on seeing your gang so far this side of the Grande, senor. I guess somebody in McCracken put you wise about the durocks going to-day. Say, ain't you leaving me a hoss to pull me into Frio?"

Sonora Jose grinned.

"No, senor; you will reach Frio soon enough to suit me on your feet. Adios!"

He waved his hand to his men and the whole gang turned from the hack and rode away to the west.

Spot Peters stared after him.

"Gee!" he remarked. "I reckoned they'd be hittin' the high spots for Mexico, like they was sent for. I guess they're looking for cover in the Huecas, the way they're headin'. I reckon that will be suthin' to tell Sheriff Watson when we hoof it into Frio."

"How are we getting into Frio, driver?" inquired one of the passengers.

"I reckon we're going on Shanks' pony, feller," drawled Spot. "Or else you can hang on hyer till I come back with fresh horses, which, I calculate, won't be this side of sundown."

He descended from his seat, tucked his whip under his arm, and started. The three passengers trailed after him.

It was a long and weary tramp to Frio, across rough, rolling prairie, under a blazing sun. But there was no help for it. It was an hour later that a Double-Bar puncher was sighted on the plains and hailed, and Spot Peters and the three dusty and fatigued passengers begged for the loan of his horse. The cow-puncher was sympathetic, but he grinned at the suggestion of parting with his horse. To a puncher on the prairie such a request was equivalent to asking a seaman in mid-ocean for the loan of his ship.

But San Antone Bill agreed to ride into Frio with the news, and send out horses to meet the hapless party. He disappeared in a cloud of dust in the direction of the cow town.

Before noon all Frio knew of the hold-up, and that the Mexican raiders had fled west for the wild passes and canyons of the Huecas. And Sheriff Watson, dismissing from his mind for the time his fierce pursuit of the Rio Kid, called out his men, and mounted in hot haste, and rode west.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Kid Horns In!

"DOG-GONE my boots!" growled the Rio Kid.

His face was dark with irritation.

From the timber island he had watched the hold-up, his eyes, keen as an eagle's, losing no detail of what had passed.

The motte lay east of the trail; the raiders had ridden west. Every stride of their bronchos carried them farther and farther away from the Rio Kid. He was done with them—if he liked.

He watched the driver and the passengers hoofing it for Frio till a fold of the prairie hid them. He watched the bunch of horsemen, their sombreros nodding over the waving grass, till the west swallowed them. Only in his sight remained the halted hack, and the dead horse, and the black buzzards gathering from far and near, drawn by the carcase.

"Dog-gone my boots!" repeated the Kid savagely. "You durned moss-head Kid! You durned locoed gink, can't you mind your own business? What is that gol-darned bank and its dust to you, you all-fired geck? You want to horn into trouble that don't concern you, you pesky guy."

The Kid talked to himself bitterly. It was no business of his. What did it matter to him if a gang of greasers rode off with a sack of banknotes belonging to Frio—Frio, the town where he could not ride without being shot down—the town where a rope and a branch awaited him if he was caught by the men who sought him far and wide? He was an outlaw, and a hunted man; and his business was to escape the law, not to stand for it. But though he cursed his propensity to horn into troubles that were not his, the Kid knew all the time that he was going to horn in. The sight of a gang of Mexicans clearing off with Texas money got his goat. Outlaw or not, he was a Texan, and he did not, and would not, stand for it.

He argued with himself fiercely, knowing all the time that he was going to horn in, that he was not going to let Sonora Jose and his gang ride into Mexico with their plunder, knowing, too, that he had ample time to head them off.

For the Kid had not been deceived, like Spot Peters, by that gallop to the westward of the Mexican hold-up men. The Kid had cut his eye-teeth long ago. He knew that the Mexican brigands would never remain on Texas soil, even in the wild recesses of the Huecas. There for days, or even weeks, they might elude pursuit, but, with the whole country up, they would be roped in sooner or later. The Kid was wise to Sonora Jose's trick. The Mexicans had ridden for the west to let Spot Peters carry into Frio the news that they had made for the Huecas; but, out of sight, they would turn to the south and ride for their own country. It was a trick to gain time to escape, to send the certain pursuit on a false track. Every hour was precious to them, so far from the border, and if the Frio sheriff went hunting for them to the west they had ample time to cover the long miles that lay southward between them and the Rio Grande.

The Kid knew it all as well as if he had read the cunning thoughts in the black-haired head under Sonora Jose's sombrero.

He stood staring out discontentedly across the prairie. The bunch of sombreros had vanished to the west, towards the blue line against the sky that marked the Hueca sierra. They were out of the Kid's keen sight now, and already, he reckoned, they had turned south.

"Oh, shucks!" growled the Kid.

He went for his horse. Slowly, still arguing with himself, the Kid drew the black-muzzled mustang from its cover in dense thicket.

He still argued with himself, affecting to be doubtful of his own purpose. But his resolution was fixed.

"Shucks!" he growled. "You're a gol-darned gink, Kid Carfax. You're asking for a rookus with a gang of the durndest fire-bugs on the border—nine of them, by the great horned toad! You're sure asking for the long jump." Then the Kid's white teeth gritted. "But they ain't getting that dust across to Mexico, old hoss—they sure ain't, while I've got a six-gun to say no."

The Kid's brain was working rapidly, even while he grumbled, while he saddled the mustang.

That wild, wide country, with its boundless prairies, its tracts of scrubby post-oaks, its dark chaparrals, its sun-dried arroyos, and black barrancas, was an open book to the Kid. As range rider and as hunted outlaw, the Kid had ridden it far and wide, and it had no secrets for him. As well as if Sonora Jose had told him his plans, the Kid knew the intentions of the Mexican brigand.

"They ain't hitting the high spots for the Huecas, old hoss," he told the black-muzzled mustang. "They sure ain't! They could hide in the Staked Plain, but I sure reckon it's too far from home for them. They're burning the trail for Mexico, old hoss; and afore they get to the Rio Grande and the border they got to cross the Rio Pollo—and after the rains in the Huecas, I guess the Pollo will be roaring. And when the Pollo's full, old hoss, they got to get to the ford; and if we can't beat them to the ford of the Chicken River, old hoss, I guess I'll sell you for your hide and buy me a pair of store shoes and go drumming!"

The Kid grinned at the idea.

"Twenty miles to the ford, old hoss; and we've got to do it humping," he said. "If you can't do twice the speed of any of them hairy bronchos from Chihuahua you're a back number, and it's you for the turkey buzzards. I guess when that gang of hoodlums rides up to the ford on the Chicken River they'll find us to home."

The Rio Kid rode out of the motte.

He turned his face to the south and rode at a gallop. Bunch-grass flew under the tireless hoofs of the mustang.

The Kid knew the speed of his horse. He had good reason to know it, for it was the speed of the grey mustang that had saved his life many a time when pursuit was hot and close. The Kid had an eye for horseflesh, and he had looked at the Mexican's mounts.

Sonora Jose and his men were well mounted, but the best broncho in the gang was nowhere near the Kid's sinewy mustang for speed. The Kid knew that he would be at the ford of the Pollo long ahead of the fleeing raiders; that the fastest in the bunch would be far behind him. And he knew that Sonora Jose could escape from the Frio country only by way of the ford on the Rio Pollo—the Chicken River, as the cowmen called it, though its old Spanish name still clung.

In rainless seasons the Rio Pollo crawled, a streak of muddy water, between high banks of sun-dried mud, and could be forded at any point of its course of sixty miles; but when there had been heavy rains in the Huecas the Pollo came thundering down across the plains filled to its brim, roaring and foaming, and at such times the Rio Kid himself would have hesitated to ride it anywhere but at the ford. And the Kid, who had been driven out of his camp in the Huecas by the rains, knew what the Pollo would be like now—a foaming torrent, thick with driftwood and drowned cows and prairie rabbits—impassable except at the one spot.

It was for that spot that the boy outlaw was aiming now.

And he was riding as if for his life.

The mustang's lightning hoofs seemed scarcely to touch the grass. The Kid had no need to use the spur; a touch of his hand was enough. He rode at a desperate gallop, his face set and hard, the wind of his speed cutting him almost like a knife. But there was exhilaration in his heart. He still reviled himself as a gink for horning into a trouble that was not his, but his whole nature rejoiced in the rookus that was coming. No pursuit from Frio could have overtaken the raiders in time; even had the sheriff not fallen to their trick, and had he ridden straight on their trail, the best horseflesh in Frio would hardly have come up with the fugitives before they reached the Rio Pollo. But the Kid was on the spot, and for him it was easy going.

Mile after mile of grassland raced under the Kid's mustang. A sudden grin dawned on his face as he rode through a patch of chaparral and came on a couple of punchers of the Bar-10 ranch loping along on their bronchos. He swept past them like a whirlwind, and they stared after him, gasping:

"The Kid!"

Crack, crack!

The two punchers were blazing away wildly after the vanishing horseman.

The Kid laughed as he swept on. He had no grouch against the punchers, though they loosed off all the cartridges in their Colts after him; he was glad that he did not need to draw a gun on them. They dropped out of sight in a few minutes, and the Kid forgot them as he galloped onward, ever south and farther south, till across the sea of grass he had a glimpse of the Pollo tossing its foaming waters in the blaze of the sun.

THE HOLD-UP! Spot Peters sat and lifted his hands over was driving, not fighting! "The money for the bank!" sa no money for the bank in this hyer sheb

Round him now on all sides was prairie, a sea of rolling grass. His glance swept round, keen as an eagle's, but over the waving grass there was no rider to be seen. The Kid, who had nothing to learn about horseflesh, calculated that the Mexicans, if they had ridden their hardest, were five miles behind him in the race, at least; and as they had started from a point well to the west of the timber island, whence the Kid had started, they would most likely hit the Pollo higher up and follow the bank down to the ford.

Not a sign of a Mexican sombrero was to be seen, at all events, over the tall grass; and the Kid, knowing that he had won the race—and won it by miles—slacked his pace a little to ease the deep-breathing mustang, and cantered on to the ford.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Trapped at the Ford!

SONORA JOSE was grinning under the shade of his big sombrero as he rode down the bank of the lashing Pollo. His men, riding hard behind and round him, had satisfied looks, in spite of haste and dust and sun-blaze and saddle fatigue. Sonora Jose had reason to grin; his followers had reason to be satisfied. For in the leather sack taken from the Frio hack ten thousand dollars in good paper were stacked; such a sum as Jose Narvaez seldom or never handled, though often his raids gave him rich booty.

The Mexican brigand had struck suddenly and struck effectively; he had succeeded to perfection, and the way back to Mexico was open and free; a few hours of hard riding, and the wide waters of the Rio Grande would roll between him and possible pursuit. He had little doubt that pursuit from Frio would ride for the Huecas—as, indeed, was the case—but if it followed him direct he had little to fear; he was already long miles from the scene of the hold-up, and once across the Pollo there was nothing to stop his ride to the Rio Grande and Mexico.

Sonora Jose showed his white teeth in a grin as he thought of his success. A Mexican confederate in McCracken had passed the word to him in time concerning the precious freight for Frio, unguarded even by a messenger or a marshal's deputy—though a guard would not have made much difference to Jose; he would have burned powder willingly had it been needed, though otherwise he was glad to avoid the spilling of blood on the Texas side of the border.

Like a hawk Sonora Jose had swooped on his prey; and now the loot was under his streaming serape as he rode, buckled to his belt. It had been the swiftest and easiest and most completely successful of all the many raids of the bandit from Mexico.

In dry weather he could have crossed the Pollo anywhere and saved himself a few miles in his retreat. The day was dry and scorching, so far as that went; but it followed many days of rain, which had fed the Pollo with yellow floods from the slopes of the Huecas, and the river was full to overflowing now. But it mattered little; hard riding had won safety, and he was close to the ford without a sign of pursuit. When he looked back only waving grass glistening and gleaming in the sunshine caught his eyes, and before him ran the Pollo, and the ford was close. By the brimming bank he rode on as swiftly as before, with no thought of drawing rein till he was on the south side of the ford.

his head as the bandits' weapons were turned on him. His business ld Sonora Jose. "Hand it over, pronto!" "I guess there ain't ang!" answered Peters calmly. (*See chapter* 2.)

That a swift horseman had headed him off from the ford where lay his only retreat from the Frio country, Sonora Jose did not yet know.

But he was soon to know.

Wide and deep and swift rolled the Pollo, fed by the rushing waters of the divide. But at the ford, where sandbanks on a stony bed lay thick, the river was shallow when at its deepest. When the river was low the ford was like a stony causeway across the bed, with tiny streams trickling through; when it was high the ford was barely two feet under water, a flood spreading out over the low banks at either side. To the eye of a stranger the ford did not exist; but Sonora Jose knew every foot of it, and could have picked it out at midnight on the darkest night. In the rolling water here and there a tree rose from the shallows. Across, on the southern side, a clump of ceibas rose, with flood-water washing round the great trunks. That clump marked the end of the ford, a sure landmark to all who knew the country.

Sonora Jose rode into the water, his men behind him in a bunch, splashing through the muddy shallows towards the distant clump.

Crack!

The big sombrero spun on the head of Sonora Jose—it spun round as a bullet struck it within an inch or two of the brigand's head.

"Carambo!"

Sonora Jose yelled in surprise.

Behind him he looked for foes; before him he had dreamed of none. But the shot rang from the clump of ceibas at the southern side of the ford, directly in the path of the retreating raiders.

Sonora Jose dragged in his broncho, up to its haunches in rolling water, and his men hurriedly reined in behind. There was no cover for them at the ford, they rode in the water exposed to fire; and the man who had fired was in front of them, unseen in the ceibas clump. He was hidden in deepest cover, with the whole gang strung out under his eyes in easy range; if that hombre knew how to shoot, he held the lives of Sonora Jose and all his gang in the hollow of his hand.

Jose gritted his white teeth and glared at the clump of trees. Who was it, in that solitary desert, who was barring his path to Mexico and safety? Pursuit was not even in sight behind. What enemy could be in front? Jose swore savage Spanish oaths in his surprise and rage.

Crack!

The second shot spun his sombrero again, almost lifting the big hat from his head.

"Nuestra Senora!" hissed Jose.

He knew that the marksman was playing with him; the man who had sent two bullets so close could have sent either of them through the brigand's brain had he chosen. Sitting his horse in the swirling yellow flood, Senora Jose stared with savage doubt and inquiry at the distant clump.

To ride on was death, if the hidden marksman so chose; to retreat was to pen himself in the Frio country, for to a distance of thirty miles on either side there was no crossing of the Rio Pollo when it was in flood.

The Mexican bandit was trapped.

His swarthy face paled under its bronze. Before many hours had passed the country behind him would be hot with pursuit. If he did not cross the Pollo at the ford, it was not likely that he ever would pass it.

The news of a Mexican raid would turn out every ranch outfit for sixty miles round Frio. The apprehensive glance of the brigand turned back over his shoulder—to a sea of waving grass, which ere long might be dotted with Stetson hats.

He gritted his teeth and rode forward, his hand upheld in sign of peace—of surrender, if the unseen enemy chose to understand it so. Once he had a glimpse of that enemy, his rifle would do the rest.

No shot, no sound or movement came from the clump of ceibas on the south side as the Mexican bandit rode on through the swirling water. His men, muttering uneasily, followed him more slowly. Sonora Jose's heart beat faster with hope. He did not understand the enemy's silence and inaction; but he was drawing nearer and nearer, and a swift rush——

"Halt!"

He was ten yards from the clump when the shout rang sharply. Only ten yards of shallow, swirling water lay between him and the ceibas. But it might as well have been ten miles, for all the chance that Sonora Jose had to passing the distance alive, if he rode on. He dragged in his broncho again.

"Tenga cuidado!" came the voice from the ceibas, and the mocking tones went on: "Sit your hoss where you are, Jose Narvaez, or I guess they'll miss one thief in Mexico for keeps!"

"Who are you?" hissed Sonora Jose.

There was a laugh.

"I guess you've cinched, you pesky guy! Ever heard of the Rio Kid?"

Jose started violently. Evidently he had heard of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande.

"You—the Rio Kid?"

"Sure!"

"What do you want?" hissed the Mexican.

"That little sack you've got under your serape, amigo! I guess I ain't letting you get it across into Viejo Mejico!"

The bandit started again.

"How do you know——" He broke off. It mattered little how the Kid knew. He knew, and that was enough. "You accursed Gringo, there are nine of us, and if you pull trigger once again

we will cut you in pieces and leave you for the zopilotes!"

The Rio Kid laughed again.

"Come on all you want, amigo, and the buzzards are welcome to me if you can get me! Quit chewing the rag, you Greaser thief! I guess you're wise to it that if I burn powder you'll never see Mexico again! Are you handing over that sack of greenbacks?"

"Never!" roared the enraged bandit.

"Never's a long word!" drawled the Rio Kid. "Guess again!"

The bandit searched the ceibas with his eyes. The voice came from thick cover, and he could see no sign of the Kid. But he knew that from the foliage a six-gun was aimed, and only too well he knew the deadly aim of the boy outlaw. His life trembled in the balance; but not for life itself would the brigand yield up his plunder.

He hissed an order in Spanish to his men, to spur on and fire into the trees as they spurred—the last desperate chance that remained to the gang of brigands, save surrender.

But dubious looks answered him, and the Mexicans hung back.

"El Nino del Rio," muttered one—"The Rio Kid!"

They sat their horses in the shallows, and dared not ride on in the face of the gun that never missed. In the open country they would have ridden him down, strong in numbers; and the Kid's unerring six-gun would hardly have saved him from so many foes.

But the Kid was in thick cover, and, short as the distance was, the bandits knew they would never reach that cover alive under his fire. Muttering and cursing, the brigands sat their bronchos, splashing in the yellow water, and dared not advance.

The Kid's voice rapped out again:

"Hands up, Sonora Jose! You're my mutton, hombre!"

"Carambo!" hissed Jose, between his teeth.

And he gave his horse the spur, riding on furiously and desperately, his rifle ringing out as he rode.

Bang!

From the ceibas came a single shot, and before the broncho had taken three strides Sonora Jose pitched from the saddle and splashed into the stream.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
The Kid Wins Out!

HIGH over their heads the gang of raiders held their hands, in token of surrender. If they had thought of following their leader's desperate rush, his sudden fall drove the thought from their minds. In the shallow water Sonora Jose, his face white, his eyes glaring, clung to a half-submerged pecan, struggling in the flood that sought to tear him away. But the eyes of the gang were fixed on the ceibas from which that one deadly shot had come.

Sharply the voice of the Rio Kid rang out—sharp with menace.

"Drop your guns, you guys!"

The rifles splashed into the water.

"Now ride on—and keep clear of this hyer timber! Beat it, you jays, and beat it your durndest! I guess if you even squint this way, it will be the last thing you'll ever do! Beat it, fellers—pronto!"

A bullet whistling over the heads of the cowed gang emphasised the order. But the Mexicans did not need bidding twice. They spurred on, glad to escape, skirting the clump of ceibas as wide as they could, and rode over the bank for the south. One man slacked rein for a moment, glancing back at his wounded leader struggling in the water, and a bullet from the ceibas cut a strip of swarthy skin from his cheek.

With a yell, the horseman rode on after the others.

In the ceibas, the Kid watched them riding madly in flight, and grinned. It would not have lain heavy on the Kid's conscience had he shot down every cut-throat in that savage gang, as he might easily have done; but he was glad to see them go. They vanished in a dust-cloud, and the Kid stepped out of his cover.

He jerked the riato from the mustang's saddle, and ran to the bank. The rope looped round the shoulders of Sonora Jose, and he was dragged out of the water.

Dripping with water, white as death, the brigand sprawled in the grass, his hand feebly seeking the long, keen cuchillo in his belt. The Kid stooped, jerked the knife away, and tossed it into the Pollo.

"Madre de Dios!" breathed Sonora Jose, gritting his teeth with fury. "Accursed Gringo——"

"Aw, cut it out!" drawled the Kid. "You're getting off cheap, feller! I guess I don't know why I put the ball into your shoulder, instead of letting daylight through your cabeza: but I always was a tender cuss. You'll live to be hanged yet, you durned cow-thief; but you sure will not carry a bag of Texas money across the border into Mexico—you sure will not, feller!"

He groped under the serape, and dragged away the leathern bag. The brigand's eyes followed it, glittering.

The Kid coiled his lasso and called to his horse. The black-muzzled mustang came trotting out of the ceibas.

"You lose, Jose!" he said cheerily. "I reckon you played your game right smart; but you never reckoned on the Rio Kid horning in, and that's where you fall down, feller. There's your cayuse. I reckon you can hop into the saddle and beat it for the Rio Grande as soon as you want, and call yourself lucky that you're dealing with a galoot my size, instead of a Texas sheriff. Beat it while you're healthy!"

And the Rio Kid, mounting his mustang, rode back across the ford, and galloped north into the Frio country, the leather sack of greenbacks at his saddle-bow.

THE END.

(All Texas is on the look-out for the Rio Kid—the boy outlaw! Saddle up and follow him in his most breath-taking exploits in "THE TRAIL OF TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS!"—next week's grand story of the roaring West!)

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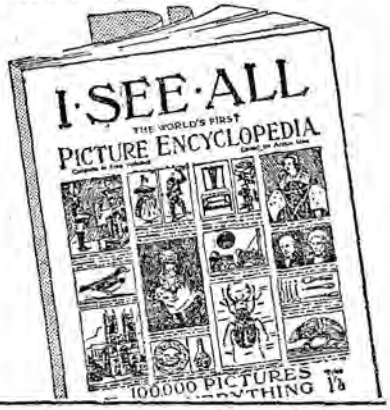

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