OUR ROARING WESTERN YARN!

The Rio Kid gets the shock of his life when he rides to Gunsight. For all the cow-town is up in arms against him for a long chain of offences with which he is supposed to be connected!

The UNKNOWN RAIDER!

by RALPH REDWAY

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Strange News for the Kid!

"HALT!"

The Rio Kid pulled in his mustang.

That sharp command rang unpleasantly enough in his ears; but the Kid was not the man to argue with a levelled Winchester.

He halted; a faint smile on his sunburnt face.

The Kid had to admit that he was caught napping for once. Certainly he had not been thinking of danger just then. The grassy path through the chaparral, on the bank of the Rio Claro, had looked deserted in the dusk as the sun set in the west.

The Kid had been thinking—though not of danger. His reins had fallen idly on the glossy neck of his mustang, and the horse followed the dusky path unguided. The trail led down the little stream of the Rio Claro towards its junction with the mighty Rio Grande—the border-line between Texas and Mexico. And the Kid was thinking that, on breaking camp the next morning, he would cross the border into Mexico, and try his luck in a new land.

The Kid had no hunch to live among greasers; and there was no land under the sun, in his estimation, like his own land of Texas. But he was tiring, as he had tired before, of the outlaw's hunted life on lonely trails. He had found rest, for a time, at the Sampson ranch down at San Pedro, only to be driven to the trails again at last; it seemed that in his own land there was no rest for the boy outlaw. Over in Mexico the long arm of the law would not be stretched out to seize him.

And then his meditations were suddenly interrupted, by the order to halt, uttered by the man who stepped out of the cover of the post-oaks, a levelled rifle at his shoulder.

The rifle bore full on the Rio Kid. A pair of keen eyes, set in a cowpuncher's bronzed face, looked along the barrel.

"Put 'em up!"

The order came tersely.

For a second, the Kid paused. The rifle-muzzle bore on him at a distance of six or seven feet; but the Kid was lightning on the draw, and the surest shot between the Rio Grande and the plains of Kansas. But his hands went up. It was no rustler or chaparral bandit who was holding him up; and the one-time puncher of the Double-Bar Ranch had no hunch to pull trigger on a cowman. He put his hands above his head, regarding the man with the rifle with a faintly smiling face.

"Up they goes, feller!" drawled the Kid. "Anything more a galoot can do to oblige?"

"Keep 'em up!" said the cowman.

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

The man came a little closer, his eyes fixed on the Kid's handsome, boyish sunburnt face. He had lowered the rifle now, but held it ready for instant use. He peered at the Kid's features in the failing light.

"You'll sure know me again, feller," the Kid remarked pleasantly.

He was wondering what it all meant, anyhow. The man was evidently no robber; and it was equally clear that he did not know the Kid by sight. So his reason for holding up the boy-puncher was hard to guess.

"I guess you ain't that all-fired pesky fire-bug," the cowman remarked, after a long stare in the Kid's handsome face.

"I sure guess I ain't a pesky fire-bug, nohow," the Kid agreed amiably. "You hunting for one?"

"Sure!"

"Then I reckon you're wasting your time on me, feller," said the Kid.

"You keep them paws up," answered the cowman grimly. "I sure want to know. I'm watching this hyer trail for the Rio Kid, and I ain't taking no chances."

The Kid started, ever so little.

"The Rio Kid!" he repeated.

"You've said it."

"I guess I've heard of that galoot," the Kid remarked casually. "Up in the Frio country, I reckon."

"I guess he belonged to the Frio country," assented the cowman. "But he's been cavorting a piece round hyer, and I guess every galoot in Gunsight is sure humming to draw a bead on him."

The Kid's eyes widened.

Gunsight, he knew, was a cow-town on the Rio Claro. But it was a new country to the Kid; it was the first time he had ridden the trails by the waters of the Claro. He had picked the Claro country for his ride to Mexico, simply because he was unknown there, and he did not want to horn into trouble on his way. There were many places in Texas where the Kid was well known, and where the sight of him would have caused guns to leap from their holsters. But Gunsight was not one of them. So far as the Kid knew, he had never

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before ridden within thirty miles of Gunsight.

So it was a surprise to hear his name on the cowman's lips, and above all, to hear that he was supposed to have been "cavorting around."

"What have the folks at Gunsight got agin the Kid?" he asked.

"A whole heap, I reckon," answered the cowman. "Shootings and hold-ups; and since he shot the marshal of Gunsight, I reckon the whole county is up to hunt for him."

"He shot the marshal of Gunsight?" asked the Kid blankly.

"He sure did—drilled him clean an' thorough. I guess we're going to string him up to a cottonwood when we got a holt of him."

"Snakes!" said the Kid.

"I guess you look square," said the cowman. "But we're sure looking arter all strangers in this section jest now, feller, and we ain't taking chances. What you call yourself?"

"I guess if you put me down as Johnny Jones, you'll get as near as you want!" drawled the Kid.

"Waal, Mister Johnny Jones, where are you from?"

"Pulled out of Post Oak this morning," said the Kid cheerfully. "Hitting the trail for Mexico."

"You don't aim to stop along at Gunsight?"

"Nope!"

"Well, I reckon you'll stop along a piece, all the same," declared the cowman. "Boss' orders is to make strangers give an account of themselves, seeing as that durned Kid is cavorting around in the section."

"Who's the boss?"

"Mr. Poindexter."

"I'm sure a stranger in these parts," drawled the Kid. "Who may Mr. Poindexter be, feller, when he's at home?"

"You ain't never heard of Poker Poindexter?"

"Nix."

"Boss of Poindexter's ranch on the Rio Claro. He's took the matter up since the marshal was plugged. I guess I'm his foreman—Tex Clew, if you want to know. Light down from that cayuse, feller."

The kid smiled.

It was an odd situation, and it appealed to his sense of humour.

Some fire-bug, it was clear, had been rustling and shooting in the Gunsight country, and had borrowed the name of the Rio Kid. Many a shooting and hold-up of which he had never heard, had been put down to the Kid, in many parts of Texas. But this was the first time he had heard of a rustler actually riding under his name. And the Kid made a mental resolve, on the spot, that before he crossed the Rio Grande into Mexico, he would trail down that rustler, and put him wise that it was not safe to add his desperate deeds to the Rio Kid's already shadowed reputation.

All Gunsight, it appeared, was hoping to get hold of the Rio Kid—who had never been near the country before. And Tex Clew, foreman of the Poindexter Ranch, was going to run him into Gunsight on suspicion of being—himself.

The Kid could not help grinning.

"Hold on a piece, feller," he said easily. "You don't want to waste your time making mistakes. What's this pesky Kid like to look at?"

"That ain't easy to say, as he's only been seen with a black rag across his face," answered Tex. "But I reckon he's a galoot about your heft, from all descriptions."

"Anybody in Gunsight know him by sight?"

"Sure! There's Frio men there, and they'll sure know him."

The Kid's eyes glinted. He was not going to be taken into Gunsight, to be recognised there by men who knew the Rio Kid. He had no mind to be strung up for the shooting of the marshal of Gunsight, of whom he had never even heard till a few minutes ago.

"But if the galoot cavorts around masked, how'd you know he's the Rio Kid at all?" he asked.

"I guess he don't make no secret of it," answered Tex Clew. "He ain't afraid to shout out his name."

The Kid could understand that. If some rustler was hiding his own identity behind the name and fame of the Rio Kid he would be ready enough to let it be known that he was the Kid.

"'Sides, he cavorts around with a band of silver nuggets around his Stetson," said Tex. "That was always a trick of the Kid's."

"I've sure heard of it," said the Kid, glad that he had dropped that distinctive headgear of late.

"Light down!" rapped out Tex. "I ain't saying you're anything but a square cow-puncher, same as you look, stranger, but we ain't taking chances. The Kid's known to be in hiding in this chaparral somewhere and we're after him. Any stranger who's seen around is going to be run into Gunsight for questions to be asked. You ain't got no kick coming if you're fair and square. I guess every white man wants that durned rustler roped in. Light down off'n that cayuse, and I'll sure take care of your hardware."

"It's your say-so!" assented the Kid.

He slipped from the saddle and stood beside the mustang, his hands over his head. His manner was one of careless submission, as of a fellow who had nothing to fear. His smiling face did not betray the thoughts in his mind. But it was not a smiling matter, and he knew it, for there was no shadow of a doubt that if the Poindexter foreman toted him into Gunsight he would be lynched to the branch of a cottonwood before he was an hour older. A crowd of enraged cattlemen would not be likely to heed his assertion that he was a stranger to the section, and that his name had been taken by some unknown rustler.

Tex Clew stepped towards him, the rifle under his arm, his left hand outstretched to remove the two guns that were slung in the Kid's holsters. The Kid made no resistance. With a careless manner and a smiling face he was watching out for a chance, like a cat.

The cowman jerked out the guns and tossed them into the grass. Then he gave a whistle, and a broncho appeared from the thickets. The cowman turned towards the horse, and for a second his eyes were off the Kid.

With the spring of a tiger he was on Tex Clew, and the foreman of the Poindexter ranch went crashing to the earth, his rifle falling into the grass. The next moment the Rio Kid and the powerful cowman were rolling over and over in the grass, fighting furiously.

Poindexter foreman was a powerful man, almost a giant in strength. It was seldom that the Kid met his match in a rough-and-tumble, but he had his hands full now.

Over and over they rolled, the advantage now with one, now with the other. Tex struggled to get a gun from his belt, and he got it out at last; but the Kid gripped his wrist and wrenched it till the gun dropped. They rolled over the Colt, fighting fiercely.

But luck was with the boy outlaw.

The fierce struggle had lasted long minutes when the Kid's hand came in contact with one of his own walnut-butted guns, which the cowman had thrown into the grass.

In an instant it was in his grip.

The muzzle was jammed into the face of the cowman, the steel rim grinding into the skin.

"Let up!" panted the Kid.

"You durned rustler——"

"Let up, you moss-head!" snapped the Kid. "I ain't boning to spill your juice, but if you don't let up pronto it's you for the long jump."

Slowly the cowman's grasp relaxed. There was death in the muzzle that ground into his face. The Kid's finger was on the trigger, his eyes blazing over the revolver.

Tex shut his teeth hard.

"You got me beat!" he muttered savagely. "I guess I was plumb loco not to drop you in your tracks. Shoot, you durned cow-thief!"

"I ain't burning powder any, if you don't beg for it, feller," answered the Kid. "I ain't come to the Gunsight country a-shooting. I'm telling you that you've roped in the wrong cayuse."

"I guess you're the Rio Kid!" snarled the cowman.

The Kid rose to his feet. He was breathless from the struggle, but the hand that held the gun was firm as a rock.

He motioned to the cowman to rise, and Tex dragged himself breathlessly up. At a sign he put his hands over his head. His bronzed face was crimson with rage.

"You're the Rio Kid!" he repeated. "You're sure the Kid! There's a rope waiting for you at Gunsight, you durned cow-thief!"

"Forget it!" said the Kid. "I own up that I'm the Kid. But I never was a cow-thief; and you don't want to shoot off your mouth so much. Keep them paws over your cabeza! I'd sure be sorry to spill your vinegar, but if you try any tricks you get yours, Tex Clew."

"It's your say-so!" grunted the cowman.

The Rio Kid bent his head to listen. He could guess easily enough that the Poindexter foreman was not the only man watching the lonely trails in the Rio Claro chaparral. And the Kid wanted to know whether the struggle had been heard by others.

But there was no sound from the darkening thickets save the sigh of the wind in the post-oaks and festoons of Spaniard's beard.

"Now, I reckon I've got to pow-wow with you, feller," said the Kid. "When I'm through you can beat it and tell the boys at Gunsight that they're a set of locoed mossheads. If you want to know what the Kid looks like take another squint at me But I'm telling you that this is the first time I've ridden a trail in the Rio Claro country."

"Can it!" answered Tex.

"I'll tell a man," said the Kid. "There's some rustler riding the trails and borrowing my name. Got that?"

"I guess a yarn like that won't save your neck when Gunsight gets a holt on you," retorted the cowman derisively.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Hands Up!

"YOU pesky coyote!" panted the cowman breathlessly.

The Kid did not speak.

He needed all his strength for a desperate struggle.

The Kid was hard as steel, thoroughly fit in every limb and muscle, active as a cat, sinuous as a puma. But the Poin-

"Likely not," assented the Kid. "But it's the frozen truth, all the same, feller. Now you sit up and answer. How long since this galoot you take for me came into the country?"

"I reckon he's been cavorting around a few months."

"Calling himself the Rio Kid?"

"Sure!"

"And sporting a band of silver nuggets round his hat to tell the world he's the Kid. He's sure no slouch. He knows how to fool a bunch of locoed mossheads. Does he work alone, or in a gang?"

"I guess he's always on his lonesome," answered Tex, staring at the boy outlaw, "and you're him, sure! It's well known that the Rio Kid has never worked in a gang. He allers plays a lone hand."

"And he's shot up some pilgrims?" asked the Kid.

"He sure has. And he shoots to kill," said the Poindexter foreman. "Look here, what guff you giving me?"

"I ain't giving you any guff, you locoed cayuse," growled the Kid. "I'm telling you that I never heard of the galoot before; but I guess I'm going to know something about him. I'll sure lay him out for using my name. I got enough to my account without his heap throwed in. You allow that he's hiding in this chaparral?"

"He took to the chaparral with a bunch of punchers arter him, this morning," growled Tex. "You've downed me, durn you, but I reckon you'll get yours afore you're out of the wood. This country ain't healthy for you."

"It sure ain't," agreed the Kid; "and I've a hunch that I'm going to make it less healthy for the galoot that's been borrowing my name."

"Oh, can it!"

"You ain't taking that in?"

"Not a word! You're the Kid, and you're the man we want. I'll lend a hand stringing you up when we get you."

"You sure tempt a galoot to spill your juice all over the chaparral," growled the Kid. "But I ain't wasting good lead on a mosshead. Hyer, put a laig over that bronc, and beat it afore I get mad with you."

Tex glanced towards his gun, that lay in the grass. The Kid stamped his heel on it, hard.

"You don't want a gun," he snapped. "A durned geek like you is safer without a gun, feller. Get on that cayuse and hit the trail. I'm through with you!"

Slowly the burly cowman climbed on the broncho.

"Now beat it back to your friends," jeered the Kid. "Tell them that the Rio Kid is sure in this chaparral, and they're welcome to raise his scalp, if they know how. Vamoose, you gink!"

The cowman galloped away down the trail.

The Rio Kid turned to his mustang. There was a dark frown on his handsome face.

"We ain't hitting for Mexico yet a-piece, old hoss," he said to his mustang. "We're sure going to look for that galoot that calls himself the Rio Kid. I guess we ain't lighting out of this country, old hoss, till we've got that durned galoot by the short hairs!"

And the Rio Kid mounted, and, leaving the trail, rode away into the darkening chaparral, and night and silence swallowed him.

A ROUGH-AND-TUMBLE! Over and over the Kid and cowpuncher rolled. Tex struggled to get a gun from his belt, and he got it out at last—but the Kid gripped his wrist and wrenched it till the gun dropped. (See Chapter 2.)

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Kid Gets Busy!

"SHUCKS!" murmured the Rio Kid.

His eyes gleamed under the shade of his Stetson hat.

For many days after that encounter with the Poindexter foreman the Rio Kid had lain very low.

For long miles by the banks of the Rio Claro, the thick chaparral extended, penetrated by few trails; a hiding-place than which the boy outlaw could have asked no better.

The Kid was an adept at blanketing his trail. Where he moved he left no sign.

Armed men hunted him in the chaparral. Many times the Kid had had glimpses of horsemen; more than once he had heard the voices of the men who hunted him for his life.

But the Kid was an old hand at this game.

It was as easy to seek a needle in a haystack as to seek the elusive Rio Kid in a country of almost impenetrable chaparral.

At any hour, had he chosen, he could have ridden to safety out of the Gunsight country. In the saddle on his swift mustang he would have laughed at pursuit. But the Kid had no intention of hitting the trail out of Gunsight.

Not till he had brought to account the unknown desperado who had used his name, and robbed and slain under that name. There was little bitterness in the Kid's nature, but in this matter he was hard as steel, bitter as death.

The Kid had thought a good deal over the strange matter in his days and nights in the lonely chaparral. It was, he figured, no ordinary bandit who had adopted the name and distinctive appearance of the Rio Kid. In the case of some bandit like Black Hanson, or Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith, such a ruse would have served no purpose. It was some very different sort of galoot, the Kid reckoned—some pilgrim who was not always a bandit, and who made himself safe from suspicion by allowing the whole section to attribute his deeds to the Kid. Some reckless rancher, perhaps—some gambler who had found the luck against him at cards—possibly some puncher of the Gunsight ranches. Some galoot who, perhaps, lived right in Gunsight itself, and very likely took a part in hunting for the Kid!

That was how the Kid worked it out. Only a man who had appearances to keep up would borrow the name of a well-known outlaw when he haunted the trails.

That seemed a sure thing to the Kid. But, having come to that conclusion, he

realised how difficult was the task he had set himself.

The man he sought was, likely enough, some citizen of Gunsight—possibly a prominent citizen. He led an ordinary life in the sight of the cow-town; and when he went on the trail of robbery, what was easier than to put a band of silver nuggets round his hat, a mask on his face, and to use the name of the Rio Kid? And after a robbery, to discard that guise, and ride into Gunsight unsuspected? But to pick out the man who was playing such a part was a problem.

After a few days the hunt for the Rio Kid slackened. Doubtless the Gunsight men opined that he had hit the horizon by that time. While the hunt was up the Kid lay low, very low indeed. He did not want to get to shooting with the Gunsight galoots. His sympathy was with them, though they were after him with a noosed rope. There was only one man in the Rio Claro country with whom the Kid wanted to get shooting, and as yet he did not know who the man was. But he aimed to know.

On the edge of the chaparral, where wide, grassy plains stretched towards the cow-town on the Rio Claro, the Kid was lying along a thick branch of a cottonwood-tree, twenty feet above the trail that ran through the chaparral, and was continued by a track across the prairie in the direction of Gunsight.

Gunsight was several miles distant, and on the sunlit prairie no life stirred, save a bunch of grazing cattle.

It was the sound of a horseman in the thickets that had made the Kid clamber into the cottonwood. He had left his mustang in his hiding-place deep in the chaparral, while he scouted for signs of pursuit. The Kid was satisfied that the hunt was over, and that the Gunsight men had gone back to their ranches; but he was not the man to leave anything to chance. He took cover in the thick branches of the cottonwood on the edge of the chaparral, as he heard the horseman pushing through the tangled thickets, and watched. If it was some puncher still seeking for him, the Kid was anxious to avoid an encounter. Only to save his life would he have pulled trigger on a cowman.

The rustling of the thickets, the swaying of the masses of Spanish moss, showed that the unseen horseman was pushing through into the open trail. In a few minutes he would emerge into the Kid's view from above.

He emerged at last.

From the high branch of the cottonwood the Kid watched him. He saw a powerful horse, with a black marking on the shoulder, push out into the trail. It was a grey horse, and oddly the marking was black. And its likeness to his own grey mustang struck the Kid at once.

His eyes gleamed down at the horseman.

Of the latter he could see nothing but the broad Stetson hat, which covered the man from view from above.

Clear of the tangled brush, the horseman moved on under the big cottonwood.

The Kid watched in silence. A horse so like his own mustang might exist in the Rio Claro country, but the Kid did not figure so. Paint, he guessed, had put those distinctive black marks on the horse below him. The man who had borrowed the name of the Rio Kid to hide his own might very well disguise his horse to resemble the Kid's famous steed. The Kid's heart beat a little faster. He was very keen to get a look at the rider's face.

That the man was in the chaparral for some unusual reason he did not need telling. He had come out of the heart of the brush, where horsemen seldom or never rode. Now he was sitting his halted horse, looking out beyond the chaparral towards Gunsight, faintly seen on the river-bank in the distance. He was not bound for the cow-town, that was clear. Where he was he had come to stop.

The Kid smiled faintly.

It looked to him as if he had struck the man he wanted. But the Kid intended to be sure. He made no sign.

The horseman watched the open plains for several long minutes, and then, seeming satisfied, wheeled the horse. Now he stared back along the trail that wound through the chaparral, as if in expectation. Again he was motionless for several minutes.

He moved again, this time leaving the trail, and backing the horse into the cover of a mass of mesquite close at hand.

He disappeared from the Kid's sight.

But he was not gone. Only a few yards from the trampled trail he was sitting his horse in cover, watching the trail, and never dreaming that he was watched himself by keen eyes above.

"Sho!" murmured the Kid silently.

If the horseman was not a trail robber, watching for an expected traveller, the Kid had lost his judgment.

Still the Kid made no sign.

Of the horseman he had seen nothing but the top of a big Stetson hat and a glimpse of his chaparejos. The chaps showed that he was dressed as a puncher—the usual garb of the Rio Kid.

If it was the unknown trail-robber who had adopted the Kid's name and style, he was watching for a victim on the chaparral trail. But the Kid was not taking chances. It was possible that the man was only a cowpuncher waiting for some friend to come along, and that the resemblance of his horse to the Kid's mustang was a matter of chance. It was not likely, but it was possible. And the Kid waited silently to see what was to follow.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The Man in the Mask!

THE chaparral was silent.

Save for the croak of some bull-frog in a hidden pool, a faint sough of the wind in the thickets, there was no sound.

But for what he had seen, the Rio Kid would have believed that he was alone there—that no other human being was within hail of him.

But he knew that the horseman was there, hidden in the mesquite beside the trodden trail, waiting and watching. Long minutes passed—minutes that seemed very long to the Rio Kid. But he waited patiently, stretched on the high branch over the trail, hidden by foliage. The Kid could be as patient as an Apache on an occasion like this.

The silence was broken at last. Hoof-beats sounded from the distance.

The Kid's eyes glittered.

A rider was coming along by the trail, evidently bound for Gunsight, for the trail led nowhere else. That trail ran through the wild chaparral, from the town of Truce to the plains round Gunsight. The man who was approaching came from Truce and was heading for the cow-town; that was a certainty.

The Kid's doubts, if he had had any, were resolved now. The hidden horseman was watching for that coming rider. Still the Kid waited to see.

The hoof-beats drew nearer, but the trail was winding, and it was not till the newcomer was quite close at hand that he came within the view of the boy puncher on the cottonwood branch above.

The Kid looked down at him keenly. He was a fat, rather flabby man, dressed in "store" clothes, with a Derby hat in the place of the Stetson usual to the cow country. He rode an "American" horse, and he rode it clumsily enough, like a man more used to the office stool than to the saddle. The Kid could see that he was a man who rode because there was no other mode of transit in the cow country save walking. He was a man who would have preferred a seat in an auto or a train.

There was a sudden rustling in the thickets, and the hidden horseman pushed out of the mesquite into the trail. Still the Kid could see little of him but his Stetson hat, but he saw the revolver that was levelled at the newcomer.

The latter jerked in his horse so suddenly that he almost fell from the saddle.

"Hands up, Lawyer Dunk!"

It was a sharp voice that rapped out.

The man from Truce gave a gasp of alarm. Sitting uneasily in the saddle, he put his hands over his head, and the Kid could see that his fat face was white as chalk.

"What?" he panted. "What—who—what——"

"I guess you've struck the Rio Kid, hombre," came the horseman's voice. "I reckon you're my mutton, Lawyer Dunk!"

"The Rio Kid!" repeated the lawyer from Truce, and the hands he held over his Derby hat trembled.

The kid's face set like iron. This was the galoot who had borrowed his name and who was robbing and killing in the Gunsight country as the Rio Kid.

The Kid had caught him fairly in the act. The face, hidden from the Kid by the big Stetson hat, was hidden from Lawyer Dunk by a black mask. But the Kid was going to see that face.

"Git off that cayuse!" went on the man who called himself the Rio Kid. "Pronto!"

The man from Truce rolled clumsily from his horse. There was a jeering chuckle from the masked man. The obvious fear of the lawyer from Truce aroused his contempt and derision. Standing in the trail beside his horse, the lawyer held his trembling hands over his head, his eyes fixed in fear upon the masked face of the outlaw.

"Scared stiff, ain't you?" jeered the latter. "I guess I ain't shooting, Lawyer Dunk, if you behave. I'm sure honing for your wad."

"I—I've nothing," stammered the man from Truce. "Only a few dollars."

"Guess again!" jeered the outlaw.

"I—I swear it!" panted Dunk. "I am going to Gunsight to see Mr. Poindexter at his ranch. I'm not plumb foolish enough to carry money riding in this chaparral. I swear I have no more than ten dollars about me. If you'd stopped me on my way home——" He broke off.

"You aim to collect dollars from Poker Poindexter, feller?" asked the outlaw, with a curious note in his voice.

"Yes," gasped the lawyer. "The interest on the mortgage is due. I am going to Gunsight to collect it. I swear——"

"I guess I'm sorry for you, Mr. Dunk, if you ain't fixed to pay me for my trouble," said the masked man grimly. "You're the richest man in the Rio Claro country, and I guess you ought to be well fixed. You want to cough up a good wad, Mr. Dunk, you sure do, or you won't ride into Gunsight to-day—or any day."

The fat lawyer's knees knocked together.

"You can go through me," he stammered. "You can search me from head to foot. I swear——"

"I guess swearing won't buy you anything," said the outlaw savagely. "If you've got a thousand dollars in your rags, you can pony up, and ride on. If you ain't, say your prayers, you haven't much time left."

The man from Truce gazed at him, and read his fate in the eyes that glittered from the holes in the mask. In utter terror, he fell on his knees in the grass of the trail.

"Give me a chance," he stammered. "Give me a chance! I aim to collect eight hundred dollars at Poindexter's ranch—the money's over-due, and I'm giving him no more time—he's expecting me to-day—the money will be ready—give me a chance—you shall have every dollar——"

A savage laugh interrupted him.

"I guess I'd as soon trust a lobo wolf as you, Lawyer Dunk. If you've got a roll, hand it over and save your life—I give you one minute."

A groan of fear was the lawyer's answer. It was clear that he carried no 'roll' with him in that unsettled country, a precaution that saved his money, but was likely now to cost him his life.

There was no mercy in the glittering eyes that looked from the holes in the mask. The revolver in the outlaw's hand bore full upon the shrinking man from Truce. The life of the lawyer might have been counted in seconds, but for the presence of the Kid.

Crack!

There was a startled yell from the masked horseman, as the Colt was was struck from his hand by a crashing bullet.

Lawyer Dunk gave a shriek. In his terror, he fancied that it was the masked man who had fired. But he realised that he was not hit, and he stared in amazement at the horseman, his last weaponless now, the revolver in the grass. With a swiftness that only the extremity of fear could have lent the fat, clumsy man, Lawyer Dunk hurled himself on his horse, and drove the animal to a frantic gallop, tearing madly past the masked man, and racing out of the chaparral to the open plain beyond.

The masked man, taken utterly by surprise, was staring about him, like a man dazed. That sudden ringing shot from the boughs of the cotton-wood over the trail, had come like a thunderclap to him.

There was a sound of scrambling and slithering in the branches. The Kid dropped lightly into the trail.

It was only a matter of seconds, but in those seconds Lawyer Dunk had vanished from the scene, and was riding—frantically towards Gunsight, and the masked man, recovering himself, turned his horse to the thickets and drove his spurs cruelly into the flanks.

"Halt!" yelled the Kid.

He lifted his revolver, and fired as the masked man plunged into the mesquite.

But the swift leap of the spurred horse saved the man who called himself by the Rio Kid's name. The bullet tore a hole through his Stetson hat as he went.

Crack! crack! crack!

Thrice the enraged Kid fired, at the crashing sound of the horseman in the thick mesquite, running in pursuit as he pulled trigger. But the tangled thickets had swallowed the leaping horseman, and the continued crashing and rustling, the thunder of hurried hoofs, showed that the masked man had not been hit, and that he was still in wild flight through the chaparral.

Crack! Crack!

The bullets tore through the leaves and branches.

"Dog-gone the luck!" hissed the Kid. The horseman was gone. Had the Kid's mustang been at hand, he knew that he could have run the fugitive down. But the mustang was not at hand. The Kid ran a hundred yards in fierce pursuit, on the torn and trampled trail left by the fleeing horse-man, and then he halted, setting his teeth. The crashing in the chaparral was dying away in the distance, and pursuit on foot was hopeless.

"Dog-gone it!" growled the Kid.

He tramped back angrily to the trail. Looking out over the plain, he had a glimpse of Lawyer Dunk, vanishing in the distance towards Gunsight. The grass swallowed the terrified lawyer, even as the Kid looked.

"Dog-gone it!" repeated the Kid savagely.

The lawyer had escaped to Gunsight, with a new tale to tell of the desperate deviltry of the *Rio Kid*, and the man who had used the Kid's name, had escaped into the chaparral, escaped recognition and vengeance and was gone. The Kid gritted his teeth. He half-regretted that he had not shot the man dead from the branches of the cotton-wood. But the killing of an enemy from ambush was not the way of the Kid.

"The dog-goned skunk!" growled the Kid, though angry as he was, he had admired the swift promptness with which the desperado had extricated himself from what looked like certain capture or death. "The all-fired coyote! I guess I'll be sudden on the shoot, next time I meet up with that pesky gink. Dog-gone him."

The crashing of the horseman had died away in the far distance, the chaparral was silent again. The Rio Kid's task remained yet to be done.

THE END

(Another roaring Western yarn next week. Look out for it!)

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