THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW, IN THE WARS AGAIN!

THE MARSHAL OF KICKING MULE

BY

Ralph Redway.

Crack! Crack! . . . But the "Kid" was the slickest on the draw.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Kid at Kicking Mule!

THE Rio Kid rode into the cow-town of Kicking Mule, under the setting sun, humming a cowboy song as he rode. Men who glanced at him on the street saw a handsome young puncher, with the dust of the trail on his chaps, mounted on a mustang—a sight too common at Kicking Mule to draw a second glance. In Kicking Mule, as in every other cow-town in Texas, they had heard of the Rio Kid; but the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had never been seen there before; and the Kid figured that the chances were that no guy in the burg knew his looks. Anyhow he was taking the chance.

But he was not taking more chances than he could help. The band of silver nuggets was gone from his hat; the silver spurs were blacked over; and the grey mustang, as well known as his rider, had been given brown "stockings" on his forelegs, and brown patches on his head and his flanks, which made him look like a pinto. So unless some guy at Kicking Mule actually knew the Kid's handsome features, he was not likely to be spotted in that cow-town so remote from his usual trails.

Careless as he looked, like any other puncher riding in from a far range, the Kid's eyes were keenly about him, under the shade of his Stetson; and the two walnut-butted guns, low-slung in their holsters, were quite handy to his grasp if he wanted them.

But it did not seem likely that he would want them. Few heeded the young puncher, in a town crowded with cow-punchers. And the few who heeded him never dreamed that they were looking at the "firebug" whose name was a legend on the banks of the Rio Grande.

The Kid was glad of it. He had not come to Kicking Mule hunting trouble: but for quite different reasons.

There was, as he noted at once, some excitement in the cow-town; and the Kid, who had seen the hold-up of the Juniper stage on the stage-trail a few hours ago, knew the reason.

The stage was in now; it had been long in; and was standing, minus its horses, outside the timber hotel. Jerry Cook, the driver, was within the building, disposing of much-needed liquid refreshment after a long drive up a dusty trail, and relating to a buzzing crowd the tragic events of the trip. Outside a crowd had gathered round the coach, staring into it, and remarking on the tell-tale stains to be seen on its bare flooring.

The Kid slackened to a walk, as he came into the crowd, and pulled in the grey mustang close by the coach.

"Say, fellers, suthin' going on in this hyer burg?" he drawled. "You guys sure seem all het up."

Several glanced at him, and one replied:

"It's a hold-up!"

"Sho!" said the Kid.

He knew more about the hold-up than the Kicking Mule guys could know. He was fresh from the pursuit of the road-agent who had held up the stage from Juniper.

"It's Black George!" said another.

"Black George?" repeated the Kid.

"I guess you're a stranger here, if you ain't heard of Black George," said the puncher who had first spoken. "He's a nigger hold-up man—and the durndest firebug in this section. Black as the ace of spades; though his face ain't so black as his heart, I reckon. He stopped this stage and shot up a man on the trail."

"Sho!"

"Shot him up for keeps!" said the puncher. "Jerry Cook brought him in as dead as deadwood. A Ranger lieutenant, who was coming hyer to pick up the trail of Black George; and I guess that nigger got wise to it somehow, and laid for him on the trail. Shot him up in the stage, by the great horned toad."

The Kid nodded.

He had witnessed that ruthless killing on the stage-trail; and it was for that reason that he had ridden in pursuit of the black road-agent. And the trail of the killer, strangely enough, had led him to the cow-town; a mystery that the Rio Kid was determined to fathom before he pulled out from Kicking Mule.

"And Black George ain't been cinched?" asked the Kid.

"He sure ain't! That coon has been cavorting around Kicking Mule for years, and he ain't never been cinched yet! I guess there's fifty men rode out to look for him now; but they ain't putting salt on the tail of that coon, I reckon. He's sure too cute!"

The Kid could believe that.

He had seldom been beaten on a trail; but the black hold-up man of Kicking Mule had beaten him to it. And the Kid reckoned that he was as good a man on a trail as any guy in Texas.

"Say, Mesquite!" said another puncher. "Jerry Cook allows that there was a kid puncher showed up on the trail, and went after Black George. Mighty close behind him, Jerry allows. Mebbe he got him."

Mesquite snorted.

"Not on your life," he answered. "If that kid puncher Jerry told us of got anywhere near Black George, I guess he got his, sudden. They'll find him lying about with a hole through him."

"I guess not!" grinned the Kid.

Mesquite stared at him.

"You guess not?" he grunted.

"I've said it."

"And what do you know about it?" demanded the burly puncher gruffly. "You got a lot to spill for a kid that ain't long out of short frocks."

"Feller, I'm the kid puncher that Jerry told you about," explained the Kid. "I'm that very guy!"

"Shucks!"

The attention of the crowd was concentrated on the Rio Kid at once.

"You!" said Mesquite.

"Me!" assented the Kid.

"You went after Black George?"

"You've said it."

"Aw, can it!" grunted the big puncher. "What you giving us? I guess if you saw Black George, you'd jump into the nearest hole, an' try to pull it in after you."

There was a laugh from the crowd of cowmen, and the Kid's eyes glinted.

"I guess I'm giving you straight goods," he said. "I'll tell a man I was there and saw the hold-up, and saw that durned lobo-wolf, Black George, make a last sickness for that ranger guy. I guess I followed him up the hill; but——"

"He got away!" grinned Mesquite.

"He sure got away!" assented the Kid.

"Mebbe you didn't follow him too much in a hurry?" suggested the cow-puncher. "Mebbe you didn't look for him very hard, in case you should find him."

There was another laugh.

"And mebbe," said the Kid cheerfully, "mebbe you're an all-fired pesky bonehead, a-shooting off your mouth promiscus, because you ain't got more hoss-sense than a cross-eyed gopher."

Mesquite Bill dropped his hand to his gun.

But he did not pull the Colt.

A long bluish barrel looked him in the face, appearing in the boy rider's hand so suddenly that it seemed like magic to the astonished cow-puncher.

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

The big puncher stared at him blankly for a moment; slowly dropping his hand from the butt of his gun.

"Say, you ain't no slouch on the draw," he said, with unwilling admiration.

"I guess I've heard that said afore!" assented the Kid. He dropped his gun into the leather holster again, and smiled. "Say, feller, I ain't come hyer a-shooting! I guess I want to get after that all-fired skunk that shot up the Ranger guy on the trail; and I want to see your marshal in this burg and put him wise to some things. I reckon I can help get a cinch on that fire-bug. Say, where does your marshal hang out?"

Mesquite Bill gave the boy puncher a long, uncertain look. Then he grinned.

"You sure are some guy on the draw," he said. "I take back what I was saying, feller; I guess I allow you're all wool and a yard wide. If you got a hunch that you can help cinch that fire-bug Black George, I reckon all Kicking Mule will be powerful glad you humped into this burg. Say, I'll sure show you along to the marshal's office."

And the Kid, walking his mustang, moved away with the big puncher, the eyes of the rest following him curiously as he went.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The Cow-Town Marshal!

THE frame house and office of Seth Starbuck, town marshal of Kicking Mule, stood a hundred yards along the rugged, irregular street. The Kid walked his mustang along by the side of Mesquite Bill, who glanced at him, several times curiously. There was no enmity in his glance; the big puncher had a respect for the guy who, kid as he looked, had beaten him to the draw. And the fact that the Kid had followed the trail of Black George, that he had come to the cow-town as an enemy of the ruthless killer of the trails, was a sure passport to the esteem of any Kicking Mule galoot.

"I reckon you're a stranger in this section," the big puncher remarked as they threaded through the excited crowd in the one street of Kicking Mule.

"Yep!" said the Kid.

"How'd you happen on the trail when Black George was holding up the stage?"

"I was camping on the hill when it happened," the Kid explained. "I guess I had no hunch to horn in; but when the fire-bug shot up that Ranger guy in the hearse, I'll tell all Texas it sure got my goat, and I got after him like I was sent for. He sure is one pizen skunk!"

"You've said it," agreed Mesquite. "Me, I'd give a month's pay to draw a bead on him."

"But what you guys in this burg doing, to let that pesky polecat cavort around years on end, without fitting him with a rope necktie?" demanded the Kid.

Mesquite grunted.

"I'm telling you, that guy has been hunted like a flea on a dog," he said. "We've combed the hills for him, and rooted in the chaparral; and never picked up sign. You see, he's somehow wise to everything that goes on hyer. A hundred times or more, Seth Starbuck's led a hunt for him—and never a sign of him been seen. Nobody knows where he hides in the hills; and he gets wise to it every time there's a search."

"Friends in the town?" suggested the Kid. "Some pesky guys that stand in with him."

The puncher shook his head.

"There ain't a coon in the town," he said. "Black George is the only nigger in these parts. And I guess there ain't any white man in cahoots with the nigger."

"Nope, it don't sound likely," agreed the Kid. "But how'd he know that that Ranger guy was on the hearse? The guy was coming here claiming to be a cattle buyer, under another name; but the road-agent was wise to him all the same."

"You got me guessing," said Mesquite. "It's got all Kicking Mule guessing. How Black George gets wise to things, nobody knows; but he does every time. Why, that Ranger was coming secret—some of the ranchers got together and fixed it. Seth Starbuck allowed that he was as good a man as any Ranger; but they put it over him, and it was fixed for the Ranger to come here, quiet, making out to be a cattle-buyer, to look round and pick up sign. There was only four men in the secret—my boss, Colonel Sanderson, two more ranchers, and the town marshal."

"And Black George?" said the Kid.

The Rio Kid fired from his hip, in the second as the marshal's gun left its ho But it was the marshal who fell back gu knocked clean out of his hand.

"Sure—but how he got wise to it got me guessing. Nobody in Kicking Mule knowed, till Jerry Cook drove in the stage, with the Ranger guy deader'n deadwood inside. Then it came out. But what nobody in the town knowed was no secret to Black George! My boss, the colonel, was here, when the stage drove in; and he jest tore his hair when he saw the guy dead inside, propped up on a seat, and the other passengers looking scared to a frazzle. The colonel sure loosed off some language."

Mesquite grinned reminiscently.

Apparently the colonel's language had been powerful medicine.

"He sure did talk some!" said Mesquite. "But Seth Starbuck will have the

butt-end of the laugh, I reckon; he allowed that a Ranger guy was no good for Black George; and he sure hit the mark. Here's the shebang!"

The Kid slipped from the saddle, and hitched Side-Kicker at the rail outside the marshal's office.

"Say, feller," Mesquite touched him on the elbow, "you want to talk turkey to Starbuck."

"How come?"

"You want to know, the marshal's been after Black George for burro's years," explained Mesquite. "He's sure a whole lot sore when guys ask him why he ain't cinched that fire-bug yet. He got a grouch when the colonel and his friends fixed it up to fetch that

same
ster.
his

Ranger guy hyer—he reckoned it was one agin him. He sure ain't no gentle cooing dove, the marshal ain't; and he's the quickest man on the draw in this section. You don't want to get him edge-wise."

The Kid smiled.

"I'll sure talk to him like I was a Dutch uncle," he said.

And he followed the puncher into the open doorway of the office of the town marshal of Kicking Mule.

It was a bare room, sparsely furnished. At a bench that served as a desk, a man of powerful frame was seated. He was speaking to a man in spurs and chaps, whose dusty horse was hitched outside.

"Say, marshal, hyer's a galoot wants to chew the rag with you," said Mesquite. "He allows he can help cinch that fire-bug Black George."

The marshal of Kicking Mule fixed his eyes on the Kid.

It seemed to the Kid that recognition flashed into the keen, searching eyes that scanned his face; recognition and hostility.

The Kid slid a hand gently and unostentatiously towards a gun.

So far as he knew, the marshal of Kicking Mule was a total stranger to him. But more guys had seen the Rio Kid than the Rio Kid had seen.

If the marshal knew him, for what he was, the Kid had ridden into deadly danger in entering Kicking Mule; and as likely as not, had to fight his way out, gun in hand.

But he waited quietly, his face expressing nothing. If it came to gun-play, the Kid was ready; but he was averse from gun-play if it could be helped.

For several long seconds the marshal scanned his sunburnt face. But if he recognised the Kid, he gave no further sign, after that one startled flash of his eyes.

The Kid breathed more easily.

He did not want trouble at Kicking Mule. He wanted to take a hand in hunting down the ruthless killer of the trails, and ridding Texas of a merciless assassin. That he was an outlaw himself, cut no ice with the Kid. For the time, at least, he was standing for the law, and it would have knocked his plans to pieces had he been recognised as the outlaw of the Rio Grande.

The marshal, after that long look, gave Mesquite Bill a curt nod, and turned back to the man to whom he had been speaking.

"Wait!" he said curtly.

"Sure!" assented Mesquite amiably.

The marshal, taking no further heed of the newcomers, went on talking to the man in chaps and spurs. It was a puncher to whom he was giving directions concerning the hunt that was going on in the hills for Black George.

The Kid stood aside quietly, and watched the marshal, while he waited for him to get through.

Mesquite had told him that Seth Starbuck was no gentle cooing dove; and the Kid allowed that Mesquite was right.

For a town marshal, the Kid figured that Starbuck was the toughest-looking guy he had ever struck.

His hard, cold, grim face, his hard, icy eyes, told of a type that the Kid knew well, and had often encountered; the gunman type.

Starbuck might be a town-marshal now, in a rough cow-town; but the Kid reckoned that he had been a gunman in his time.

But in a town like Kicking Mule, a marshal who was not quick on the draw, and did not know how to handle a gun, would not have been a whole lot of use. He looked tough, and he was tough; but he was just the galoot to keep some sort of order, when the town was crowded by wild riders in from the ranges. The Kid allowed that the Kicking Mule guys had known what they were about when they elected Seth Starbuck to his present position. He looked, too, as good a man as could be wanted, to get on the trail of the desperate outlaw whose long list of hold-ups and killings made his name a terror to the section. The wonder was, to the Kid's mind, that he had not succeeded in cinching the black outlaw, who had defied the whole section for a series of years.

The marshal dismissed the man in chaps at last, and the latter left the office, mounted his broncho, and rode away clattering down the street. Starbuck turned towards Mesquite and the Kid.

"I ain't got a lot of time for chewing the rag," he said ungraciously. "I guess I got my hands full, with Black George's latest break."

"I allow you have, marshal!" said Mesquite placatingly.

Starbuck frowned.

"I guess I'm doing all a galoot can do," he said. "I ain't a durned detective, that I know of. Search me! Colonel Sanderson allowed that a Ranger officer would handle Black George, if he could be got here secret. And what's come of it?"

"Not a whole lot!" said Mesquite.

"Not a thing!" snapped Starbuck. "When I come in from Post-Oak, I found the stage in, with the Ranger dead aboard. Your boss give me the rough edge of his tongue. Thunder! I guess I came near pulling a gun on Colonel Sanderson, Mesquite! Wasn't it his stunt to get the Ranger guy here, and wasn't I agin it? Who's going to blame me if the guy gets himself shot up coming here? Say!"

"It sure wasn't your funeral, marshal," said Mesquite soothingly. "The colonel blows off his mouth a lot, when he's got his mad up; but he sure respects you a whole lot, marshal. He sure knows you're the man to get Black George, if he's ever got."

"It sure makes a hombre sore," said Starbuck. "If the town wants a new marshal, I'm ready to resign. But I ain't no durned conjurer to hand them Black George like a rabbit out of a hat! No, sir!"

He turned to the Kid.

"Who's this guy, and what does he want?" he snapped. "I've told you I'm a busy man."

"I guess I don't know his call-by——" Mesquite turned inquiringly to the Rio Kid.

"Two-gun Carson fits me!" murmured the Kid, his eyes on the marshal's hard face.

He was satisfied now that the marshal did not know him as the Rio Kid; that the man never dreamt that he was anything but what he looked, and indeed was—a cow-puncher. Yet that flash of hostile recognition in Seth Starbuck's eyes, at first sight of him, remained in the Kid's memory and puzzled him. The marshal did not know that he was

the Rio Kid; but he had seen him before somewhere.

"Waal, what you got to spill, Two-gun Carson?" grunted the marshal.

"I guess I got something to spill about Black George."

"Shoot!"

"This hyer guy was on the trail when that coon held up the stage from Juniper, marshal," interjected Mesquite. "He's the kid puncher that Jerry let on about, who got after Black George and followed him into the hills."

"I guess he's sure lucky to be here to chew the rag about it, then," grunted Starbuck. "He ain't going to tell me that he got Black George?"

"Nope!" said the Kid.

"Well, spill what you got to unload, pronto."

"I followed that guy's trail," explained the Kid, "and it sure beat me to a frazzle, for it led me—you won't guess where, hombre."

"Up into the sierra?"

"Nope!"

"Where, then?" snapped the marshal impatiently.

"Back to the stage-trail," said the Kid.

"And there you lost it?"

"I sure did not!"

Starbuck started, and his eyes fixed on the Kid, hard.

"What then?" he asked.

"I followed that black outlaw's hoss hoof-prints," said the Kid deliberately, "and they sure led me right into Kicking Mule. Marshal, if you want to find Black George, you want to look for him right here in this cow-town!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Sharp Shooting!

SILENCE followed the Rio Kid's words.

Mesquite Bill stared at him, his mouth agape with astonishment. The expression on the marshal's face was hard to define.

There was surprise in it—obviously, the Kid's words had startled him. But there was something more than surprise—something that the Kid, keen as he was, could not quite get.

In the silence, the deep-drawn breath of the marshal of Kicking Mule was heard. He had risen to his feet, and was staring across the desk at the Kid, with a stare that seemed as if it would penetrate through the cool, handsome face, to the thoughts behind.

Mesquite Bill broke the silence.

"Sho!" he ejaculated.

"I'm giving you the straight stuff!" said the Kid earnestly. "There ain't nary a doubt about it. That nigger doubled among the chaparral on the hill, after shooting up the Ranger guy in the stage; and then he hit the stage-trail again, and rode for this town. He sure did."

The marshal burst into a jeering laugh. There was a ring in that laugh, a ring that was cracked and false, that made the Kid look at him sharply.

"What you giving us?" sneered Starbuck. "You aim to make us believe that a buck nigger rode into this town without a guy noticing him. I'm telling you, there ain't a black coon in Kicking Mule; and if one showed up hyer, every guy in town would be round him to see whether he was Black George or not. Forget it, puncher."

"You sure have got it wrong, feller," said Mesquite Bill, his astonished face breaking into a grin. "That sure is some tall story."

"I guess I've got eyes," said the Kid. "I'll tell all Texas that I followed that buck nigger's trail foot by foot and inch by inch; and never lost it till I was the length of a dozen riatas from this burg. The tracks was too thick jest outside the town, to follow it farther. But that galoot rode into Kicking Mule, unless he turned off in full sight of the town—and why should he ride close to Kicking Mule and then turn off? No, sir! He rode into this town."

The marshal glanced at the open doorway, bright in the red sunset.

"It ain't dark yet," he said.

"It ain't!" assented the Kid.

"You allow that the nigger rode into the town in the daylight."

"Yep!"

"Under the eyes of all Kicking Mule!" said the marshal.

"There ain't no other way about it, hombre. That's jest what that guy Black George did."

The marshal laughed again, gruffly, contemptuously.

"Ask up and down Kicking Mule, whether any guy has seen a nigger riding into town," he said. "You find a guy that's seen one, and bring him along to me! I'll sure be glad to see him."

The Kid stood silent.

He was nonplussed, himself.

In a town where there were no negroes, any black man riding in would surely have gained immediate attention; especially with the cow-town throbbing with excitement over the latest outrage by the black road-agent. No black man could have entered Kicking Mule that day, without being immediately observed, and closely questioned. That, certainly, had not happened. Any guy who had seen a negro on the street, that day, would have told all Kicking Mule.

Yet the trail had not lied.

If the Kid's eyes had deceived him in the matter of the trail of the black horse, it was the first time they ever had deceived him.

"It sure ain't possible, Carson!" said Mesquite Bill. "You sure was mistooken about that cayuse's trail."

"Mistooken!" snapped the marshal scornfully. "It ain't a mistake—it's a durned lie! This kid puncher is jest shooting off his mouth promiscus. Too much tanglefoot since he struck town, I reckon!"

"I guess I don't worry the tanglefoot a whole lot, marshal," said the Kid quietly, "and I ain't used to a galoot giving me the lie!"

"You'll sure get used to it, if you spin fool yarns that-a-way in Kicking Mule!" sneered the marshal. "You come here on my busy day and waste my time with a tall story like that!"

"I come here because you're marshal of Kicking Mule, and I want to help cinch that buck that shot up the Ranger lieutenant," said the Kid. "I guess it was my call to put you wise to what I know about the firebug."

"You don't know a thing about that firebug!" said the marshal deliberately. "You jest come here shooting off your mouth with a fool yarn, to make yourself look a little bigger'n you are. You want to get the town rubbering at you, I reckon; and that's your holt. Take your fool yarn away and tell it to some bonehead who'll swallow it."

"You sure was mistooken, puncher," said Mesquite anxiously. "You mixed up Black George's trail with some other guy's."

"I sure did not!" said the Kid quietly. "When I mix up a cayuse's trail with another cayuse's, feller, I'll sure give up cattle-punching and buy me a store and sell canned beans. I'll tell the world that black horse came into Kicking Mule; and I'd know its tracks again, if I picked them up on the street or in any guy's yard."

"Can it!" snapped the marshal. His eyes gleamed at the Kid, and his hand was very near his gun. "Mesquite, hyer, allows that you're mistooken. I say it's a durned lie!"

The Kid's eyes gleamed, and he breathed hard.

The marshal, who looked so much more like a gun-man than a town marshal, was hunting trouble. Mesquite could see that Seth Starbuck was forcing on a quarrel, a quarrel that might lead to gun-play, and he touched the Kid's arm.

"Let's git!" he said. "The marshal ain't banking on your yarn nohow, and you're sure wasting his time. Beat it, feller——"

"Beat it, while you've got whole bones to beat it with!" jeered Starbuck. "I ain't banking on that fool yarn a whole lot. But I'll sure tell you what I figure. Black George gets wise to a lot of things that go on in this town. I've figured for a long time that he's in cahoots with some durned, dirty, double-crossing scallywag that puts him wise. You come here and tell me a durned lie, and I'll say that it looks as if you was playing Black George's game."

"Thunder!" ejaculated Mesquite. He gave the Kid a startled look.

"That's what it looks like to me!" said the marshal. "It looks as if you was the dirty skunk that's in cahoots with Black George. And if you don't like that, you gol-darned lying scallywag, pull your gun, durn you!"

It was trouble; and it came suddenly. But it did not come too suddenly for the Kid, who was watching Starbuck like a cat.

With the last word the marshal grasped his gun, and it leaped from the holster.

The Kid fired from the hip in the same second.

The roar of the Colt filled the marshal's office with sound. A yell from the Kicking Mule marshal sounded louder still as he staggered back behind the bench.

His gun crashed to the floor, shattered by the Kid's bullet. His right hand hung numbed. For the moment the marshal believed that the hand, as well as the gun, had been shattered, so sharp and numbing was the shock.

The Kid's smoking Colt was levelled the next moment.

"Put 'em up!" he snapped.

The eyes gleaming over the levelled barrel enforced obedience. Seth Starbuck, with a face convulsed with rage, lifted his hands above his head.

Mesquite stared on, dumbfounded.

He had seen some sharp shooting in his time, but never anything so swift as this. Seth Starbuck, the quickest man on the draw in Kicking Mule, had been beaten to it by the kid puncher. The cow-man gaped with amazement. Starbuck stood with his hands up, covered by the Kid's gun; and Mesquite could hardly believe his eyes as he saw it.

"Waal, carry me hum to die!" he gasped.

The Kid made a step towards the enraged marshal.

"You durned pizen polecat!" he said quietly. "I guess I'd have given you yours for keeps, only I reckon I never figured on coming hyer to shoot up the town marshal. You got your mad up, I reckon, because that buck, Black George, snaps his fingers at you, and the whole town figures that you can't handle your job. And I'll say that the town's right—you can't! I guess—

could cut a better marshal than you out of a greasewood stump. Sarch me!"

"Git out of this town!" gasped the marshal, husky with rage. "Git out of Kicking Mule while you're alive, puncher!"

The Kid laughed contemptuously.

"I ain't gitting a whole lot," he answered. "I guess I've took up the trail of that murdering villain, Black George, and I'm freezing on to that trail till the rope's round his dirty neck. You git me? I'm fixed in Kicking Mule till I get Black George!"

"Say, I'm standing for you, feller!" said Mesquite. "You want a sidepardner on that trail, and you only got to call on Mesquite Bill, of the Bar-One."

"That goes," said the Kid, with a nod. "I'll sure be glad of a friend in town while I'm hunting for that coon scallywag. As for you, Mister Starbuck, you aimed to shoot me up, and you've slipped on it. You try the gun game agin, hombre, and you git yours, hombre, marshal or no marshal. Why, dog-gone you, I eat your sort alive, with the boots on."

Mesquite grinned, and the marshal of Kicking Mule panted with rage. It was the first time that Starbuck had been beaten to the draw and held up with his hands in the air.

The report of the Colt had drawn several onlookers to the spot. Half a dozen faces looked in at the open doorway, staring blankly at the surprising sight of the marshal standing with his hands up, covered by a puncher's gun.

Starbuck writhed with rage. The scene would be reported all over the town in an hour, and it was a severe blow to his prestige.

"Git!" he muttered. "You beat it, puncher—durn you! Git out of my office!"

"I'll sure do that, feller," said the Kid coolly. "You go your way to cinch Black George, marshal, and I'll go mine. If you don't want my help I ain't figuring on boosting it at you. There's heap plenty galoots in this burg will be powerful glad to lend me a hand if you won't, and I'm telling the world that I'm here to cinch that firebug who shot up the Ranger guy, and I ain't quitting till I git him."

"You're talking now!" said Mesquite.

The Kid lowered his gun and stepped back to the doorway, his eyes still on the marshal of Kicking Mule. Starbuck's gun lay shattered on the floor, but the Kid figured that he likely had another weapon handy, if he had a chance to reach it. More than likely, there was a revolver ready behind his desk, out of sight.

And the Kid would not have put it past him to shoot a guy in the back. The fierce glitter in the marshal's eyes told that he was only waiting for a chance.

"Git!" said the marshal, between his teeth.

"Sure!"

The punchers at the doorway stepped back to make respectful room for the Kid. The boy puncher lounged out carelessly into the street and holstered his gun.

Within, Seth Starbuck lowered his upraised hands, now that he was no longer covered by the puncher's weapon. His hard face was white with rage, his eyes burning. Never, since Seth Starbuck had first struck Kicking Mule, had he been beaten at gun-play till now. He groped under his desk for a loaded Colt that lay on a shelf there; but his right hand was still numbed, and he transferred the weapon to his left.

With a crouching step—the step of the typical gun-man—he crossed his office to the doorway and looked out into the street, dusty, and glowing under the setting sun.

A score of men had gathered at the spot, and there was a backward rush to get out of the line of fire as the marshal's white and furious face appeared in the doorway.

Bang!

Before the marshal's Colt could single out the boy puncher, who stood by the hitched mustang, the Kid's gun was in his hand, and its roar awoke the echoes.

The burly form of Seth Starbuck pitched forward into the street. The gun in his left hand clattered into the dust, and the marshal of Kicking Mule lay prone.

"By the great horned toad!" gasped Mesquite Bill. "The marshal's got his!"

The Kid laughed.

"Not by a jugful!" he said coolly. "I guess that galoot is worth a whole lot of dead men, feller. He will sure have a pain in his cabeza when he sits up and takes notice again."

The Kid lopped Side Kicker's reins over his arm and walked the mustang away down the street towards the hotel. An excited crowd followed him, only two or three remaining with the fallen marshal.

Five minutes later Seth Starbuck opened his eyes and stirred. He sat up dazedly, his hand to his head. His fingers came away wet and red from his hair. He stared round stupidly and caught several grinning glances. With an effort he dragged himself to his feet.

"Creased!" he muttered.

The marshal of Kicking Mule gave a savage glare round at the grinning faces, staggered into his office, and slammed the door. At the timber hotel the Kid was the centre of an excited and admiring crowd. In the marshal's office a man with a bandaged head gritted his teeth and dwelt on savage thoughts of vengeance.

The Kid had located in Kicking Mule to get Black George; but the mysterious road agent was not likely to be a more bitter and vengeful enemy to the boy puncher than the marshal of Kicking Mule.

THE END.

(Things are going to be hot for the Kid—but he doesn't worry any. Don't miss next week's roaring Western yarn, entitled: "THE RIO KID'S ENEMY!")

THE VANISHED MILLIONAIRE!

(Continued from page 12.)

Locke fired, and the heavy bullet tore through flask and hand at once, and the contents of the flask splashed over the man's face and head, and ran in rivulets down his arm.

For an instant he stood as though he couldn't realise what had happened. Then suddenly he began to scream, and, with his uninjured hand, tried to wipe the stuff from his face and sound eye, and all the time he screamed like a cat in pain. He stumbled forward, and finally blundered through the opium den and out into the passage.

Locke's face was white and grim, and Jack felt physically sick.

"Help me!" said Locke curtly. "Take his heels!"

Together they tore off the ropes that bound Sir James, and lifted him off the mattress, and laid him on the floor in an angle of the room out of range.

Locke held a small flask of brandy to his lips.

"Drink this," he said. "It's all right, we're friends."

Then faintly from above there came sounds of an uproar. Shouts and screams, and then suddenly the door leading into the den opened, and Mansfield sprang through.

He looked round him like a hunted animal. There was murder in his eyes.

"Locke, by James!" yelled Mansfield, and fired. The bullet cracked past Locke's head, and struck the wall behind. Then Locke fired, and the man fell, with a groan, and lay still.

Even as he touched the ground a second figure came through the door. It was Mark Renton.

Jack saw the gleam of steel, but that was all, for the next moment Jack's gun spat, and Renton staggered against the wall, flopped forward queerly, and slumped down in a heap.

"What's that?" cried Locke suddenly. There came the sound of shouts, mingled with heavy blows, from the passage leading up the stairs to Ah Ling's chop-shop.

"Is it——" began Jack.

Locke nodded.

"The police? Yes, it sounds as though they are here."

The police it was. A man in blue came lumbering down the steps into the opium den, and he started at the sight of the two detectives and the wounded men, and also at the sight of the Chinese dopes in their bunks.

"Who the blazes——"

"It's all right, constable. I am Ferrers Locke, the detective. I think you know me. This is a surprise to you, what?" said Locke. "But no more than it is to me. Tell me how you had knowledge of this place, and our intentions here?"

"We hadn't any knowledge, as a matter of fact," he explained. "But we have been detailed to keep a close watch on this place, and when I saw a fellow coming out, yelling like a fiend, and then heard shots, and a bit of an uproar, I thought there was murder being done. So I blew my whistle, hurried in here, and, with a few chaps, we have fairly set the place on fire."

"What a bit of luck!" murmured Jack Drake, wiping the perspiration from his face.

"It is indeed a bit of luck, as you say, Jack," said Locke. "Have you made any captures upstairs, constable?"

"Yes; a chap who came in with that fellow over there a few moment's ago." And the constable pointed to Renton.

"Logan!" muttered Locke. "That's fine!"

Then he turned towards the little room leading off the den.

"Phone the Yard, constable, for Inspector Bellew!" he ordered. "And send for the ambulance. We've got someone here who must be moved at once." And he stooped over the form of the missing millionaire.

* * * * * *

Three weeks later, when Sir James had recovered, Locke received from him a long letter of thanks and a cheque for an amount that almost took his breath away. The man who had vanished had not forgotten.

THE END.

(Next week's DETECTIVE-THRILLER is entitled: "THE AMPUR CARPET!" and contains another batch of exciting adventures and amazing situations.)