

The Rio Kid Horns 'N'!



—RALPH REDWY—

CHAPTER I

"YOU coyote!"

The Rio Kid started, and glanced round.

He had ridden into Kicking Mule, not intending to halt in the cow-town. But his mustang was thirsty from the dusty desert trail: and the sight of the water-trough outside the Red Dog saloon decided him to draw rein. He sat in the saddle, while Side-Kicker plunged his black muzzle into the water and drank. He did not notice the man and the girl on the plank side-walk till that sharp, angry, scornful exclamation drew his attention. Then he glanced round at them, under the shady rim of his Stetson.

She looked a pretty girl—one of the prettiest in Texas, the Kid reckoned. She was, he figured, a sight for sore eyes! But the man was the kind of guy that got the Kid's goat at sight. Only too well he knew that kind of hard face, with its icy ruthless eyes. It did not need the six-gun in the low-slung holster to tell him that guy was a gun-man: the variety of gallot that was ready to draw and

pull trigger at a word. The girl, clearly, did not fear him. But she was a girl,—the Kid reckoned that most male guys in Kicking Mule walked warily under those icy eyes. Kicking Mule was a remote and rough cow-town, which sheriffs were shy of: and the law of the Colt was the chief if not the only law there.

"You coyote!" The girl spoke again, and it was strange to hear such sharp and scornful tones come from such pretty red lips.

The man laughed, as if amused.

"I guess you can spill all the fancy names you can think of, Cora!" he drawled. "But I'll say that I'd like to hear young Andy Harris spill jest one! He wouldn't dare."

"Andy doesn't fear you any more than I do, Poker Pete! But Andy's an honest cow-puncher, and not so quick with a gun as a saloon-loafing gunslinger of your sort. But if you figure that you've got him scared, you've got another guess coming."

"Says you!" grinned the gun-man, "I reckon he won't dare to show up in Kicking Mule while I'm around. Andy sure knows that his best guess is to stay out on the ranch. You expecting him to horn in?"

The girl did not reply to that question. She gave the gun-man one look of scorn and anger, turned on her heel, and walked away. Poker Pete stood looking after her, as she went, with a sneering grin on his hard face.

The Rio Kid set his lips.

Never had he been more disposed to pick a quarrel with any man, than he was at that moment. He would gladly have wiped that sneering grin off the gun-man's face with a lick of his quirt, and backed up the quirt with his gun. But the Kid, wild as his reputation was from the Rio Grande to the Panhandle, was in truth a peaceful guy, never looking for trouble. He checked the impulse to horn in, and turned his head away.

"Gee, Side-Kicker, old hoss."

He rode on up the dusty street of Kicking Mule, till, clear of the cow-town, he broke into a gallop on the prairie trail beyond. He would have dismissed the incident from his mind: but somehow the pretty face, distressed as well as angry, of the girl Cora, haunted him: and he was still thinking of that chance encounter in Kicking Mule when he halted for a rest and a meal under the shade of a ceiba tree beside the trail.

CHAPTER II

BANG! bang! bang!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Kid could not help it. Himself one of the best shots in all Texas, as



Never had he been more disposed to pick a quarrel with any man

quick on the draw, and as accurate in his shooting, as any guy in the Lone Star State, what he now saw amused him. Every guy in Texas couldn't be a good shot; but that any guy that had ever packed a gun could be so bad as this made him wonder—and made him laugh. He sat watching the pistol-practice at a little distance, and could not repress his amusement.

He had had his meal, and was thinking of saddling up again and hitting the trail, when a rider came along. The Kid watched him idly, expecting him to ride past and disappear. But he did not ride past: he dismounted near the clump of trees where the Kid had camped, and tethered his horse. He did not glance in the direction of the Kid, and did not see him sitting there in the shade. The Kid watched him with some interest, wondering what his game was. He looked a mere lad—hardly over twenty—with a fresh pleasant face, a face the Kid liked as soon as he saw it. His sheepskin chaps showed that he was a

puncher from one of the ranches. To the Kid's surprise, he produced a Colt revolver, which he proceeded to load carefully. What he wanted with his hardware, in that lonely spot was a mystery. There was no one at hand but the Kid: and he did not even see the Kid: he figured himself alone on that solitary trail. So it perplexed the Kid what he was going to do with that shooting-iron.

To his further surprise, the young man pinned up a circular disc of bark on the trunk of a tree beside the trail. Then he backed across the trail, revolver in hand. And then the circus began. Taking careful aim, the young puncher fired at the target on the tree—missing not only the target, but the tree itself. He fired again, and scored another miss: a third time, and just hit the tree, nowhere near the target.

It amazed as well as amused the Kid. He had seen some poor shooting in his time; but this was his first experience of a guy who could hardly hit a tree at six yards. That young puncher looked fit and strong, as well as good-looking, and no doubt he was a good hand with a horse, or a cow, or a lariat: but with a gun he was the world's prize boob.

"Dog-gone it!" The Kid heard the exclamation from his distance, "Dog-gone it! I guess it's me for the camp cemetery at Kicking Mule if I don't shoot straighter than that! Dog-gone it!"

He aimed and fired again. Three bangs rang out in succession, and the young puncher was evidently putting into it all he knew. But the result was the same as before. One bullet hit the tree-trunk, a foot from the target: the other two whizzed away cutting twigs from the mosquito thicket. And it was then that the Kid laughed—he just couldn't help it.

That involuntary laugh seemed to reach the ears of the young puncher, and apprise him that he was not alone as he had figured. He stared round towards the Kid, sitting under the ceiba: and his face flushed crimson, as he realized that his wretched shooting had been observed. The Kid's laugh died out at once: he was amused, but he did not want to hurt any guy's feelings. But the young puncher had heard him: and with a flushed face, he came striding towards the Rio Kid, his eyes flashing with anger: the smoking gun in his hand.

"You seem sorta tickled, stranger," he said, staring down at the Kid as he sat. "Mebbe you'd like me to teach you manners."

The Kid looked up at him, smiling.

"Don't get your mad up, feller," he said, amicably. "Sure I shouldn't have snickered, but—Aw, carry me home to die! Ain't you never handled a shooting-iron better'n that?"

His smile, and his good-natured face, seemed to disarm the young puncher's resentment. His knitted brows relaxed, and his own face melted into a grin.

"I guess I ain't got no kick coming, if a guy snickers at my shooting," he



The Kid looked up at him, smiling.

said, "I'll tell a man, it's bad enough to make a blind coyote snicker. I ain't much use with a gun."

"You said it!" agreed the Kid.

"They'd tell you at the Lazy-O that I ain't no slouch with a rope, and that I'd ride any guy in a rodeo; but shooting ain't my long suit." He grinned ruefully. "Sure I've ridden miles from the ranch to put up some pistol-practice, because I wouldn't let the bunch see such a show,—they'd sure laugh like you did. But it ain't no joke, I'm telling you: I'm a dead man if I don't shoot straighter than that at Kicking Mule." He gave an angry shrug of the shoulders. "I guess you can watch if you like, and snicker all you want—it cuts no ice with me."

He turned away.

The Kid rose to his feet. His sunburnt face was serious. If that young pancher was scheduled, as his words implied, for a shooting-affray at Kicking

Mule, and if that was the way he handled a gun, he was not likely to ride home alive to his ranch. It got the Kid's goat to think of that fresh, good-looking young puncher going like a lamb to the slaughter.

"Say, you going to the cow-town for gun-play, hombre?" he asked.

"Yup!"

"Sure I'm a stranger to you," said the Kid. "But if you'd take a word of advice from a stranger, you'll ride clear of Kicking Mule and gun-play. It ain't my funeral, feller, but you wouldn't have a dog's chance with a guy that could handle a gun."

"I'm wise to that."

"But you're hitting Kicking Mule all the same?" asked the Kid, puzzled.

"Sure!"

"Well, I'll say you've got grit," said the Kid. "But what's the matter with riding back to your ranch, and keeping alive, feller?"

The young puncher stood silent for a moment or two. But the kind friendliness in the Kid's face encouraged him to speak.

"It's a cinch," he said, "I got to go. I guess Poker Pete will make coyote's meat of me, but I got to go."

The Kid started. He remembered the name by which the girl Cora had addressed the cold-eyed gun-man outside the Red Dog in Kicking Mule.

"Poker Pete!" he repeated.

"You know him, mebbe?"

"I seen him, coming through Kicking Mule," answered the Kid, "Feller, if you've got a rookus on with that guy, you'll sure be horn mad to try gun-play with him. That guy is a killer, boy. I'd say, on his looks, that he's killed as many guys as he has fingers and toes. Feller, you'd be going to your funeral."

The Kid's tone was deeply earnest. The young puncher looked at him, smiled faintly, and nodded.

"I know!" he said.

"Ride clear," urged the Kid. "Whatever the trouble is, you ain't no call to face up to a dog-goned killer like that guy Poker Pete."

"I got to."

"How come?"

"There's a girl in it. She's not going to think me yellow." The young puncher's eyes blazed, "Poker Pete's picked on her for his fancy, and he's let all Kicking Mule know that the corral-bar is up against any other guy—and that counts me in, that she's promised to marry. If I go into town to see Cora—"

"Cora?"

"That's her name. If I go into Kicking Mule to see Cora, I got to meet

Poker Pete. He sure figures that he's got me scared stiff, and that I daren't go. But I'm riding into camp all the same, and that's why I've been putting up the shooting at that target that made you snicker."

"Great gophers!" muttered the Kid. So this was "Andy Harris".

He understood now. And he could see, in his mind's eye, what was going to happen when Andy Harris rode into Kicking Mule: gun-play with the ruthless gun-man, and not a mosquito's chance for his life. A guy whose shooting was anything like his, might as well not have packed a gun at all. And yet, the Kid had to admit, what else was the young puncher to do?

The puncher smiled faintly at the Kid's earnest face.

"Well, now I've spilled it, feller, you wouldn't advise me to ride clear, for fear of that gun-man?" he said.

"No!" said the Kid, slowly, "No! You got to stand for it! But—" He paused. It was at that moment, that the Rio-Kid made up his mind. "All the advise I got to give you, is to put in some more practice at that target with that gun of yours, and put in all you know: and don't be in a hurry to ride into Kicking Mule."

"That's what I'm going to do. I guess sundown will be early enough to hit town. You riding?"

"Yep, I guess I got to be moving."

The Kid called to his mustang, and saddled up. Andy walked back to his target, and recommenced his pistol-practice. The Kid waved a friendly hand to him, as he rode away. Bang! bang! bang! followed on, so long as he was in hearing. The Kid smiled. So long as that quite futile pistol-practice kept Andy Harris away from Kicking Mule, it was okay by the Kid. The Rio Kid was not riding on his way. He was riding back to Kicking Mule: and the cracking of Andy's revolver died away behind him, as he rode at a gallop for the cow-town.

CHAPTER III

"SAY, fellers, is there a guy called Poker Pete around?"

The sunset was reddening the rugged street of Kicking Mule when the Rio Kid rode in. He hitched his mustang at the rail outside the Red Dog, and called to a group of punchers lounging by the door of the saloon. They stared round at him, and one of them drawled an answer:

"Sure Poker Pete's in the shebang if you want him, stranger."

"I sure do want him," said the Kid, "Jest to speak a civil word, and tell him that if he figures that he can bulldoze punchers from the ranches, he's got

another guess coming. It's sure time that that guy was told where he got off, and I'm here to tell him."

There was a gasp from the loungers at the Red Dog. The Kid's voice, though not loud, was clear and incisive, and his words reached ears within the saloon—as he intended that they should. And the Kid did not need telling that not a man there would have ventured to utter those words within the hearing of Poker Pete.

They stared at him—at his boyish face, sunburnt and handsome under the Stetson. And the man who had answered him spoke again, hastily.

"You dog-goned young gink, you git on that hoss and hit the trail, afore Poker Pete comes out to you. You ride back to your ranch while you're still in one piece."

The Kid laughed.

"I ain't riding yet a piece," he answered, "I've come here to see that gunman who seems to have this burg scared to a frazzle. I'll say that he don't



He was riding back to Kicking Male

scare me worth a continental red cent. I hear that he's been bulldozing punchers from the ranches, and I'm sure a puncher born and bred, and I don't stand for it. That guy Poker Pete has got to climb down and walk soft. And I've jest rode into town to see that he does."

There was a step in the doorway of the saloon, and Poker Pete appeared there. Evidently, he had heard the Kid's words. He was not touching a gun, but his hand was very near the Colt in the low-slung holster. There was a glitter in the cold eyes as they fixed on the Rio Kid. And the little crowd outside the Red Dog parted to right and left, in haste to get out of the line of fire. In Kicking Mule, such words as the Kid had uttered had to be backed up with a gun.

"Say, puncher." Poker Pete's voice was a quiet drawl, but it was packed with menace. "Say, you sure are blowing off your mouth a few. I'm Poker Pete if you want me."

"Sure I've seen your ugly face once afore, when I rode through this burg," said the Kid, "I didn't like the look of it, and I'm telling you that I came powerful near to giving you a few with my quirt, jest on your ugly looks. You're sure the kind of galoot that gets my goat, and I jest wonder why the citizens of this cow-town don't ride you out of town on a rail. I'd sure be glad to lend them a hand."

A dead silence followed. Every eye was on Poker Pete. For a moment the silence was tense. Then the gun-man's hand dropped on his gun. All Kicking Mule knew his swiftness on the draw. All expected to see that boyish-looking stranger roll over under a sudden shot. The six-gun flashed from the holster.

But if Poker Pete was swift on the draw, the Rio Kid was swifter. Even as the gun-man's Colt came up, the Kid, with a movement that was too swift to be followed by the eye, whipped out his six-gun.

Bang!

Bang!

There was a hoarse yell from the gun-man. He staggered in the saloon doorway. His right hand streamed crimson. Even as he pulled trigger, the Kid's bullet had struck that hand. The Kid was no killer. He had not shot to kill. He had shot the Colt out of the gun-man's hand—and half a finger along with it. There was a buzz from the Kicking Mule crowd. They had not seen shooting like this before. There were many along the Rio Grande and the Rio Frio who knew the Kid's shooting, but it was a surprise in Kicking Mule.

The Kid smiled over his smoking Colt. But his eyes were as watchful as a panther's for what was coming. For a moment, the gun-man stared at his streaming hand, his face convulsed with fury. The gun had fallen from his shattered hand, exploding as it fell. Suddenly, swiftly, he reached down for it,



The Kid whipped out his six-gun

and grasped it in his left hand.

Bang!

Poker Pete needed only a moment, and it was well for the Kid that he did not give him that moment. His shot came like lightning, and the gun-man's Colt clattered on the ground again, his left hand streaming like his right.

The Kid holstered his gun.

"I guess that lets you out, feller," he said, quietly. "You sure want to get your paws doctored, but I ain't no killer. I guess you'll never handle a gun agin, Poker Pete, and I guess every guy in this burg will be glad of it. You've rode high and you've rode hard, but you'll never ride a guy agin—your best guess is to walk soft from now on. You're pizen bad medicine, feller, but your teeth is drawn, and you can beat it."

The gun-man staggered, groaning, into the Red Dog. The Rio Kid gave one

glance round at staring faces, and stepped to his mustang, and mounted. He hummed the tune of a Mexican fandango as he rode away from Kicking Mule.

CHAPTER IV

"CORAI!"

"Andy!"

"I had to come, Cora! You wouldn't want me to let that big stiff scare me away! I got to face up to it, Cora."

The girl laughed.

"I knew you would, Andy, and was I scared?" she said, "But it's all over—Poker Pete will never pull a gun again—he's been shot up in a gun-fight with some stranger who rode into town—."

Andy Harris whistled.



"Who was the guy?" he asked.

"Nobody knows—some kid puncher who happened along, they say. But am I glad, Andy, that he horned in?"

The Rio Kid, as he rode on his lonely trail, had left happiness behind him: and he too was glad that he had horned in.

THE END