

THE TRAIL OF PERIL! The Rio Kid strikes across the Red Desert, little dreaming of the adventure that awaits him in the heart of that great expanse of sand—an adventure which is destined to change the whole of his fortunes!

THE RIO KID!

By *Ralph Redway:*



**This week:
Saved from
the Desert!**

ANOTHER ROARING LONG WESTERN TALE, FEATURING THE RIO KID—BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Three Gunmen!

THAT he was trailed, the Rio Kid knew before he was many hours out of Salt Lick. He had not expected it, and he was not specially on his guard; but wariness, with the Kid was second nature. He had owed his life to it many a time on the Texas grasslands and in the dusky chaparral on the banks of the Rio Grande. It had not deserted him now that he was riding by lonely trails through New Mexico with Arizona and a new life before him.

The figure of a horseman that showed for a moment on the sky-line; the rising of a flock of startled jays from a belt of cottonwoods; these and other signs, imperceptible to an eye less keen, told the Kid that he was trailed, and he knew that the trailing was done by men who knew the game. And he smiled whimsically as he rode the grey mustang at an easy gallop.

For long days, as he rode westward, the Kid had avoided trouble. He had sworn that he was done with trouble, and that he would never pull a gun again if he could help it. But his old besetting weakness had found him out

at last, and at Salt Lick he had hunted for trouble and found it. True, it had been for another's sake—in defence of the weak against the strong—in such a matter the Rio Kid simply could not refrain from horning in.

There had been gun-play at Salt Lick, and the bully of the camp had been a little slower on the draw than the young puncher from Texas. The Kid had no regrets that he had shot up Jeff Blake; he had saved a much more valuable life thereby. But the trouble he had woke up was following him.

The Kid pondered it as soon as he knew without doubt that he was trailed. He was too far from Texas now for his old enemies to be on his track. The Staked Plain and a range of mountains lay between him and the sheriffs who wanted him so badly. Even the sheriff of Frio, defeated at the finish, when the Kid was almost in his grip, was not likely to have trailed him so far. He was done with Texas and the sheriffs of the Lone Star State; the Kid was clear on that point.

The men who were trailing him now were not a sheriff's posse; they were not men who stood by the law. He guessed that they belonged to Jeff Blake's crowd at Salt Lick, and that they were

trailing him to avenge the death of the gunman. Had they known of the Rio Kid and his reputation on the Rio Grande, likely enough they would have stayed in Salt Lick and let him ride. But the Kid was in a country now where he was not known, and he was taken at face value, as a young puncher little more than a boy.

Salt Lick had gaped in amazement when the dreaded gunman went down under his fire. Not a hand had been raised when the Kid rode out and hit the trail for the west again. Not a man in the gang had cared to tackle the puncher single-handed; and on Main Street, in Salt Lick, they could not venture to attack him in a gang. Salt Lick was a wild camp, but there was a limit. The Kid figured that they were following on his trail to deal with him where there were no eyes but those of the buzzards to see what happened to him.

That they knew their business the Kid was very soon aware. Through the hot afternoon he rode, watchful as a hawk, and, save for one glimpse of a horseman, for a second, he saw nothing of them. Once he dived into a clump of pines and waited for an hour, with his hand on a six-gun. But they did not come up. They were keeping their dis-

lance, and the Kid knew that they were waiting for night. When he camped, they—

How many there were of them the Kid did not know; he guessed three or four. Three or four gunmen were not an easy crowd for even the Rio Kid to handle; and yet they did not ride him down, as they might have done, for his horse was growing weary from a long trail, and their animals were fresher. They were not taking chances with the puncher who had shot-up Jeff Blake. But they were holding on to his trail like bloodhounds.

When the sun set over the Gila Mountains in the west the Kid did not think of riding on in the darkness and giving his pursuers the slip. In the first place, his mustang was weary, and the Kid was a man to think of his horseflesh before he thought of himself. In the second place, he was not the man to dodge away in the dark.

But when he camped, the Kid was infinitely cautious.

He was well aware that it would be a case of shooting on sight. If the enemy drew a bead on him, his game was up. They had followed him from Salt Lick to shoot him up without parley. The Kid did not mean to give them a chance if he knew it.

He corralled his horse in a thicket of pecans, and twenty yards from that spot he built a camp-fire of pine chips and branches. Beside the fire he arranged his bed-roll, with a log in the blankets that looked like a sleeping figure. He lighted the fire, and stepped away quietly into the cover of the pecans.

The Kid had ridden long and hard that day, but he was not thinking of sleep. Sleep that night would have proved a sleep from which there was no waking.

He waited.

The fire blazed and burned and crackled, casting strange lights and shadows on the surrounding trees. Beside it lay the log under the blankets, and the Kid himself could almost have sworn that it was the figure of a sleeping man, so natural did it look. He waited with a six-gun in his hand, and a glint in his eyes. He expected to hear every moment the ring of a rifle, and the crash of a bullet on the log under the blankets. And as soon as a rifle flashed in the darkness the Kid was ready. The flash of the rifle would be guide enough for him, and one, at least, of the gunmen of Salt Lick would be sorry he had followed the puncher's trail.

The minutes were long as he waited.

The blaze of the camp fire showed for a great distance through the open woods; it could not fail to guide the pursuers to the Kid's camp. But they were long in coming.

The Kid waited patiently. His life had taught him patience. This was not the first time he had waited, gun in hand, in the clinging darkness, for an enemy. Scarce a glimmer of the fire reached him, where he lay in cover in the pecans, and waited and watched.

Crack!

It was the ring of a rifle at last.

The Kid jumped.

"Great snakes!"

It was at that moment that the Kid learned the kind of foes he had to deal with.

For the bullet was not aimed at the dummy by the fire. It was aimed at the Kid crouching in the pecans, and it went so close that he felt the wind of it on his face. His enemies had seen through the trick, and the dummy by the fire was unheeded. He did not even

see the flash of the rifle: it was fired from a direction he had not expected.

"Great snakes!" murmured the Kid. He rolled over in the darkness under the pecans, and only just in time.

Crack-ack!

Two bullets struck the ground where he had been crouching a moment before. The Kid, silent as a snake, crawled through the darkness to the spot where he had hidden his horse. Without a sound the mustang rose at his touch, and the Kid led him softly away, his left hand on the bridle, a six-gun in his right. Three rifles rang within a few seconds of one another. But the gunmen were firing at random now, and the bullets tore leaves and twigs.

The Kid trod softly away. He knew that he had three enemies to deal with now, and he knew that every one of them was bad medicine. The Kid was not a man to take useless chances against odds. He had underrated the gang, and he knew that now, and for the present moment he aimed at retreat. In soft silence he retreated, and the darkness of the night swallowed him up, and the silence behind him told that the enemy knew that he was gone, and that they were saving their lead.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Kid Burns Powder!

IT was days later that the Kid sighted the bunch that had followed him from Salt Lick. The Kid was not riding on the Arizona trail now. To ride on his way, with three desperadoes dogging his trail, did not suit the Kid's ideas at all. If the Salt Lick gang wanted trouble, they could have it, and the Kid's idea was to round-up that bunch before he left New Mexico behind him. For a day they had trailed him, and now the Rio Kid was trailing them.

In the lonely foothills of the Santa Rosa Sierra, the Kid hunted the bunch who were hunting him. He knew that they knew he had turned on them, for they kept well out of his way. Three to one as they were, they feared an open encounter with the puncher who had shot-up Jeff Blake.

It was a game of hide-and-seek, with life or death as the stake; but the Kid was a past-master of the game, and he came on the bunch at last.

Lying on a rocky mesa, screened by the sassafras that grew in the ledges and clefts, the Kid looked down into a deep canyon, shadowy even when the sun was at the zenith, deeply shadowed in the early morning, and watched the Salt Lick gang breaking camp. Dave Butt, the leader of the gang, he knew by sight; the others were strangers to his eyes, though he fancied they had been in the crowd outside Donovan's place in Salt Lick when he had pulled on the gunman there.

He watched them saddle up their bronchos; and then for a time they stood in consultation, as if in doubt. They had lost the Kid's trail, he was sure of that; and perhaps they doubted whether he had lost theirs. He saw them casting anxious and doubting glances round at the rocky slopes of the canyon.

The Kid waited and watched grimly.

He might have gone back to his mustang, which he had left hidden in an arroyo near at hand, and hit the trail again, leaving the baffled desperadoes behind him. But it was likely enough that they would have followed on; and he had learned that they were good men on a trail. The Kid had made up his

mind to be clear of that bunch, and he waited and watched.

They mounted at last and rode up the canyon, and the Kid smiled; for their way lay past the mesa, and they were riding into easy revolver range. The Kid jerked a six-gun from his holster as the three Stetson hats bobbed on the canyon trail below, but he did not pull trigger. They were three to one, and they had trailed him to shoot him up; but it went against the grain with the Kid to fire from ambush. He waited till the bunch of riders, going at little more than a walk, came within easy range from the mesa. Then he stood up, a gun in either hand.

"Halt, you 'uns!"

The Kid's voice rang sharp and clear. The Salt Lick gang started and stared round. For the moment they did not see the Kid, though they heard him. The flat-topped mesa rose to a height of a dozen feet; the Kid, standing against the skyline, was above their heads, looking down at them over his guns.

The Kid laughed aloud.

"This way, fellers!" he called out. "Here's your mutton, with the wool on! Put 'em up!"

Three pairs of startled eyes stared up at the Kid then.

"Put 'em up!" he shouted.

But before the words had fairly left his lips he was firing; for three hands were reaching for guns, and there was not a second to waste.

Crack, crack!

Two riderless horses went dashing up the canyon, clattering wildly over the rocks.

The Kid dropped into cover again instantly, as Dave Butt blazed away. Bullets spattered on the rocks round him as the gunman pumped out lead.

The Kid lay and laughed.

Clatter, clatter!

The man was riding now.

The trouble had ended almost as soon as it had started. Dave Butt was alone now, and even as he pumped lead at the mesa he knew that he was wasting his fire, and that he was within easy shot.

The Kid had been too much for the Salt Lick gang; and Dave Butt grabbed at his reins and dashed away at a desperate gallop, only hoping to get out of range before he was dropped.

The Kid stood up again and looked after him, still laughing. The Salt Lick gunman was riding desperately to escape. But he was an easy-target for the walnut-butted guns; the Kid could have riddled him with lead as he rode had he chosen so to do. But he did not choose; he would not fire on a fleeing man—to kill, at all events. Though the time was soon to come when he would regret that he had not let daylight through the fleeing ruffian.

The Kid's guns barked out together. A bullet tore the Stetson from Dave Butt's head; another clipped a lock of hair away; a third stripped a skin from his ear; a fourth passed between his arm and his ribs. It was fancy shooting, for which the Kid had been famous in Frisco; every one of the bullets would have passed through the horseman had he wanted them to. But to the escaping man it seemed that he was narrowly missing each shot; and he was sweating with the fear of death as he drove on his broncho to a mad gallop.

He vanished at last among the rocks of the canyon, and the Kid's mocking laugh followed.

"I guess I'm through with that bunch!" chuckled the Kid. "I reckon that Butt won't pull rein this side of Salt Lick. He won't if he knows where

he's healthy. He was sure going like he was sent for."

And the Kid clambered down from the mesa and stepped out for the arroyo where he had cached his mustang.

He was through with that bunch now, and he rode on the south-western trail without wasting a further thought on them. Even the Rio Kid, keen as he was, was liable to make mistakes. Two of the bunch would never trouble him or any man again; and Dave Butt had fled for his life, with the fear of death in the very marrow of his bones. But, if he had only known it, the Kid was not done with the man from Salt Lick, though he dismissed him from his mind as he rode away, with the Gila Mountains on the skyline before him.

THE THIRD CHAPTER. Jornada de la Muerte!

It was a fresh trail, and it was the trail of a man on foot. Eyes less keen than the Kid's would not have picked it up at all, for the shifting sand of the Red Desert covered most of it in the hot wind. But the slightest sign was enough for the Rio Kid. He was curious at first, and then he was interested; and then he realised, with a laugh, that he was falling into his old way again, minding somebody else's business instead of his own.

Standing there beside his mustang on the edge of the desert, among the scrubby yuccas and cactus, the Kid stared at the tell-tale sign and swept the desert with his eyes.

The Journey of Death lay before him, and the Kid did not want to tread that desert marked by the bleached bones of men and horses, where even the gaunt prairie wolf starved for prey. He did not want to face heat and dust and stinging flies and thirst and a likely death; his way lay elsewhere. But he knew that he was going into the desert.

Jornada de la Muerte was the old Spanish name for the desert in the days when New Mexico was a province of Old Mexico, and both were ruled by the Spaniard. These days were long past. New Mexico, Arizona, California had been wrested by the Anglo-Saxon from the descendants of the old Spanish conquerors. That they had once been Mexican territory, and grasped away by the strong hand, was almost forgotten. But the old name of the desert survived—Jornada de la Muerte—the Journey of Death—though it was named also the Red Desert. Few cared to tread its half-obliterated trails, to face its burning winds. The Rio Kid did not care to do so, if he could have helped it. But that track decided the matter for him.

Some man had trod there—trod away into the trackless desert—on foot! Why?

The Kid knew why.

The man, whoever he was, had lost his horse; the beast had died, perhaps, under the hardship of a hard trail. On foot, the man was seeking to keep on. But the Kid guessed that he was hard hit; for obviously he had lost his trail. No man in his senses would have gone

into the desert on foot; and this man, whose sign he was reading, was on foot in the desert. The man was lost. Dead already, perhaps, in the burning sun, the prey of the coyotes and the zopilotes. But that track touched the Kid strangely. If the poor wretch still lived, staggering on his way afoot, helpless and doomed, the Kid was not the man to pass him by unaided.

He sighed. He did not want to ride the Jornada de la Muerte.

"You never was a galoot for minding your own business, Kid!" he told himself banteringly. "Come on, old hoss!"

Much against the grain, but without hesitation, the Kid pushed on into the Red Desert.

His mustang went at a walk, the Kid, sitting in the saddle, picking up sign here and there with a keen eye.

The trail was fairly fresh, or the dust and sand would have blotted it out. Most of it, indeed, was blotted; but sign enough remained to guide the Kid. Mile after mile the black-muzzled mustang trod across the sandy waste, where so many a man and beast had fallen by the way and perished of thirst. Nothing lived in the desert but the sharp yuccas, the prickly cactus, and myriad of stinging flies.

The Kid puzzled over it. The wanderer whom he was seeking must have been out of his senses, he figured. Or why had he taken the most fatal direction of all that lay open to him? Sun-stroke, perhaps; or the madness that comes of suffering and solitude. Whatever it was, the Kid was going to find him and help him.

"Great snakes!" the Kid ejaculated suddenly.

He shaded his eyes with his hand and stared before him.

The dim, dusty desert far ahead had vanished from his view, and, in place of dust and sand and spear-like yucca, he saw a pleasant, green valley, with giant ceibas casting a grateful shade over running waters.

The Kid's face lighted up.

The sight was comforting, as well as amazing, in the heart of the fatal desert.

"Come up, old hoss!"

The Kid urged on his mustang to a gallop. He was surprised, indeed, that the horse did not break into a gallop of his own accord. The sight of that cool and smiling valley, with its glistening stream, should have attracted the mustang as it attracted the Kid. But the mustang seemed not to heed it, though he obeyed the urging of his rider and galloped onward.

The Kid understood now why the lonely wanderer, whose track he was following, had plunged into the desert. From afar, doubtless, the unknown man had seen that glorious sight of verdure, and had headed for it on foot, after his horse had fallen by the way. The Kid fully expected to find him under the shade of the ceibas by the flowing stream.

And then, with a suddenness that was dazing, the stream, the ceiba-trees, the green valley vanished like the vision of a dream.

The Kid stopped, and rubbed his eyes.

Was he dreaming?

A minute before that smiling verdure had been spread before his sight, seemingly only a mile or so distant. Now the barren desert stretched for mile on mile—barren, arid, fatal.

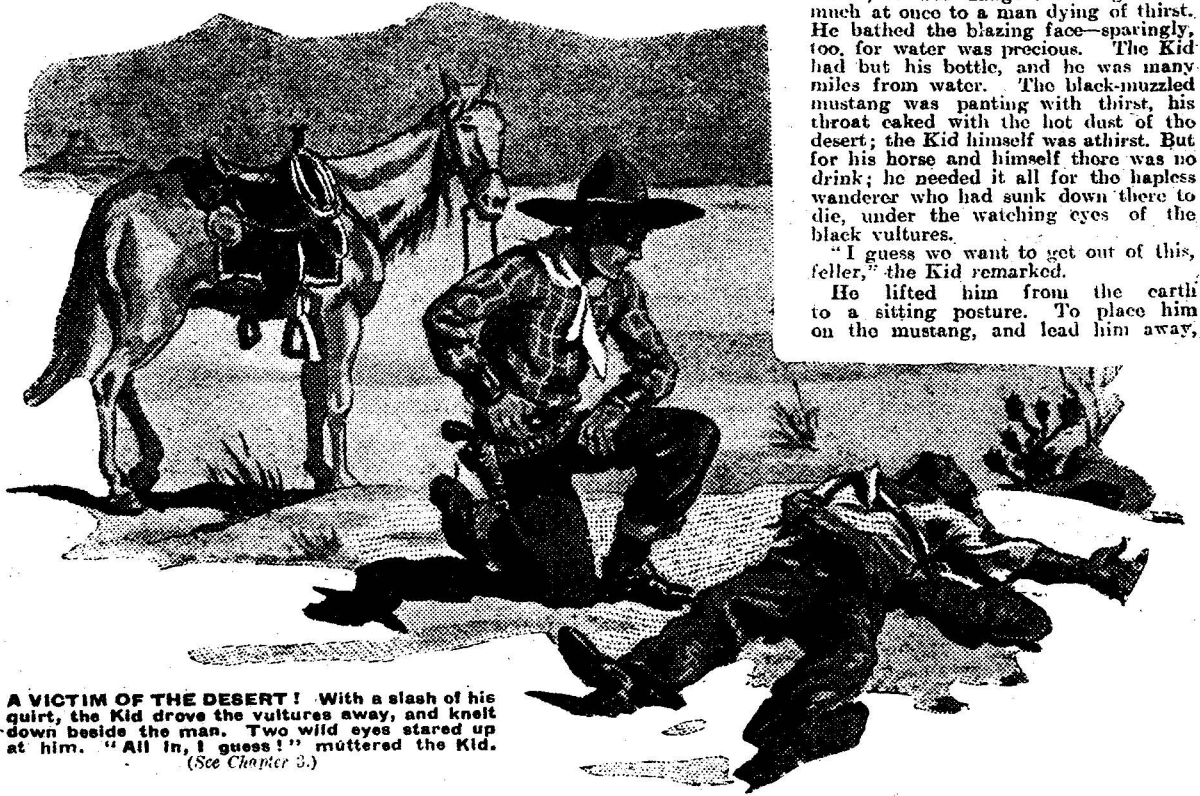
"Jerusalem!" murmured the Kid.

He knew now why that pleasant stream had not attracted his mustang.

"Mirage!"



THE LAST OF THE GUNMAN! "I got you!" the gunman was yelling as the Kid stole up. "You wiped out my cards, but I got you at last!" They were Dave Butt's last words. The Kid's six-gun roared, and the gunman spun round and fell heavily! (See Chapter 5.)



A VICTIM OF THE DESERT! With a slash of his quirt, the Kid drove the vultures away, and knelt down beside the man. Two wild eyes stared up at him. "All in, I guess!" muttered the Kid. (See Chapter 3.)

The Kid snapped his teeth.

The Rio Kid, an old hand of the plains and the deserts, had been deceived by the desert mirage, like the veriest tenderfoot.

The next moment he laughed aloud. "You durned gink!" he said to himself. "You sure want to learn your way about, you pesky locoed geck! Jest a mirage!"

It was only a mirage, and it had vanished. Only the barren desert lay around the Kid.

But the vision had enlightened him.

Doubtless the lonely wanderer had been led on by the mirage, even as the experienced Kid had been. That accounted for the apparent madness of the man in entering the trackless waste on foot.

In that hurried gallop after the mirage the Kid had lost the faint, almost imperceptible sign he had been following.

He could have tried back and picked it up again; but there was no need. The Kid knew all the signs of the desert, and from where he had halted a new sign told him its own tale.

From the blue sky a black, floating figure dropped to the earth. It was a zopilote—a black vulture.

Here and there, winging through the blue, came other black wings, some of them mere specks in the distance.

The scavengers of the desert were gathering to a feast.

It might have been the body of some desert wolf that drew them, but the Kid guessed now that he knew where to look for the wanderer.

He turned his mustang towards the spot, half a mile distant, where the black vulture had dropped to earth.

There he would find the prey that drew the carrion birds from afar.

If it was the man he sought, he was not yet dead, or the obscene birds would have reached the spot before this. At the last gasp, the Kid

reckoned. The vultures knew they had only to wait.

He rode up at a gallop, and sighted three hideous black vultures sitting on the sand, watching. Within a few feet of them lay a man, and their red eyes were fixed upon him.

With a slash of his quirt the Kid drove the vultures, croaking and cackling, away, and leaped from his horse.

He had found his man.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Gambusino!

"ALL in, I guess."

The Rio Kid knelt beside the man who lay on the barren earth, unsheltered in the wild eyes of the sun.

Two wild eyes stared at him without comprehension. The man was in the grip of delirium.

It was evident that he was utterly spent. His lips were dry and black with thirst; his water-bottle lay empty at his side. Dust covered him like a garment. Wild words babbled from his lips; and among the disjointed words the Kid caught one repeated again and again.

"Oro! El oro—el oro!"

"Gold!" murmured the Kid.

The man was a Mexican; his swarthy face and black hair, and his babbling in the Spanish tongue, showed as much. A prospector for gold—a gambusino. As he lay in delirium he babbled of the gold he had sought in the rocky sierra and the arid desert—the gold he had perhaps found. He was a man past middle life; a gambusino of experience, and yet he had been led astray by the mirage of the desert. The Kid placed his own water-bottle to the dry, parched lips, and the man swallowed the water with avidity. Still he babbled and babbled of gold.

The Kid fed him sparingly with

water; it was dangerous to give too much at once to a man dying of thirst. He bathed the blazing face sparingly, too, for water was precious. The Kid had but his bottle, and he was many miles from water. The black-muzzled mustang was panting with thirst, his throat caked with the hot dust of the desert; the Kid himself was athirst. But for his horse and himself there was no drink; he needed it all for the hapless wanderer who had sunk down there to die, under the watching eyes of the black vultures.

"I guess you want to get out of this, feller," the Kid remarked.

He lifted him from the earth to a sitting posture. To place him on the mustang, and lead him away,

was all that the Kid could do; it was death to linger. He would strike water in time to save the gambusino's life and his own—at least, he hoped so. A heavy sack hung by straps over the man's back—heavy and clinking. The Kid marvelled as he saw it. Staggering from weakness as the man must have been before he fell, he had not abandoned that heavy sack.

"Specimens from a strike, I reckon," the Kid remarked.

The Kid detached the leathern sack; it weighed not less than twenty pounds. The neck of it was secured by a loose cord; it came half-open as the Kid lifted it to the horse's back. A yellow gleam struck his eyes.

"Jerusalem! Nuggets!"

The Kid stared into the sack. It was crammed, not with rough specimens of pay rock, as he had surmised, but with gold nuggets—gold, almost pure, with little rock. No wonder the Mexican gambusino was babbling of "oro." He had struck it rich, and the gold in the sack was worth thousands of dollars.

The Kid drew a quick, deep breath.

There was a fortune in his hand, and the man to whom it belonged lay dying at his feet—dying; if the Kid did not save him.

The Kid's laugh rang out strangely on the silent desert.

He was not tempted. That sort of temptation did not appeal to the Rio Kid, wild as was his reputation in his own country.

He hung the sack of nuggets on the saddle-bow, and then lifted the Mexican into the saddle.

Taking a grip on the man to keep him there, the Kid spoke to his mustang and trod away.

The sun blazed down on him. The dust rose in clouds under his feet and

the horse's hoofs. Behind him, the vultures croaked and cackled their disappointment.

It was a weary trail.

Hour after hour the Kid tramped on, tramping back the way he had ridden, but on foot the way was long and weary. He stopped at times, to moisten the babbling man's lips with water, never his own. The Kid was hardy; he knew how to suffer and be silent. The man was a Mexican, and the Texas puncher had no love for Mexicans. The man was a stranger, and the Kid was little interested in strangers. But he was going to save the gambusino, and set him on his way again with his gold safe in his sack, or die in the desert by his side.

Well was that fatal desert named the Journey of Death! Had he had but a few more miles to cover, the Kid knew that he would never have done it alive; without abandoning the man who lurched in the saddle, supported only by the Kid's strong arm. And having once befriended him, the Kid could not abandon him; that was not to be thought of, and he did not think of it. Mile after mile, dusty and deadly, under burning heat, stung by flies, choked by dust, parched with thirst, the hardy Kid tramped on, with an aching arm holding the babbling gambusino in the saddle.

The Kid was almost sinking when he left the dust and blaze of the desert behind him, and led his horse into a canyon of the Gila mountains, on the edge of the desert. The blazing sun was sinking low, almost touching the rim of the desert in the west, blazing like a ball of red fire in the steady blue. But the Kid did not halt. His last drop of water had been given to the delirious gambusino, and he dared not halt till he struck water.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER. Dave Butt's Last Shot!

HIGH over the Gila mountains, and the Gila desert, the full round moon soared. Clear white light fell in deep canyon and rocky arroyo; and it fell upon a camp among brown rocks, where a tiny spring bubbled, and spread verdure for a little distance. By the spring grew trees and thickets, a spot of life in the barren rocky canyon. The Kid had struck water there at midnight, and there he had camped. His horse had drunk deep, and lain down to sleep in the shadows; on the Kid's blankets the gambusino lay, silent now. The delirium had passed, and the man was sleeping.

The Rio Kid had lighted a campfire, of wood from the thicket. The night was cold in the mountains.

He sat with his back to a big rock, his feet to the fire, watching the sleeping man. The man had been stirring, and the Kid was ready to tend him when he awakened.

The wild, dark eyes opened in the moonlight.
"Agua!"

The Mexican spoke faintly.

The Kid placed a pannikin of water to his lips. The Mexican drank eagerly, and lay back on the blankets. His black eyes were fixed on the Kid. The man was himself again now, and his strength was returning. The Kid could see that he was puzzled, and he smiled.

"I reckon I picked you up yonder in the Jornada de la Muerte," the Kid explained.

"A Gringo!" muttered the Mexican.

"Sure!"

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"You have saved me from the desert!" said the gambusino, speaking in English now.

"Correct!"

"Gracias! I had had no water for two days—my horse fell and died; and then—it was the mirage," said the gambusino, in a low voice. "I was led by the mirage—yet I might have died in the mountains, as my horse died. You have found—you have seen—" He broke off, his black eyes wandering to and fro, and the Kid knew of what he was thinking.

The Kid picked up the heavy sack and pushed it towards him.

The Mexican's eyes glistened.

"You know what is in that sack, señorito?"

The Kid laughed.

"Sure! You've struck it right way back in the sierra, I guess?"

"The gold was yours to take—I was dying in the desert," muttered the gambusino, eyeing him in wonder. "You saved my life, and you give me back my gold."

"Forget it, feller!" grinned the Kid. "You ain't butted into a rustler or a hold-up man, sure."

The gambusino lay silent for a long time, his black eyes fixed strangely on the Kid.

He spoke again at last.

"You are right, senior; I have struck it rich in the sierra. And you—what are you doing here in the desert?"

"I reckon I'm heading for the mines," answered the Kid. "I'm goin' to try my luck prospecting!"

"You are a Gringo, and I am Mexicano," said the man in the blankets. "But you have saved me. Half of what I have shall be yours."

The Kid shook his head.

"Forget it!" he answered.

"But I am in earnest, senior," said the gambusino. "I have a fortune in this sack; and in the Golden Canyon is the mine I have found. I have the map in my belt—without that even I should never find it again—a lonely canyon on the border of the Jornada de la Muerte. It is the richest strike ever made in Arizona." His eyes gleamed: "I shall be rich, senior, and you shall be rich for saving me from the vultures of the desert. Amigos!"

He stretched out his hand, and the Kid took it lightly. He had not expected much gratitude from a Greaser; and it was not in the Kid's mind to accept the generous offer the gambusino had made. The Kid wanted no reward for what he had done.

But he smiled cheerily.

"Amigos!" he assented. "I reckon you'd better get some sleep now, and in the morning we'll hit the trail for Los Pinos."

The Mexican nodded.

He lay down in the blankets again, and the Kid retired to his resting-place by the rock on the other side of the fire.

The night was cold; but the Kid had thought nothing of giving up his blankets to the man who was still weak from his terrible experience.

The Kid slept.

It was a stirring of his mustang that awakened him, and he awakened with all his senses on the alert, and his hand on a six-gun.

Crack!

The sharp ring of a rifle rolled like thunder through the silence of the canyon.

There was a faint cry from the Mexican, rolled in the Kid's blankets by the fire. One cry; and silence! Trampling feet rang on the rocks.

A burly, stabby-faced man, haggard with long trailing, rushed into the light of the camp-fire. His face was blazing with triumph.

"I got you at last, puncher!" yelled Dave Butt.

For an instant, the Rio Kid lay still, in the shadow of the rock beside his mustang. It was Dave Butt, the gunman of Salt Lick; and he had trailed down the Rio Kid—the Kid who had almost forgotten his existence. For long days and nights the gunman had been on the trail, and the glare of the camp-fire, evidently, had drawn him to the camp in the canyon; and he had shot the sleeping man in the blankets from cover before he rushed into the camp. The Kid's teeth set hard—evidently the gunman knew nothing of his companion, and he had shot the sleeping Mexican in mistake for the Kid.

"I got you!" the gunman was yelling. "You wiped out my pard's, you durned puncher, but I got you at last."

They were Dave Butt's last words.

Bang!

The Rio Kid's six-gun roared, and the gunman spun round and fell heavily on the rocks, dead before he touched the ground.

"You durned guink!" shouted the Kid savagely.

He sprang up and ran across to the Mexican.

The gambusino was raised on his elbow, staring at the gunman as he lay in the moonlight. His face was deadly white.

"You're hit?" panted the Kid. His face was ablaze with rage; had Dave Butt had a hundred lives, the Kid would have taken them all at that moment.

The gambusino groaned.

"I am struck to death, senior!"

The Kid knew it. He knew that the gunman had waited and watched, and dwelt on his aim, and taken every cunning care, before he showed himself. He had trailed down the Rio Kid, but it was a stranger who had fallen to his bullet; and the gunman's life had paid for it. But the life was ebbing from the face of the gambusino.

The Kid knelt beside him—he would have examined the wound, though he knew it was useless.

The gambusino made a gesture.

"It is useless, senior! Adios! I die saved me—but it was my fate to die in the sierra! There is none of my blood to survive me—take the sack—take the map from my belt—I give you all—"

His voice trailed away.

In the light of dawn, the Rio Kid made a grave of rocks for the Mexican gambusino, whose life he had saved in the desert, and who had so strangely and terribly saved the Kid's life in his turn. With a clouded face the Kid mounted his mustang and rode out of the canyon. In the rising sunlight, the desert stretched before his gaze, the Jornada de la Muerte, fatal to so many—almost fatal to the Rio Kid. With a black brow he gazed over the desert, hating it as if it were a living enemy; but he turned his back on it at last, and rode away, grim and silent, through the echoing hills.

THE END.

(The Rio Kid sets out in search of the Golden Canyon. But many obstacles lie in his path before he strikes gold. See next week's roaring tale of this amazing boy outlaw, entitled: "THE RIO KID'S BONANZA.")