

# L. RON HUBBARD



## King of the Gunmen

GALAXY  
P R E S E N T S

# Chapter One

THE outlook of Kit Gordon was as bleak as the tawny desert which writhed in the heat below his cliff. Never in his thirty-one years had he sunk so far or faced death in such a variety of ways.

And that was saying a great deal, as men had variously dubbed the lean gunslinger “Suicide,” “Smoke” and “Sudden Death.” From the Missouri to the Pacific, tales were told about the branding fires of the things Kit Gordon was supposed to have done—and sometimes he had done them and always, even if he had not, he was capable of the feats.

Few men could honestly swear that they had met him but his general appearance was very well known. He stood six feet one, hardly thick enough through the waist to cast a shadow were it not for his double guns, swelling out to broad and heavy shoulders which bore up a well-shaped head from which any man, no matter how blind, could have judged his quick intelligence.

His one compelling feature was his eyes. They were changeable with his mood and swiftly so, ranging rapidly from cold killer gray to hot and angry green and even to glowing gold. Men watched his eyes as cattle brokers watch the ticker tape. Their shade was the only thing by which it was possible to predict Kit Gordon’s next move.

The men who told stories of him would have been shocked to have seen him now. They stressed the meticulousness of his clothes, the polish of his sixty-dollar boots, the hang of his black broadcloth coat, the set of his expensive John B.

But their description was inaccurate now. Kit's hands were blistering under the onslaught of the savage sun. His coat was white with alkali dust and the Stetson punctured by a rifle bullet. One of his boots had been scuffed beyond repair when his horse had collapsed under him.

His even-featured face was gray with pain and hunger. He was dying and he knew it. But he was not afraid, only annoyed by the circumstances which had led him to such a pass, at his own foolhardy pursuit of Kettle-Belly Plummer and the flight from the lynch mob in the north.

He was still mystified at the rapidity of his downfall, angered by the injustice which had been done.

Two hundred miles north, at the Santa Fe whistling post of Randall, his hotel room had been looted in his absence and his change of clothing had vanished. A private inquiry had elicited the information that the gunman named Plummer, an enemy of old standing, had been seen in the vicinity. Kit Gordon had preferred to do his own justice, had taken the trail.

But he had found no trace of Kettle-Belly Plummer though he had searched for two days in the surrounding country. He would not have cared about the suit and hat and boots. But among the loot had been a repeater watch, a favored possession and good-luck piece worth around a thousand dollars. That watch had once been the property of Kettle-Belly Plummer

until that unworthy had lost it across the faro table in Dodge, two years before. In the following fight, Kit Gordon had kept the watch.

Trying to think of some way to get a line on the obvious thief, Kit had returned to Randall, intending to press his inquiry even further. His reception was amazing.

The town marshal, backed by a mob of railroad workers, had tried to arrest him and Kit, knowing a lynch mob when he saw one, had resisted. Before the marshal and two section hands had thumped into the dust of the street, Kit Gordon had been hit and hit hard with a bullet in his right shoulder but he had managed to escape.

The only intelligence he had of the affair was that he had been *seen* leading the gang which had stopped and robbed the Limited the night before, dynamiting the express car and killing a messenger.

Kit knew the answer to that. Plummer was settling the score in his own back-knifing way. If Kit could only find Plummer . . .

His tongue swelling in his mouth from thirst, with hanging behind him and torturous death at hand, he lay exhausted, watching the maddening mirages come and go, growing palm trees and spouting fountains from the caustic sand. A train puffed importantly where a train would never run. A town fried a hundred feet in the air.

The town was what interested Kit. It was certainly somewhere near at hand or else it could not have its picture projected upon the shimmering sky in that ridiculous fashion.

His head felt light and through it ran the crazy string of his thoughts. He considered the town with a practiced eye, even amused when it occurred to him that he was inspecting something which was probably a hundred miles away and far beyond the normal range of sight.

He could read the signs very clearly. The Bird Cage Opera House. The *Seco Hombre* Saloon. Wells Fargo's stage was drawn up before the post office and the citizens were standing about.

As is the trick of the mirage at times, all things were greatly magnified so that the men and horses appeared ten times their usual size.

One fellow in particular attracted Kit Gordon's attention. The man was very tall and thickly built, with a black beard and a black hat. He hovered on the rim of the crowd as though he did not want to be seen and then, abruptly, turned on his heel and sprinted for a horse.

With one foot in the stirrup, he started to mount. The men in the crowd seemed to be very agitated as they started toward him on the run.

And then, as is the habit of the mirage, having started the drama it refused to longer amuse Kit Gordon by completing it. Empty air writhed with heat waves and the town was gone.

Palm trees came again to wave in false breezes. A waterfall poured endless tons of water down in clouds of cool spray. And then palms and waterfall also vanished.

A lake which spread for endless leagues appeared to sparkle, cool and inviting, before Kit's tortured gaze.

He shut his eyes. Soon enough he would go mad and

start to run toward those things. No use to devil himself by watching now. Maybe he had been wrong in running away. Death at the end of the rope and dancing lightly upon the air would have been much preferable to dying thus, by slow torture, wounded, starved and alone. His two Colts did him no good now. They would not command a desert's heat or bully the stones into giving drink.

Even if someone happened to find him, his moment of life would only be lengthened long enough to get him into shape for a hanging so that he would make a presentable corpse.

Painfully he crawled into the comparative shade of a boulder and pillowed his head upon his arm.

He was again in the sun when he suddenly came to life. He sat up, listening. A drumming of hoofs was a throb in the earth more than a sound in the air. Even now, half dead, the instinct for battle was rising strongly within his wasted being.

To his left was the deep gash of a pass, evidently the only way through and up to this lava rimrock. But the sounds were not from there.

He swept the desert's blaze with his tortured sight and though motes of sunlight danced like a curtain, he made out the dots of running horses in the distance underneath a great pall of yellow dust.

Restively he sought for the energy required to move and finally dragged it from the almost exhausted well of strength. He took a Colt in his left hand and inched closer to the rim. It was barely possible that the posse from the north had trailed him all that way.

But no, these men were coming from the south. One was

in the lead, three hundred yards in front of a compact mass of horsemen.

Their approach was very swift and as the lead man neared, a puff of dust leaped before him and a shot sounded from the men behind. The lone rider was evidently striving to make this break in the blank face of the stretching buttes even as Kit had made it too many hours ago to think about it.

The man was close enough to give Kit a general idea of his appearance. He was huge and thickly built, wearing a black Stetson and a blacker beard.

It seemed to Kit's privation-distorted memory that he had known this big fellow once. Somehow he confused himself with the man's flight, the posse below with the posse which had trailed Kit.

He was stripped down to his fundamental self, was Kit, and it was his second nature which compressed the trigger of the Colt.

The kick of it made his whole body ache. Through the shredding smoke of the shot he saw a man flop off his mount and vanish under the hoofs of fellow riders.

The black-bearded one in the lead glanced up that hundred-foot wall of lava with a startled shout.

Kit fired into the running horsemen again and once more his bullet took toll. He did not have to see to shoot or even consciously try. It would have been more difficult to have missed than to have hit. Such was the reputation of Kit Gordon. And even now, footfalls already echoing along the golden pavement of the Devil's corridors of black, he could

squeeze his trigger and count on his man with a Colt at seventy-five yards and more.

The black-bearded one vanished into the defile. The horsemen out front were a tangled mass of horses trying to turn and getting run down.

The Colt fired with methodical, terrifying precision. Three men were lumps upon the hot sand when the horsemen finally fled out of range. Nor did the posse pause for an instant for even a backward glance. They were hidden by their own mask of dust and when it had settled they were nothing but hoofmarks on the desert floor.

Kit turned around and looked toward the pass. The shooting had cleared his head and now he was wondering a little if he had had any business taking part in the unexpected drama.

The man with the black beard came with admirable caution. He put his hat up on the end of a mesquite stick and waited for several minutes. When nothing happened he exposed a cautious eye. Kit did not look very formidable at the moment. The man took heart and advanced with a lumbering stride.

He stood looking down at Kit for some time as though his eyesight could plumb Kit's head and read the reasons for that sudden and welcome aid.

Kit managed a grin and though the effect was ghastly, the stranger knew the smile was well meant.

"I know where I saw you," said Kit, speaking slowly and trying to keep his tongue from clogging his speech. "You were walking around a hundred feet in the air. That's it. A hundred feet in the air."





*The Colt fired with methodical, terrifying precision.  
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the horsemen finally fled out of range.*

The look on the stranger's face was intended to be consoling. "That's all right, friend. You just take it easy. I got some water on my horse."

Kit nodded, showing a gentlemanly willingness to accept a small favor like that. He grinned anew. "You were walking around back of a stagecoach in front of the post office and suddenly you decided to light out hell for leather. You grabbed a horse at the hitch rack, and the stagecoach and the crowd and the horse were all a hundred feet in the air. That's where I met you."

The stranger was clearly astounded. He cocked his big shaggy head on one side and his blue eyes were wide open with wonder.

"You mentioned water?" said Kit, trying not to be eager. But even that thought could not be sustained in his thirst-dazed mind. He had seen something bright on the stranger's vest. An oval badge. . . .

"You're a sheriff!" said Kit, drawing back, half-minded to snatch for his Colt. But the other man did not seem to find anything odd in being a sheriff or in Kit.

"Sure, pardner. I'm Rainbow Jackson, sheriff of Yancy County, Arizona. And if you're going to speak derogatory of my recent flight from the irate citizens of Gunsmoke, you can be plenty certain it was a *dernier resort*. *Honi soit qui mal y pense*, says I. That's French. I ain't cussin'. It means a guy that'd think it wasn't right ought to be booted in the pants. When sheepherders get up nerve enough to pack guns and shoot and when they don't show no predilection for peace, I prefers to use speed and horse sense in my own peculiar

way. What ain't going to be done *vi et armis* has got to be done with brains—and I ain't got no army to speak of at the moment. . . .”

Rainbow Jackson's voice seemed to come from a long distance and the visibility was growing dense before Kit's face. “You said something about water?” He was still trying to appear as a gentleman should.