

The One for the Mojave Kid

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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Author's Note

About a mile or so from camp lay Independence Rock, 120 feet high and over 2,000 feet long according to an estimate.⁽¹⁾ It is covered with the names of travellers. A few miles further along is Devil's Gate, where the Sweetwater passes through a cleft some 30 yards wide and 300 yards long. The rock walls tower several hundred feet, sheer rock. There was grass for our stock. We camped at a bend of the river just after sundown.

From a diary, August 19, 1849

Twelve years earlier a party of mountain men were camped here: „Immense numbers of buffalo in sight... here I am at a beautiful spring, a hot fire of buffalo

dung, a set of good, sweet hump-ribs roasting... I have forgotten everything but my ribs and my sweetheart."

We had finished our antelope steak and beans, and the coffeepot was back on the stove again, brewing strong, black cowpuncher coffee just like you'd make over a creosote and ironwood fire out on the range.

Red was cleaning his carbine and Doc Lander had tipped back in his chair with a pipe lighted. The stove was cherry red, the woodbox full, and our beds were warming up for the night. It was early autumn, but the nights were already cool. In a holster, hanging from the end of a bunk, was a worn-handled, single-action .44 pistol—and the holster had seen service as well as the gun.

„Whenever," Doc Lander said, „a bad man is born, there is also born a man to take him. For every Billy the Kid there is a Pat Garrett, an' for every Wes Hardin there's a John Selman."

Temple picked up a piece of pinewood and flicking open the stove door, he chucked it in. He followed it with another, and we all sat silent, watching the warm red glow of the flames. When the door was shut again, Red looked up from his rifle. „An' for every John Selman there's a Scarborough," he said, „an' for every Scarborough, a Logan."

„Exactly," Doc Lander agreed, „an' for every Mohave Kid there's a..."

Some men are born to evil, and such a one was the Mohave Kid. Now I'm not saying that environment doesn't have its influence, but some men are born with twisted minds, just as some are born with crooked teeth. The Mohave Kid was born with a streak of viciousness and cruelty that no kindness could eradicate. He had begun to show it when a child, and it developed fast until the Kid had killed his first man.

It was pure, unadulterated murder. No question of fair play, although the Kid was deadly with any kind of a gun. He shot an old Mexican, stole his outfit and three horses which he sold near the border. And the Mohave Kid was fifteen years old when that happened.

By the time he was twenty-two he was wanted in four states and three territories. He had, the records said, killed eleven men. Around the saloons and livery stables they said he had killed twenty-one. Actually, he had killed twenty-nine, for the Kid had killed a few when they didn't know he was in the country, and they had been listed as murders by Indians or travelers. Of the twenty-nine men he had killed, nine of them had been killed with something like an even break.

But the Mohave Kid was as elusive as he was treacherous. And his mother had been a Holdstock. There were nine families of Holdstocks scattered through Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, and three times that many who were kinfolk. They were a clannish lot, given to protecting their own, even as bad an apple as the Mohave Kid.

At twenty-two, the Kid was five feet seven inches tall and weighed one hundred and seventy pounds. He had a round, flat face, a bland expression, and heavy-

lidded eyes. He did not look alert, but his expression belied the truth, for he was always wary, always keyed for trouble.

He killed for money, for horses, in quarrels, or for pure cruelty, and several of his killings were as senseless as they were ruthless. This very fact contributed much to the fear with which he was regarded, for there was no guessing where he might strike next. People avoided looking at him, avoided even the appearance of talking about him when he was around. Usually, they got out of a place when he came into it, but as unobtrusively as possible.

Aside from the United States marshals or the Texas Rangers in their respective bailiwicks, there was only local law. Little attention was given to arresting men for crimes committed elsewhere, which served as excuse for officers of the law who preferred to avoid the risks of trying to arrest the Mohave Kid.

Ab Kale was an exception. Ab was thirty-three when elected marshal of the cow town of Hinkley, and he owned a little spread of his own three miles out of town. He ran a few cows, raised a few horses, and made his living as marshal. For seven years he was a good one. He kept order, never made needless arrests, and was well liked around town. At thirty-four he married Amie Holdstock, a second cousin to the Mohave Kid.

As the Kid's reputation grew, Kale let it be known throughout the family that he would make no exception of the Kid, and the Kid was to stay away from Hinkley. Some of the clan agreed this was fair enough, and the Kid received word to avoid the town. Others took exception to Kale's refusal to abide by clan law where the Kid was concerned, but those few dwindled rapidly as the Kid's murderous propensities became obvious.

The Holdstock clan began to realize that in the case of the Mohave Kid they had sheltered a viper in their bosom, a wanton killer as dangerous to their well-being as to others. A few doors of the clan were closed against him, excuses were found for not giving him shelter, and the feeling began to permeate the clan that the idea was a good one.

The Mohave Kid had seemed to take no exception to the hints that he avoid making trouble for cousin Kale, yet as the months wore on, he became more sullen and morose, and the memory of Ab Kale preyed upon his mind.

In the meantime, no man is marshal of a western cow town without having some trouble. Steady and considerate as Kale was, there had been those with whom he could not reason. He had killed three men.

All were killed in fair, stand-up gunfights, all were shot cleanly and surely, and it was talked around that Kale was some hand with a gun himself. In each case he had allowed an even break and proved faster than the men he killed. All of this the Mohave Kid absorbed, and here and there he heard speculation, never in front of him, that the Mohave Kid was avoiding Hinkley because he wanted no part of Ab Kale.

Tall, well built, and prematurely gray, Kale was a fine-appearing man. His home was small but comfortable, and he had two daughters, one his own child, one a stepdaughter of seventeen whom he loved as his own. He had no son, and this was a matter of regret.

Ab Kale was forty when he had his showdown with the Mohave Kid. But on the day when Riley McClean dropped off a freight train on the edge of Hinkley, the date of that showdown was still two years away.

If McClean ever told Kale what had happened to him before he crawled out of that empty boxcar in Hinkley, Ab never repeated it. Riley was nineteen, six feet tall, and lean as a rail. His clothes were in bad shape, and he was unshaven and badly used up, and somebody had given him a beating. What had happened to the other fellow or fellows, nobody ever knew.

Ab Kale saw McClean leave the train and called out to him. The boy stopped and stood waiting. As Kale walked toward him he saw the lines of hunger in the boy's face, saw the emaciated body, the ragged clothes, the bruises and cuts. He saw a boy who had been roughly used, but there was still courage in his eyes.

„Where you headed for, son?“

Riley McClean shrugged. „This is as good a place as any. I'm hunting a job.“

„What do you do?“

„Most anything. It don't make no difference.“

Now when a man says that he can do most anything, it is a safe bet he can do nothing, or at least, that he can do nothing well. If a man has a trade, he is proud of it and says so, and usually he will do a passing job of anything else he tackles. Yet Kale reserved his opinion. And it was well that he did.

„Better come over to my office,“ Kale said. „You'll need to get shaved and washed up.“

McClean went along, and somehow, he stayed. Nothing was ever said about leaving by either of them. McClean cleaned up, ate at the marshal's expense, and then slept the clock around. When Kale returned to the office and jail the next morning he found the place swept, mopped, and dusted, and McClean was sitting on the cot in the open cell where he slept, repairing a broken riata.

Obviously new to the West, Riley McClean seemed new to nothing else. He had slim, graceful hands and deft fingers. He cobbled shoes, repaired harnesses, built a chimney for Chalfant's new house, and generally kept busy.

After he had been two weeks in Hinkley, Ab Kale was sitting at his desk one day when Riley McClean entered. Kale opened a drawer and took out a pair of beautifully matched .44 Russians, one of the finest guns Smith & Wesson ever made. They were thrust in new holsters on a new belt studded with cartridges. „If you're going to live out here, you'd better learn to use those,“ Kale said briefly.

After that the two rode out of town every morning for weeks, and in a narrow canyon on the back of Kale's little ranch, Riley McClean learned how to use a six-shooter.

„Just stand naturally,“ Kale advised him, „and let your hand swing naturally to the gun butt. You've probably heard about a so-called gunman's crouch. There is no such thing among gunfighters who know their business. Stand any way that is easy to you. Crouching may make a smaller target of you, but it also puts a man off balance and cramps his movements. Balance is as important to a gunfighter as to a boxer. Stand easy on your feet, let your hand swing back naturally, and take the hammer spur with the inside of the thumb, cocking the gun as it is grasped, the tip of the trigger finger on the trigger.“

Kale watched McClean try it. „The most important thing is a good grip. The finger on the trigger helps to align your gun properly, and after you’ve practiced, you’ll see that your gun will line up perfectly with that grip.“

He watched McClean keenly and was pleased. The boy had the same ease with a gun he seemed to have with all tools, and his coordination was natural and easy. „You’ll find,“ he added, „in shooting from the hip that you can change your point of aim by a slight movement of your left foot. Practice until you find just the right position for your feet, and then go through the motions until it is second nature.“

Finally, he left him alone to practice, tossing him a box of shells occasionally. But no day passed that Riley McClean did not take to the hills for practice.

There are men who are born to skill, whose coordination of hand, foot, and eye is natural and easy, who acquire skills almost as soon as they lift a tool or a weapon, and such a man was Riley McClean. Yet he knew the value of persistence, and he practiced consistently.

It was natural that he knew about the Mohave Kid.

Riley McClean listened and learned. He talked it around and made friends, and he soon began to hear the speculations about the Kid and Ab Kale.

„It’ll come,“ they all said. „It can’t miss. Sooner or later him an’ Kale will tangle.“

As to what would happen then, there was much dispute. Of this talk Kale said nothing. When Riley McClean had been two months in Hinkley, Kale invited him home to dinner for the first time. It was an occasion to be remembered.

The two months had made a change in Riley. The marks of his beating had soon left him, but it had taken these weeks to fill out his frame. He had gained fifteen solid pounds and would gain more, but he was a rugged young man, bronzed and straight, when he walked up the gravel path to the door of the Kale home. And Ruth Kale opened the door for him. She opened the door and she fell in love. And the feeling was mutual.

Ab Kale said nothing, but he smiled behind his white mustache. Later, when they had walked back up to town, Kale said, „Riley, you’ve been like a son to me. If anything should happen to me, I wish you would see that my family gets along all right.“

Riley was startled and worried. „Nothing will happen to you,“ he protested. „You’re a young man yet.“

„No,“ Kale replied seriously, „I’m not. I’m an old man as a cow-town peace officer. I’ve lasted a long time. Longer than most.“

„But you’re chain lightning with a gun!“ Riley protested.

„I’m fast.“ Kale said it simply. „And I shoot straight. I know of no man I’d be afraid to meet face to face, although I know some who are faster than I. But they don’t always meet you face to face.“

And Riley McClean knew that Ab Kale was thinking of the Mohave Kid.

He realized then, for the first time, that the marshal was worried about the Mohave Kid. Worried because he knew the kind of killer the Kid was. Deadly enough face to face, the Kid would be just as likely to shoot from ambush. For the Kid was a killing machine, utterly devoid of moral sense or fair play.

The people of Hinkley knew that Riley McClean had taken to carrying a gun. They looked upon this tolerantly, believing that Riley was merely copying his

adopted father. They knew that Kale had been teaching him to shoot, but they had no idea what had happened during those lessons. Nor had Ab Kale realized it until a few days before the payoff.

The two were riding out to look over some cattle, and Kale remarked that it would be nice to have some rabbit stew. „If we see a fat cottontail,“ he said, „we’ll kill it.“

A mile farther along, he spotted one. „Rabbit!“ he said, and grabbed for his gun.

His hand slapped the walnut butt, and then there was an explosion, and for an instant he thought his own gun had gone off accidentally. And then he saw the smoking .44 in Riley McClean’s hand, and the younger man was riding over to pick up the rabbit. The distance had been thirty yards and the rabbit had lost a head.

Ab Kale was startled. He said nothing, however, and they rode on to the ranch, looked over the cattle, and made a deal to buy them. As they started back, Kale commented, „That was a nice shot, Riley. Could you do it again?“

„Yes, sir, I think so.“

A few miles farther, another rabbit sprang up. The .44 barked and the rabbit died, half his head and one ear blasted away. The distance was a shade greater than before.

„You’ve nothing to worry about, Riley,“ he said quietly, „but never use that gun unless you must, and never draw it unless you mean to kill.“

Nothing more was said, but Ab Kale remembered. He was fast. He knew he was fast. He knew that he rated along with the best, and yet his hand had barely slapped the butt before that rabbit died...

The days went by slowly, and Riley McClean spent more and more time at the Kale home. And around town he made friends. He was quiet, friendly, and had a healthy sense of humor. He had progressed from the town handyman to opening a shop as a gunsmith, learning his trade by applying it that way. There was no other gunsmith within two hundred miles in any direction, so business was good.

He was working on the firing pin of a Walker Colt when he heard the door open. He did not look up, just said, „Be with you in a minute. What’s your trouble?“

„Same thing you’re workin’ on I reckon. Busted firin’ pin.“

Riley McClean looked up into a dark, flat face and flat, black eyes. He thought he had never seen eyes so devoid of expression, never seen a face more brutal on a young man. With a shock of realization he knew he was looking into the eyes of the Mohave Kid.

He got to his feet and picked up the gun the Kid handed him. As he picked it up, he noticed that the Kid had his hand on his other gun. Riley merely glanced at him and then examined the weapon. The repair job was simple, but as he turned the gun in his hand, he thought of how many men it had killed.

„Take a while,“ he said. „I s’pose you’re in a hurry for it?“

„You guessed it. An’ be sure it’s done right. I’ll want to try it before I pay for it.“

Riley McClean’s eyes chilled a little. There were butterflies in his stomach, but the hackles on the back of his neck were rising. „You’ll pay me before you get it,“ he said quietly. „My work is cash on the barrelhead. The job will be done right.“ His eyes met the flat black ones. „If you don’t like the job, you can bring it back.“

For an instant, their eyes held, and then the Kid shrugged, smiling a little. „Fair enough. An‘ if it doesn‘t work, I‘ll be back.“

The Mohave Kid turned and walked out to the street, stopping to look both ways. Riley McClean held the gun in his hands and watched him. He felt cold, chilled.

Ab Kale had told the Kid to stay away from Hinkley, and now he must meet him and order him from town. He must do that, or the Kid would know he was afraid, would deliberately stay in town. The very fact that the Mohave Kid had come to Hinkley was proof that he had come hunting trouble, that he had come to call Kale‘ s bluff.

For a minute or two, Riley considered warning the marshal, but that would not help. Kale would hear of it soon enough, and there was always a chance that the Kid would get his gun, change his mind, and leave before Kale did know.

Sitting down, Riley went to work on the gun. The notion of doctoring the gun so it would not fire properly crossed his mind, but there was no use inviting trouble. Running his fingers through his dark rusty hair, he went to work. And as he worked, an idea came to him.

Maybe he could get the Kid out of town to try the gun, and once there, warn him away from Hinkley himself. That would mean a fight, and while he had no idea of being as good as the Kid, he did know he could shoot straight. He might kill the Mohave Kid even if he got killed in the process.

But he did not want to die. He was no hero, Riley McClean told himself. He wanted to live, buy a place of his own, and marry Ruth. In fact, they had talked about it. And there was a chance this would all blow over. The Kid might leave town before Ab Kale heard of his arrival, or something might happen. It is human to hope and human to wish for the unexpected good break—and sometimes you are lucky.

As Riley was finishing work on the gun, Ruth came in. She was frightened. „Riley“—she caught his arm—„the Mohave Kid‘ s in town and Dad is looking for him.“

„I know.“ He stared anxiously out the window. „The Kid left his gun to be repaired. I‘ve just finished it.“

„Oh, Riley! Isn‘t there something we can do?“ Her face was white and strained, her eyes large.

He looked down at her, a wave of tenderness sweeping over him. „I don‘t know, honey,“ he said gently. „I‘m afraid the thing I might do, your father wouldn‘t like. You see, this is his job. If he doesn‘t meet the Kid and order him to leave, he will never have the same prestige here again. Everybody knows the Kid came here on purpose.“

Ab Kale had heard that the Mohave Kid was in town, and in his own mind he was ready. Seated at his desk he saw with bitter clarity what he had known all along, that sooner or later the Kid would come to town, and then he would have to kill him or leave the country. There could be no other choice where the Kid was concerned.

Yet he had planned well. Riley McClean was a good man, a steady man. He would make a good husband for Ruth, and together they would see that Amie

lacked for nothing. As far as that went, Amie was well provided for. He checked his guns and got to his feet. As he did so, he saw a rider go by, racing out of town.

He stopped dead still in the doorway. Why, that rider had been Riley McClean! Where would he be going at that speed, at this hour? Or had he heard the Kid was in town...? Oh, no! The boy wasn't a coward. Ab knew he wasn't a coward.

He straightened his hat and touched his prematurely white mustache. His eyes studied the street. A few loafers in front of the livery stable, a couple more at the general store, a half-dozen horses at the hitch rails. One buckboard. He stepped out on the walk and started slowly up the street. The Mohave Kid would be in the Trail Driver's Saloon.

He walked slowly, with his usual measured step. One of the loafers in front of the store got to his feet and ducked into the saloon. All right, then. The Kid knew he was coming. If he came out in the street to meet him, so much the better.

Ruth came suddenly from Riley's shop and started toward him. He frowned and glanced at her. No sign of the Kid yet. He must get her off the street at once.

„Hello, Dad!” Her face was strained, but she smiled brightly. „What's the hurry?”

„Don't stop me now, Ruth,” he said. „I've got business up the street.”

„Nothing that won't wait!” she protested. „Come in the store. I want to ask you about something.”

„Not now, Ruth.” There was still no sign of the Kid. „Not now.”

„Oh, come on! If you don't,” she warned, „I'll walk right up to the saloon with you.”

He looked down at her, sudden panic within him. Although she was not his own daughter, he had always felt that she was. „No!” he said sharply. „You mustn't!”

„Then come with me!” she insisted, grabbing his arm.

Still no sign of the Kid. Well, it would do no harm to wait, and he could at least get Ruth out of harm's way. He turned aside and went into the store with her. She had a new bridle she wanted him to see, and she wanted to know if he thought the bit was right for her mare. Deliberately, she stalled. Once he looked up, thinking he heard riders. Then he replied to her questions. Finally, he got away.

He stepped out into the sunlight, smelling dust in the air. Then he walked slowly across and up the street. As he reached the center of the street, the Mohave Kid came out of the Trail Driver and stepped off the walk, facing him.

Thirty yards separated them. Ab Kale waited, his keen blue eyes steady and cold. He must make this definite, and if the Kid made the slightest move toward a gun, he must kill him. The sun was very warm.

„Kid,” he said, „your business in town is finished. We don't want you here. Because of the family connection, I let you know that you weren't welcome. I wanted to avoid a showdown. Now I see you won't accept that, so I'm giving you exactly one hour to leave town. If you are here after that hour, or if you ever come again, I'll kill you!”

The Mohave Kid started to speak, and then he stopped, frozen by a sudden movement.

From behind stores, from doorways, from alleys, stepped a dozen men. All held shotguns or rifles, all directed at the Kid. He stared at them in shocked disbelief. Johnny Holdstock... Alec and Dave Holdstock... Jim Gray, their cousin... Webb Dixon, a brother-in-law... and Myron Holdstock, the old bull of the herd.

Ab Kale was petrified. Then he remembered Riley on that racing horse and that today was old Myron's fortieth wedding anniversary, with half the family at the party.

The Mohave Kid stared at them, his face turning gray and then dark with sullen fury.

„You do like the marshal says, Kid.“ Old Myron Holdstock's voice rang in the streets. „We've protected ye because you're one of our'n. But you don't start trouble with another of our'n. You git on your hoss an' git. Don't you ever show hide nor hair around here again.“

The Mohave Kid's face was a mask of fury. He turned deliberately and walked to his horse. No man could face all those guns, and being of Holdstock blood, he knew what would come if he tried to face them down. They would kill him.

He swung into the saddle, cast one black, bleak look at Ab Kale, and then rode out of town.

Slowly, Kale turned to Holdstock, who had been standing in the door of his shop. „You needn't have done that,“ he said, „but I'm glad you did...“

Three days went by slowly, and then the rains broke. It began to pour shortly before daybreak and continued to pour. The washes were running bank full by noon, and the street was deserted. Kale left his office early and stepped outside, buttoning his slicker. The street was running with water, and a stream of rain was cutting a ditch under the corner of the office. Getting a shovel from the stable, he began to divert the water.

Up the street at the gun shop, Riley McClean got to his feet and took off the leather apron in which he worked. He was turning toward the door when it darkened suddenly and he looked up to see the bleak, rain-wet face of the Mohave Kid.

The Kid stared at him. „I've come for my gun,“ he said.

„That'll be two dollars,“ Riley said coolly.

„That's a lot, ain't it?“

„It's my price to you.“

The Kid's flat eyes stared at him, and his shoulder seemed to hunch. Then from the tail of his eye he caught the movement of the marshal as he started to work with the shovel. Quickly, he forked out two dollars and slapped it on the counter. Then he fed five shells into the gun and stepped to the door. He took two quick steps and vanished.

Surprised, Riley started around the counter after him. But as he reached the end of the counter, he heard the Kid yell, „Ab!“

Kale, his slicker buttoned over his gun, looked around at the call. Frozen with surprise, he saw the Mohave Kid standing there, gun in hand. The Kid's flat face was grinning with grim triumph. And then the Kid's gun roared, and Ab Kale took a step backward and fell, face down in the mud.

The Mohave Kid laughed, suddenly, sardonically. He dropped his gun into his holster and started for the horse tied across the street.

He had taken but one step when Riley McClean spoke: „*All right, Kid, here it is!*“

The Mohave Kid whirled sharply to see the gunsmith standing in the doorway. The rain whipping against him, Riley McClean looked at the Kid. „Ab was my friend,“ he said. „I’m going to marry Ruth.“

The Kid reached then, and in one awful, endless moment of realization, he knew what Ab Kale had known for these several months, that Riley McClean was a man born to the gun. Even as the Kid’s hand slapped leather, he saw Riley’s weapon clearing and coming level. The gun steadied, and for that endless instant the Kid stared into the black muzzle. Then his own iron was clear and swinging up, and Riley’s gun was stabbing flame.

The bullets, three of them fired rapidly, smashed the Mohave Kid in and around the heart. He took a step back, his own gun roaring and the bullet plowing mud, and then he went to his knees as Riley walked toward him, his gun poised for another shot. As the Kid died, his brain flared with realization, with knowledge of death, and he fell forward, sprawling on his face in the street. A rivulet, diverted by his body, curved around him, ran briefly red, and then trailed on.

People were gathering, but Riley McClean walked to Ab Kale. As he reached him, the older man stirred slightly.

Dropping to his knees, Riley turned him over. The marshal’s eyes flickered open. There was a cut from the hairline on the side of his head in front that ran all along his scalp. The shattered end of the shovel handle told the story. Striking the shovel handle, which had been in front of his heart at the moment of impact, the bullet had glanced upward, knocking him out and ripping a furrow in his scalp.

Ab Kale got slowly to his feet and stared up the muddy street where the crowd clustered about the Mohave Kid.

„You killed him?“

„Had to. I thought he’d killed you.“

Ab nodded. „You’ve got a fast hand. I’ve known it for months. I hope you’ll never have to kill another man.“

„I won’t,“ Riley said quietly. „I’m not even going to carry a gun after this.“

Ab Kale glanced back up the street. „So he’s dead at last. I’ve carried that burden a long time.“ He looked up, his face still white with shock. „They’ll bury him. Let’s go home, son. The women will be worried.“

And the two men walked down the street side by side, Ab Kale and his son...



(1) Above dimensions not accurate, LL.