

## A BOY OUTLAW IN LOVE!

The Rio Kid has been in many tight corners, and he's been behind prison bars in his long, adventurous career, but he has never yet been in love, until this week!

# The RIO KID!



by **RALPH REDWAY**

ANOTHER ROARING LONG COMPLETE TALE OF THE WEST, FEATURING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW.

### THE FIRST CHAPTER.

#### A Lodging for the Night!

**W**HEN the Rio Kid rode down the hill to Horse-Thief, he looked as much unlike the handsome, natty Kid, as it was possible for a fellow to look unlike himself. The Kid had roughed it in the hills of Nevada; but that was not the reason. He had roughed it often enough in the old days on the llanos of Texas, and had turned out handsome and neat and as clean as a new pin, in spite of the dust of the plains and the grime of the chaparral. But the Kid had hit a heap of trouble on the trail to Horse-Thief, and the signs of it were thick upon him.

The half-healed scar of a deep scratch from a yucca thorn marred his good looks. He was clothed in mud as in a garment. There had been heavy rains in the Sierra Nevada, and the Horse-Thief River had overflowed its banks, and for miles the Kid had ridden through a mud swamp. Rain was coming down hard, and the Kid was drenched. Wet and muddy, tired, and not in the best of tempers, the Kid looked anything but the dandy cow-puncher of the Double-Bar Ranch.

He had allowed that he would ride into the town of Horse-Thief in the afternoon; but the rain and the swamping of the trail had washed out that programme. Long after the sun had disappeared over the sierras, he was still wearily following the trail down from the hills. He no longer hoped to pick up

the lights of Horse-Thief in the distance. It was long past the hour when all good citizens went to their bunks.

The black-muzzled mustang, with all his hardy endurance, was sorely fatigued, and plugged on slowly and stolidly through the rain. The night was as black as the skin of a Louisiana coon. Only the glimmer of rain broke the darkness. The Kid almost gasped with relief at the sight of a glimmering light far off in the night.

He knew that he was not near Horse-Thief yet. The light was burning in some outlying cabin or ranch-house. Whatever the place was, it was a shelter for the night, at least—a shelter from the drenching rain. The Kid pushed on more cheerily, and the grey mustang bucked up a little, the black muzzle no longer drooping so despondently.

Through the mud and the rain the Kid arrived at last at a gate in a wire fence, and halted. Gates and fences were anathema to the Kid, bred on the boundless plains, where a puncher might ride for sixty miles without dismounting. But the Kid was far from the Rio Grande now. He hitched the mustang to the fence, opened the gate, and strode up the path towards the building that

was hidden in darkness, from which the single light gleamed at midnight.

He found himself in a timber porch, beside which was the window from which the light shone through a thin curtain. He groped for the door in the gloom, and rapped on it with the butt of his quirt.

Knock!

Save for the swish of the ceaseless rain the night was silent and still. The crash of the quirt rang almost like thunder on the solid pinewood door.

There was a sound of movement within the building.

Footsteps—light footsteps, which the Kid knew to be those of a woman—approached the door from within.

The Kid heard a bolt withdrawn, and the door was opened.

Light glimmered out, and in the lighted doorway a slim and graceful girl stood.

"You've come back, then!" said a voice, naturally soft, but now sharpened by anger.

The Kid swept off his drenched Stetson.

The sight of the graceful figure in the doorway had startled him. He had expected to see some hard-featured settler's wife; some hapless woman worn into harshness and grimness by the hardships of the frontier. The girl was a great surprise to him. Before he could speak, the voice went on, in startled tones, as a pair of blue eyes scanned him:

"You! You're not Hank?"

The Kid could not help grinning.

"No, ma'am," he answered politely,

"I guess I'm not Hank!"



He made a backward step the next moment.

The girl had picked up a rifle from a hook on the wall beside the door, and it seemed to leap to her shoulder. The muzzle bore full upon the Rio Kid. The girl's finger was steady on the trigger, and the barrel was as steady as a rock.

"Stand where you are!"

The musical voice was very sharp now.

The Rio Kid grinned again. He was quick with a gun himself—too quick, some of the sheriffs in Texas had thought. He could admire the same quality in others. The girl in the lonely cabin had lost no time in getting him covered with the rifle.

"Your game, ma'am," said the Kid pleasantly. "Shall I put 'em up?"

And, without waiting for a reply, he cheerfully elevated his hands above his head.

The girl looked at him searchingly over the rifle. If she was alone in the lonely cabin, as the Kid guessed, she was on her guard.

"You're not Hank?" she repeated, scanning him.

"Nope!" agreed the Kid. "If you're expecting a galoot named Hank, miss, I'm sure sorry that my name ain't Hank. But it ain't."

"Who are you?"

"I'm generally called the Kid when I'm to home," answered the Rio Kid good-humouredly. "No cause for alarm, ma'am. I wouldn't hurt a fly, let alone a woman. You're sure handy with the rifle, miss."

"What do you want here?"

"Not a bullet from that rifle, miss, if it ain't troubling you too much," said the Kid. "I never allowed I should be disturbing a lone woman, or I sure wouldn't have knocked at your door. I guess I was going to ask for shelter from the rain; but I wouldn't advise you to take a stranger in, in this lonesome place. But if you ain't any objection, ma'am, I'll bed down in a shed or a barn."

The girl scanned him keenly.

"You're a stranger here?"

"You've got it in once, miss. From Arizona last," answered the Kid.

"Hoboes are not wanted around Horse-Thief."

The Kid started.

He knew that he must look considerable of a picture, wet, and splashed from head to foot with mud. But it was a shock to be taken for a tramp. Still, he could not blame the girl of the lonely cabin for her mistake. An untidy, muddy stranger knocking at a door at midnight had to expect to be regarded with suspicion. Certainly the Kid did not look like a man who had a fat roll in his belt, and a hundred thousand dollars tucked away in a safe place.

"Ma'am," said the Kid, "I ain't exactly a hobo. Jest a galoot looking for shelter from the rain. But if you're scared, miss, I guess I'll hit the trail pronto, and wade on."

The Kid stopped back.

"Stay!" said the girl.

The Kid stayed.

"You can bed down in the barn, stranger. You'll find the door on the latch. You can come around for breakfast in the kitchen in the morning. Good-night"

"Good-night, ma'am!"

The door closed on the Kid almost before he had replied. He heard the bolt carefully shot.

"Well, carry me hum to die!" murmured the Kid.

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He walked back to his mustang, and unhitched him. In the darkness it was not easy to find the barn; but the Kid groped his way. Glad enough was the worn and weary Kid to hear the rain pattering on a roof above his head. In the darkness he found beds of straw for himself and his mustang, and that was all the Kid wanted.

For a few minutes after he had bedded down in warm straw the Kid wondered who the girl was, who Hank was, and in what strange quarters fortune had landed him. But only for a few minutes, then he was fast asleep, breathing steadily, to the accompaniment of the lashing rain on the roof of the barn.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### A Chance for the Kid!

THE rain went with the night; the Rio Kid stepped out of the barn into a world of sunshine.

He stood and looked about him, breathing in deep the keen air from the sierra.

The barn stood at some distance from the house; next to it was a horse corral, empty. Further on was a chicken-run, and fowls ran about cackling in the dawn. The house itself was a small building; a cabin built of timber, with not more than four or five rooms in it. But it was cleanly painted; there was a well-kept garden; all his surroundings, though poor enough, showed the attention of a careful hand. There were four fields under cultivation, though the Kid did not know enough about agriculture to know with what they were planted.

It was a small homestead, such as the Kid had seen hundreds of times up and down the West.

"Nesters!" muttered the Kid, with a grimace.

In Texas, where the "nesters" were creeping over the cattle country, fencing and wiring and planting, the Kid, like all true cow-punchers, hated them. But he was in Nevada now, and only a couple of miles out of a frontier town; and he expected to find fences, and gates, and barbed wire, and the whole bag of tricks. The Kid was only passing through, to reach the cow country further north, and he had been anxious to ride into the cow country. Now he was not sure that he was in a hurry. Somehow, he was not keen on hitting the trail and riding away from that lonely cabin—he hardly knew why!

There was no sign of the girl—no sign of anyone else. Hank—if the unknown Hank had returned after all—was not visible. The Kid washed himself at the horse-trough; he unfastened his slicker pack and performed his toilet in the barn, before his little hand-mirror—the Kid was very particular upon such matters as these. It still rankled in his mind that the girl had taken him for a hobo. The Kid was too fair-minded to blame her for the mistake; but he was keen to set it right. No one came near him while he was thus occupied; and it was a very different Kid who emerged from the barn—a handsome puncher who could not possibly have been mistaken for a hobo, even on a dark, rainy night.

The girl had told him that he could come around to the kitchen for breakfast; and as he had not supped on the previous night, the idea of breakfast was very welcome to the Kid. Besides, he wanted to see again the blue eyes that had scanned him so searchingly. Somehow, those eyes haunted the Kid's thoughts. He hardly knew why. The Kid greatly admired all women, even to a rugged old Indian squaw, chewing

tobacco, the Kid would have been kind and gentle; all women were to him a superior order of beings, whom it was a man's business to respect, and to defend with his life if need were. But his respect and admiration were given impartially to the whole sex; and no individual woman had ever drawn a special glance from him before. Now he was thinking of a pair of blue eyes, to his own great astonishment.

The kitchen door, at the back of the timber cabin, stood wide open to the sunshine.

The Kid approached it rather timidly.

Timidity was so new to the Rio Kid, that it further astonished him to realise that he was timid.

He glanced in, and raised his hat as a pair of blue eyes turned on him.

"Good-morning, ma'am!" faltered the Kid, still more astonished to hear his own voice falter.

The girl looked at him. For the moment she did not recognise him, thanks to the toilet in the barn.

"Oh!" she exclaimed suddenly.

"You're the hobo!"

The Kid coloured.

"A puncher, ma'am!" he said.

"You're late for breakfast!"

"I'm powerful sorry, ma'am. But——"

The Kid rather repented him of the time spent in the barn on his toilet, necessary as it had been.

"Come in!"

In the daylight, evidently the girl was not afraid. Her manner was quite matter of fact. The Kid stepped in, she gave him a stool at the table, and placed breakfast before him.

"I guess you've fed this morning already, ma'am!" ventured the Kid. He had hoped that the blue eyes would breakfast with him.

"Hours ago."

"Oh!"

"You're not eating your breakfast."

"Oh!"

The Kid ate.

The girl sat down on the opposite side of the table, scanning him. She seemed interested in the Kid; he could not help seeing that, and it gave him a strange little flutter that almost spoiled his appetite, good and substantial as the breakfast was. The improvement in his looks had obviously made a difference in the girl's opinion of him. But when she spoke, and revealed the cause of her interest, the Kid was abashed again.

"I can see you're not a hobo now," she said. "Excuse my mistake. You're a puncher?"

"Sure!"

"Not on a ranch at present?"

"Nope!"

"Looking for work?"

The Kid paused.

The hundred thousand dollars he had cleaned up in the Gila Mountains made cow-punching a matter of choice with the Kid. But it was not his cue to tell the story of his adventures in the gold country of Arizona. Trouble, as usual, had dogged the steps of the Kid, in Arizona as elsewhere; and the story of the Gambusino Mine was a closed chapter.

"I guess I'm heading for the cow country, ma'am!" he answered at last. "There's always room for a good man in the cow country."

"Have you ever worked on a home-stead?"

The Kid breathed hard.

Such a question, to a cow-puncher, was almost enough to make his gun leap from the holster, if asked by a man. But the Kid answered with great politeness.

"I ain't, ma'am—not yet."

"I've a reason for asking," said the girl. "My hired man has deserted me—he cleared off suddenly, yesterday, without a word. That was why I was sitting up so late, hoping that he would come back."

"The durned son of a gun!" exclaimed the Kid indignantly. That any man, hired or otherwise, could have deserted those steady, clear blue eyes, seemed incomprehensible to the Rio Kid.

The girl smiled slightly.

"I guess I want to see that galoot," said the Kid hotly. "I guess his nearest relative wouldn't know his face when I was through with him. The dog-goned gink!"

"If you want a job as a hired man I can give you one," said the girl calmly.

The Kid's heart leapt so suddenly, that the boiled bacon almost choked him.

"You!" he ejaculated.

"Yes. Hank will not be coming back now—and if he did, I should fire him. I'm alone here until—until someone comes whom I'm expecting later. I can see now that you're not a hobo." She smiled, the most fascinating smile that the Rio Kid had ever seen. "Your face looks honest—"

"Thank you, ma'am!" said the Kid humbly; and wondering what Sheriff Watson, of Frio, would have said to that.

"I think I know a man who can be trusted," said the girl composedly. "If you care to take my hired man's place, I'll be glad. Labour is not easy to get in these parts, especially as the wages are not high—in this case."

"I sure don't care about wages much, ma'am," said the Kid eagerly. "Jest the barn to bed down in and food for a galoot and his horse—"

"I paid Hank three dollars a day!" "Suits me, ma'am!" said the Kid. Had the blue eyes said three cents, the Kid's answer would have been the same.

"Then I will try you for a week," said the girl, in a businesslike tone. "I guess you'll pan out better than Hank. He was a poor fish anyway. You can work?"

"Try me, ma'am!" said the Kid fervently.

"Come out as soon as you've finished your breakfast."

The girl went out by the doorway, light and graceful as a fawn. The Kid's eyes followed her till she disappeared; then returned to his unfinished breakfast.

The breakfast remained unfinished. The Kid was lost in meditation—wondering meditation.

Had any man on the Double-Bar Ranch ever suggested that the Kid would ever be working as a hired man for a nester, the Kid certainly would have pulled a gun on him, and made him eat his words.



**THE KID CHIPS IN!** There was the stranger—and Miss Janet was in his arms! The Kid grasped the man and dragged him back. He was a powerful man, but in the Kid's grip he sprawled backwards, and went crashing to the floor. "You dog!" hissed the Kid. (See Chapter 4.)

And here he was jumping with both feet at a chance of working as a hired man for a nester.

He was perplexed.

As a hired man he could stay within range of a pair of blue eyes; on any other terms he could not. That was why the Rio Kid had jumped at the unexpected chance. His hands, clean and white from the cowboy gloves, were to be hardened by rough toil—toil that was going to be a pleasure to him. He wondered and was perplexed. He was still wondering, staring at his unfinished breakfast, when a voice—sweet, but very firm and businesslike—broke in upon his meditations.

"Are you ready?"

The Kid jumped up so suddenly that the stool upon which he was seated went crashing.

"Yep, I guess so, ma'am."

"Come, then."

The Rio Kid came.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

#### The Hired Man!

**T**HE Kid leaned back on his hoe and mopped his brow. Perspiration ran down the brow of the Kid, and it damped his thick hair. Having mopped his brow, he looked at his hands. The Kid's hands had always been soft and white; the cowboy gloves had protected them; and now— After a week as hired man at Horse-Thief they were blistered, rough, and raw. The Kid wondered whether their present state would affect his shooting, if he had need to pull a gun. Not that he was likely to need to pull a gun now. His life at the homestead was peaceful—so peaceful that the Kid marvelled that it was he, Kid Carfax, who was leading that life. He was almost forgetting how to pull a gun—but he was learning how to pull weeds.

Miss Janet—her name was Janet Grango—was not a hard taskmaster; she was kindness itself. But she expected a hired man to earn his hire, as was only just. The Kid earned it by the

sweat of his brow; and sometimes as he laboured he laughed—laughed at himself. As he wielded the hoe, he wondered what the old bunch on the Double-Bar would have said could they have seen him now, hoeing like a peon. And was thankful that they could not see him—thankful for every long mile that lay between him and Texas. Hoeing was a man's job, but it was a job the Kid had never handled. He had lived in the saddle, and he hated to find himself afoot. And hoeing was a game of the nesters who were creeping over the cow country, eating up the plains with cultivation. And the Rio Kid was working as a hired man for a nester, because that nester was a girl with blue eyes, and the blue eyes had worked havoc with the Kid's unwary heart.

He realised that now.

He realised that if the blue eyes smiled upon him he would say a long farewell to the sierra and the llano, to the camp in the chaparral, to the long, long trails by blazing sun or glinting star, to the free, roving life—to all that had hitherto been his joy. Such power was there in a pair of blue eyes. But he realised, too, that to Miss Janet he was simply a hired man—just a hired man, and nothing more. A cleanly hired man, an industrious hired man, a respectful and reliable hired man; but just a hired man who worked on the homestead, and dug and trenched and pulled weeds, and hoed—hoed—hoed! Still, it was a long trail to a girl's heart, and the Kid did not expect to ride that trail in a day, or a week, or a month. He served Janet faithfully, and found kindness, at least, in her eyes; and he saw her every day—hours every day—and that was all that the Kid could ask, so far.

But it was a great relief when Hank and his friends came.

Miss Janet farmed that little holding capably. With one hired man to aid her, she farmed it well, and sold poultry and eggs and vegetables to the men of

Horse-Thief. Her father had been a farmer, the Kid gathered; she was an orphan now. She was clever and capable, and she made the homestead pay, while others larger in the vicinity were dismally impuacious. The Kid guessed that Miss Janet was "some" girl!

That her hired man had a fat roll in his belt Miss Janet suspected no more than she suspected that he had ridden out of Texas with half the sheriffs of the Lone Star State gnashing their teeth when he eluded them.

Heavy lay that knowledge on the Kid's mind now.

What would she think of the outlaw of the Rio Grande—the Rio Kid, whose hand was against every man, and against whom every man's hand was raised?

For, of course, if he spoke out, he would have to tell her.

The Kid was not the man to lie or delude. The truth came as naturally to his lips as the air he breathed. He would have to tell her; and he could tell her, in truth, that he had been driven into outlawry by no fault of his own; but he would have to tell her that he was outlawed. Still, the roll in his belt was a comfort. Much less than that roll, he figured, would square matters with the law. The Kid was young, but he had seen law bought and sold in Western courts. Let it all go, if need were, leaving him with his two strong hands to work—if the blue eyes smiled on him.

But the blue eyes met his every day clearly, unsuspectingly, without the slightest suspicion of the Kid's thoughts and feelings. But the Kid was patient in riding a long trail.

But he was glad when Hank came. He was leaning on the hoe, mopping his perspiring brow, when Hank and his friends came up the trail from Horse-Thief town. Once before Hank had looked in. Hank had had a three days' "bender" in Horse-Thief, and then he had come back to his job, to find his job gone, a pair of blue eyes eyeing him sternly, and a finger pointing to the trail. Hank had gone back to Horse-Thief empurpling the atmosphere with "guss" words. Now he had come back with a couple of friends, picked up from the boot-leg saloons of Horse-Thief, to argue the matter out with the new hired man. Hank had no idea of harming Miss Janet. Moreover, Hank knew that all Horse-Thief would have risen as one man to lynch him had he harmed a hair of her pretty head. Hank had come to lay out the new hired man; and, having had a glimpse of the Kid in the fields, he had sagely brought a couple of friends to help him do it.

The Kid's face lighted up. He dropped the hoe, and regretted for a moment that his gun-belt was hanging in the barn. In time of trouble the Kid was rather like a lost man without his guns. But there was no time to get the guns without running for them, and the Kid would not have run, under the eyes of the three galeots from Horse-Thief, to save his life, or a dozen lives. The Kid stood at attention, smiling—a rather wicked smile—as Hank and his friends came across the fields to him. From the house came Miss Janet, her eyes gleaming under the wide brim of her hat, and her rifle in her hand. Miss Janet knew that the three toughs had come to "soak" her new hired man, and she was prompt to intervene.

"Leave them to me, ma'am," said the Kid beseechingly. "I guess I want a change from the hoeing, miss."

"Three to one!" snapped Miss Janet.

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"I guess they'll be pie to me, miss," beseeched the Kid, quite dismayed at the idea of there being no "rookus," after all. "Don't you chip in, miss. I sure can handle the whole caboodle."

The Kid had to make good his words, for Hank and his companions, without stopping to parley, rushed right at him. Miss Janet stood uncertain, the butt of her rifle in the grass. But her uncertainty soon disappeared, and she smiled.

The Kid fairly let himself go. After a week of digging and hoeing, of mending fences and carrying water, feeding chickens and cutting cabbages, this was sheer joy to him.

If the three toughs expected the Kid to dodge or flee, they were in error. The Kid jumped to meet them. They closed round him; and had they been able to carry out their intentions, the hired man at Horse-Thief would have been left a broken wreck on the ground—punched, gouged, stamped, throttled. But a fist that seemed like a chunk of solid iron drove into Hank's face and lifted him off his feet, and laid him on his back, half-stunned at the start; and he lay staring up at the Sierra Nevada, while the other two piled on the Kid and dragged him down.

The Kid's eyes were blazing with the joy of combat. This was life again, after a week as a hired man.

Two powerful toughs, known all around Horse-Thief as "bad men" had the Kid in their grip; but the Kid did not crumple in their grip as they expected. It seemed to the two toughs of Horse-Thief that they had corralled a panther wild from the sierra. The Kid gave grasp for grasp, blow for blow. A man dropped at his feet, gasping and dazed; the other swung off the ground, with a yell of terror, in the Kid's powerful arms, and earth and sky reeled about him, till he was flung to the earth across his comrade.

Hank was sitting up in the soil newly hoed by the hired man, blinking. He did not seem to know what had come to him. His friends lay panting on the earth—panting, gasping, groaning. They picked themselves up at last, and ran for the trail. They did not even give the new hired man a look; they lighted out wildly, and the dust of the trail swallowed them up. They had had enough of the hired man.

Hank staggered up. He did not run—his hand was groping for the revolver at the back of his trousers.

The Kid laughed. Hank was not quick on the draw. Had the Kid been belted with his guns, and had he thought it worth while to pull, Hank might have been riddled with lead before he got his gun out. But the Kid had no gun, and Hank's revolver was in his grip.

Like a panther the Kid leaped forward.

Up went the revolver, but the Kid had the rising arm in his grasp, and the bullet, as it flew, flew skyward. A second more—Hank never knew how—the six-gun was wrenched from his hand and the muzzle of it was pressed to his chest, the Kid's finger on the trigger, the Kid's sunburnt, handsome face grinning over it.

"Let up, pard!" said the Kid pleasantly.

Hank spat out a curse. The Kid's look became quite ugly, and the trigger rose a fraction. His eyes gleamed over the gun like steel.

"Don't!" cried Miss Janet.

"I guess it's your say-so, miss," assented the Kid.

He tossed the revolver into the waters

of the Horse-Thief River, that flowed by Miss Janet's fence.

"I guess you want to hit the trail, feller," said the Kid. "I guess the sooner you hit the trail, the better it will be for your health. Pronto!"

And as Hank paused the Kid grasped him, and the former hired man went spinning into the water after his gun, and he disappeared there with a mighty splash.

"Oh!" gasped Miss Janet. Hank crawled out on the opposite side of the river. He did not seem to care for the Kid's side of it. He limped away, squelching water, and vanished from sight across the alfalfa fields.

The Kid smiled. Then he blushed as he turned to meet the eyes of Miss Janet fixed on him. The Kid had thoroughly enjoyed that rookus; much more than he enjoyed his labours as a hired man. But he was afraid of what Miss Janet might think.

"You see, miss—" stammered the Kid lamey.

But the girl smiled. "I guess Hank won't come back again in a hurry," she said. "I guess he has had a jugful more than he wanted. I'm glad you can take care of yourself."

"I sure always could do that, miss," smiled the Kid. And then, greatly daring, encouraged by the kind smile, he added: "And I guess if you'd let me take care of you, Miss Janet—"

The girl's merry laugh interrupted him.

"I guess I don't need it." She had not caught the Kid's hidden meaning. She nodded to him and went back into the cabin.

The Kid picked up the hoe.

#### THE FOURTH CHAPTER. The Kid Hits the Trail!

THUD, thud, thud!  
Horse's hoofs rang on the trail.

Two more weeks had passed, and the hired man at Horse-Thief was still in Janet's service, still working in the fields and the barns, more than earning his keep.

Janet had told him more than once that she had never seen such a hired man; that she guessed she was lucky when he came along to Horse-Thief and stopped at her homestead. Perhaps it was because other matters occupied her mind that she did not divine the cause of the hired man's unremitting service and loyal devotion. And until he should see understanding in her eyes the Kid did not dare to speak. He who would never have shrunk from half a dozen levelled six-guns, was daunted by a pair of blue eyes.

Thud, thud, thud!  
The Kid was mending a fence along the trail when the horseman rode out from Horse-Thief and came clattering up to the homestead. Since the affair with Hank and his friends the Kid worked with his gun-belt on, and as the horseman dashed up to the gate, he straightened up, and his hand dropped on a gun. A young man with a sunburnt face and a merry eye pulled rein at the gate and gave him a cheery nod.

"Hallo!"  
"Hallo!" returned the Kid, his hand leaving the gun. A gun was not wanted.

"Miss Janet at home?"

"Sure."

"I guess you're a new man here," said the horseman, scanning the Kid.

"New hired man," answered the Kid composure, wondering a little who the rider was.

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of bitterness and hatred in his heart as he mooched beneath the elms.

Three forms loomed up before him, and he made no attempt to avoid them. Those three forms belonged to Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, and myself. We were, as a matter of fact, looking for Pitt. We had no idea then as to the fate he had met at the hands of Christine & Co.

"Somebody here, dear boys," remarked Montie. "I say, old fellow, have you seen anything of Pitt?"

"Yes, he's here," said Pitt calmly.

"The very chap I wanted to see!" I said, striding forward and facing Pitt squarely. "I want just five minutes with you, Pitt. What have you got to say for yourself? What do you mean by playing that foul trick upon our boat?"

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Pitt roughly. "What's the good of making a fuss about it? I thought I was doing Christine a good turn. No harm in taking a rise out of you fellows, is there?"

"Doing Christine a good turn!" I repeated blankly. "Did you tell Christine that?"

"Yes, I did!"

"And what did he say?"

"What's it got to do with you what he said?" snarled Pitt. "Go away, confound you! You're an interfering brute, that's what you are! What's it got to do with you? Who told you to fish up that bowl?"

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More than one man had ridden out from Horse-Thief to the homestead to deal for garden produce; and also, as the Kid knew well enough, to see a pair of blue eyes. He had not seen this rider before; and at the second glance he noted the signs of long travel. The horseman had come through Horse-Thief from a greater distance—a much greater distance. He had been long on the trail, the Kid could see; yet he had ridden rapidly and eagerly up to the gate. Obviously he had been there before—he knew the place and its owner.

He dismounted, hitched his horse at the gate, as the Rio Kid had hitched the black-muzzled mustang that rainy night three weeks ago, and tramped up the path to the cabin. The Kid resumed mending the fence, and the tap of his hammer echoed through the quiet afternoon.

A minute more and he dropped the hammer, leaping up. From the cabin came a cry—a cry from Miss Janet.

It was a startled cry; it might have meant anything, from surprise to alarm. To the Kid it meant that he was wanted in the cabin just as fast as he could get there. The stranger had entered the cabin; the door in the porch stood wide open. A panther leaping on his prey, a red-skinned brave springing at the throat of his enemy, was not so swift as the Rio Kid as he bounded to the cabin—his gun leaping to his hand, his eyes blazing death.

There was the stranger, and Miss Janet was in his arms—his arms were closed round her!

The Kid's left hand grasped the man and dragged him back. He was a powerful man, but in the Kid's grasp he sprawled backwards, helpless as a baby, and went crashing to the floor. The Kid's gun looked him in the face as he sprawled.

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I stared at him wonderingly.

"What's it got to do with me?" I repeated. "I'll show you! You're a scheming cad, and if you'd had your way this plot would never have come to light. Thank goodness, I found it out!"

"Oh, hang you!" growled Pitt, turning away. "It's a pity you can't mind your own business. But I can't expect anything else, I suppose, considering that you were originally picked up in the gutter by a low-down detective!"

I simply shook with fury. I had been quite prepared to let Pitt down lightly. But those words of his stung me into instant action. With a jerk of my hand I swung him round.

Smack!

My fist struck his mouth with terrific force, and he went down with a crash.

"If you get up again I'll give you another!" I said, breathing hard. "And if you ever say anything like that again, I'll thrash you until you can't see!"

Pitt scrambled to his feet, trembling violently.

"Try it on now!" he hissed. "You're a gutter-brat, and you were picked up by a rotten, blackmailing detective—"

Pitt didn't get any further. He lunged at me while he spoke, but I got in my blow first. He fought like a tiger, and for several minutes we were at it hard as we could go. Although a cad of the first water, Pitt was certainly not lacking in pluck. He stood up to me without flinching.

"You dog!" hissed the Kid.

"What the thunder—"

"Stop!" shrieked Miss Janet. She was between the Kid and the man who sprawled and gasped. "What do you mean? How dare you?"

Stupefied, the Kid gazed at her. The gun sagged in his hand. Her eyes blazed anger at him.

"Miss!" he stuttered. "Miss! I—I thought—"

"It's my new hired man, Frank," said Janet. The anger passed from her face as she realized the mistake the Kid had made, and her cheeks dimpled, and her laugh rippled. "Don't mind him; he had never seen you before. He must have thought—" She broke off, laughing till the tears came into her blue eyes.

And the stranger, grinning, picked himself up.

The Kid stared at them. His gun was in its holster now. He began to understand. This man who had kissed Miss Janet under his eyes—this man was not a "fresh" galoot from whom Miss Janet was to be defended. He was not a dog-goned guy to be soaked to a pulp. He was—What was he? She called him Frank! Who in thunder was Frank? The Kid knew, in a flash of perception, without being told. The Kid knew in one sharp, bitter moment that the biggest fool in Nevada was the hired man at Horse-Thief, who had horned in when Miss Janet's fiancé had been greeting her after a long absence.

"I—I—I guess I'm powerful sorry, ma'am" faltered the Kid. His sunburnt face was burning.

"Your hired man has sure got a hefty grip, Janet," said Frank, settling his ruffled collar and grinning. "It's all O.K., my man. I reckon you figured I was a fresh hombre, and Miss Janet wanted a protector. Ha, ha, ha! It's all O.K. Miss Janet don't need protecting from me. Miss Janet is sure going to marry me this fall. Isn't that a cinch, Janet?"

The girl was smiling; but the look on the Kid's face checked her merriment.

But I soon settled him. One heavy punch sent him staggering back, and he collapsed, muttering threats still. His nose was bleeding, his left eye was closing up, and his mouth was cut. But I hadn't a ounce of pity for him. The fellow was a rotter to his finger-tips.

Tommy and Montie said nothing, and as I brushed my clothes down, Pitt slowly rose to his feet and stood facing me.

"You'll be sorry for this!" he panted thickly. "You'll wish you'd never made an enemy of me before I've done!"

He turned on his heel and slunk off.

"Dear boy, he fully deserved it," said Sir Montie quietly. "But you've made a frightfully vindictive enemy. Take my advice, and be on your guard! It'll be necessary!"

As events turned out, Montie's warning was fully justified! I hadn't done with Reginald Pitt by a long way!

Incidentally the boat-race took place—fairly—on Saturday afternoon. The Ancient House won by a clear three lengths, and Bob Christine was decent enough to congratulate me afterwards. He took his defeat in the right spirit.

As for Pitt, well, I've got quite a lot to tell of him—but that's another yarn.

THE END.

(Reginald Pitt has certainly gained notoriety at St. Frank's—and all in a few weeks. You'll hear more of this amazing new boy in next week's rousing story of the chums of St. Frank's.)

ment. For the first time since she had hired the new man there was a gleam of understanding in the blue eyes, and Miss Janet's lovely face was grave now. "Thank you," she said softly. "Thank you. If I needed a protector, I should never find a braver one."

And that was some comfort to the hapless Kid as he backed out into the porch, and, once out, fairly ran for the barn.

In the barn, the Kid looked at the black-muzzled mustang. The soft, black muzzle snuggled under his arm, and the Kid rubbed his horse's nose tenderly, thoughtfully. For long minutes he stood caressing the horse, and his face was pale, his breathing hard. He spoke at last.

"Old boss," said the Kid. "Old boss, you and me run up against a snag when we hit Horse-Thief; we sure did. Old boss, your boss is sure the durndest, pop-eyed, all-fired cink ever! Old boss, it's three weeks since you and me should have figured on hitting the trail for the cow country; and I guess, old boss, that you and me are going to hit that trail mighty sudden."

The slicker pack was on; the Kid led the mustang quietly out. He led him quietly into the trail. He led him softly along by the fence, where the hammer lay as the Kid had dropped it. He led him out of sound of the cabin, and then he mounted. With the reins in his hands, the mountain breeze blowing in his face, his boots in the stirrups, the Rio Kid was the Rio Kid again.

"Now, old boss!" he said.

And a wildly riding horseman vanished in a cloud of dust. The Rio Kid was riding for the cow country again—riding hard—carrying with him a memory half sweet, half bitter. And a job was open for a new hired man at Horse-Thief.

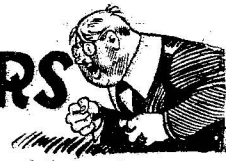
THE END.

(You'll meet the Kid in another rousing Western yarn next week, chums!)



# The BUNTER BROTHERS

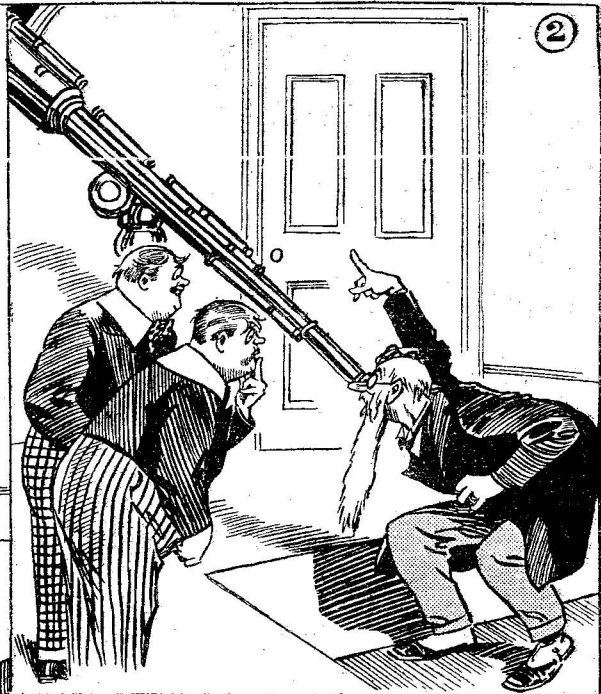
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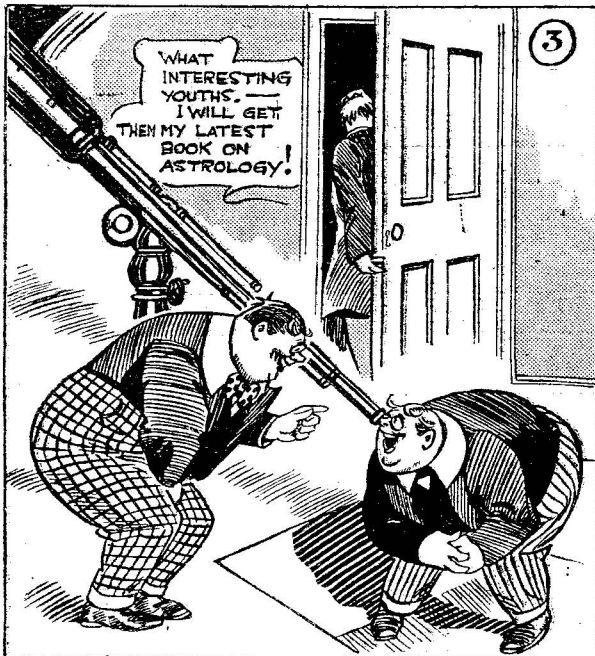
## PROFESSOR STARRYCRUMPET ENTERTAINS THE BUNTERS!



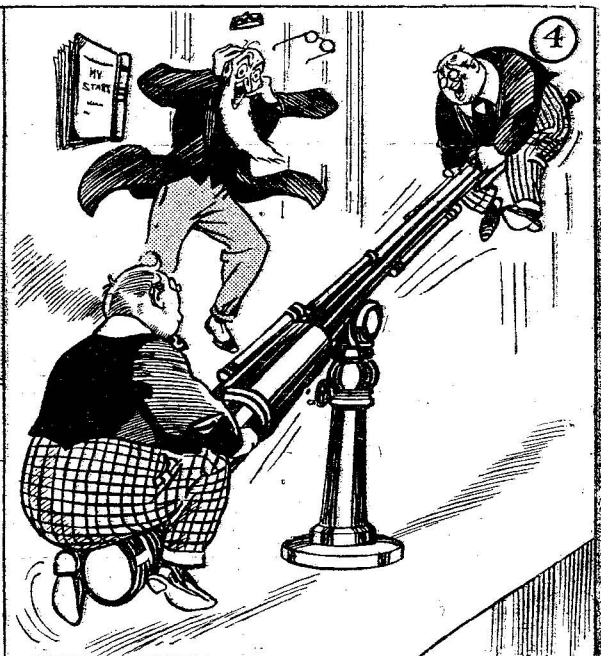
"This," said Professor Starrycrumpet, displaying his wonderful new telescope to Billy and Sammy Bunter, "is the greatest invention of modern times. By looking through it we are able to see what the people on Mars have for breakfast."



The professor bent double and attached his gleaming orb to the end of the telescope. "Look, the orange-coloured planet—'tis Mars!" "Then where's pa's?" asked Billy facetiously, winking at Sammy.



"I must get on with my work," said Professor Starrycrumpet, "and leave you to study the stars and planets at your leisure." He left the room, leaving the Bunter Brothers to enjoy the spectacle of the Milky Way. "Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Billy. "He thinks we're interested in his old astronomy."



But the Bunter Brothers were not! As soon as they were alone they proceeded to use that wonderful telescope as a see-saw. Just then back came the merry professor. When he saw those two fat boys riding his precious telescope, he had fifty-one fits. After that the Bunter Brothers saw stars with a vengeance—but not through a telescope!