

Most of the Rio Kid's ill-luck can be traced to the one source—his unfortunate knack of walking into other people's troubles and becoming involved therein. He's up to his neck in it again this week!

The Rio Kid *By* RALPH REDWAY



A TOPPING LONG COMPLETE TALE OF WESTERN ADVENTURE, FEATURING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Held up on the Trail.

IT was no business of the Kid's. Twice or thrice he told himself so. Perhaps because he was not quite convinced.

Horning into other folks' troubles had been the Rio Kid's bane. Most of his ill-luck could be traced to that one source.

He sat on the high bluff overlooking the Wildcat trail, with indifferent gaze—or gaze that he tried to make indifferent. It was no business of his, and this time, at least, he would keep clear of a "rookus" that did not concern him.

The Rio Kid was in Montana now. Many a long hundred miles lay between him and his own country of Texas—long hundreds of miles that weighed, sometimes, on the Kid's cheery heart. He was in cow country again, but different from the cow country he had known in the south, along the banks of the Rio Grande. And every difference was, to the eyes of the Texas puncher, a difference for the worse. There were too many hills, and too many mountains; the stretches of grass-land were not so fertile, not so rich and fragrant; the sun had lost the burning blaze to which he had been used from his earliest years. Towns lay too near together; railways disfigured the country; telegraph wires stretched in the most unexpected places. The Rio Kid avoided towns as if they had been plague spots. He hated to hear his spurs ring on a pavement; he wanted no means of transport other than the saddle on the black-muzzled grey mustang. He had no use for telephones and telegraphs, for Pullman cars or automobiles—still less use for fences and notice-boards. He had ridden into the Wildcat country because it was cow country, and because a pilgrim he had met up with on a trail had told him that it was the roughest, wildest cow country in Montana—the most unspoiled, from the Rio Kid's point of view.

In the Wildcat section men still packed guns, and sometimes used them; cattle camps were rough and ready; it was not unknown for a bunch of cowboys to "shoot up" a town while on a bender. Frontier feuds still survived there, and on lonely trails rustlers and road-agents still plied their peculiar calling. It was

This Week: "THE SPARSHOTT FEUD!"

a country where the Rio Kid could feel more or less at home; where he could camp down in the timber without seeing the smoke of any man's chimney on the horizon. So the Kid, putting the memory of Texas, and the Rio Frio, and the old Double-Bar bunch out of his thoughts, rode the Montana trails with a cheery face and a light heart. More than once he had looked in at a ranch, and passed on his way. The Kid, with a fat roll in his belt, was his own man these days, and could afford to please himself. That was how it happened that he was camped, in the heat of the day, on the bluff that overlooked the Wildcat trail, intending to ride again in the cool of the later afternoon, when the two-horse hack from the railway depot at Singer came along, and was stopped almost under the bluff where the Kid sat looking down.

That little hack, with its two horses, driven by a red-bearded man in shirt-sleeves, ran once a day from the railway depot to the cattle town of Wildcat—a long trip. The Kid, sitting among the mesquite on the high cliff, watched it idly when it appeared from a bend of the trail, and came clattering along over a stony, sun-baked track. His keen eyes, keen as an eagle's, noted from a distance that there was one passenger in the hack—a young fellow who looked like a puncher. The Kid watched the hack idly, without any special interest, simply because it was the only moving object in a wide landscape. His interest awakened more keenly when there was a movement at the trail twenty feet below the bluff where he sat and two horsemen pushed out into view from the cover of the rocks. The Kid could see little more of them than their Stetson hats, but he did not need telling what their game was.

"Gee-whiz!" murmured the Kid.

It was plainly a hold-up.

Both the horsemen were masked. Each of them had a gun in his hand. One of them rode into the trail in front of the advancing hack, and lifted his gun to a level.

"Halt!"

That sharp command reached the ears of the interested Kid above.

The hack driver pulled in his team at once. The little vehicle clattered to a stop on the stony trail.

The other horseman rode to the side of the hack, his gun up, his eyes gleaming over it through the holes in his mask.

"Light down!"

That order was given to the passenger within.

The Kid watched.

It was no business of his. That was as clear as daylight. He had come to Montana to punch cows, not to intervene in a trouble of this kind. In far-off Texas the Kid was wanted, himself, by many a sheriff. In his own country he was an outlaw, though not by his own choice. He had no call to chip in here. A hold-up on a Montana trail was nothing to him, and the Kid stilled the impulse to drop his hand on a walnut-butted gun at his belt. He sat and watched.

The man in the hack looked out at the horseman.

In his sun-browned, rather handsome face, the Kid could read a doubt. He knew that the pilgrim was considering whether to pull a gun. But a revolver was looking him in the face, and he decided not.

"Light down!"

The man in the hack smiled as he answered:

"I guess you've made a poor strike this time, pardner! I've come back on the railroad with nothing over my hack fare to Wildcat."

"Light down!"

"Any old thing!" drawled the cowman in the hack, and he stepped down into the trail.

"Put 'em up!"

The young man elevated his hands over his head.

His face still wore a careless smile.

"Nothing in it, I keep on telling you!" the Kid heard him say. "No roll, and no baggage. You're wasting your time, hombre."

The horseman did not heed him. He called out to his comrade, who pulled his horse aside from the trail.

"Drive on!"

The hack driver looked round in surprise. But a gun was staring him in

the face, and he shook out his reins and drove on.

"Here, I say!" exclaimed the passenger who had alighted. "I guess you don't want me to walk the other two miles to Wildcat! What's this game?"

"Keep your hands up!" rapped out the horseman, holding him steadily covered with the six-gun. "Here, Rube!"

"Yep!"

"Get hold of his gat." Rube dismounted, and advanced on the young cattleman. Under a leveled gun, the passenger of the hack did not resist, though his eyes were gleaming now. It seemed to occur to him—as it occurred to the Kid watching from above—that there was something more in this than a common hold-up. But he was at the mercy of the road-agents, and he kept his hands up.

Rube drew a gun from the young cow-man's hip-pocket, and slipped it into his own. But the masked horseman's gun still covered the cow-man.

"Rope up his paws, Rube."

"You bet!" The young cow-man made a move. But the threatening gun was within four feet of his face. His hands were drawn behind him, and bound together with a length of trail-ropes. Far in the distance the clatter of the hack died away in the direction of Wildcat.

"What's this game?" asked the young cow-man, and there was an angry ring in his voice. "This ain't a hold-up! What's the game? What do you want with me?"

"I guess we'll put you wise, now we've got you dead to rights," said the horseman, and he dragged the mask from his face. "Look, Kent Loring! Look, you durned galoot, and see who is going to string you up on a cedar beside the trail."

The young cowman looked at the face revealed by the removal of the mask—a hard-featured tanned face. His own face paled.

"Eben Sparshott!" he muttered, and he dragged fiercely at the rope that held his wrists. But he dragged in vain.

"Rig a rope to a branch, Rube!" said the horseman, curtly, "When the punchers find him swinging by the trail, they'll know that there's an end of the Sparshott feud! You've got five minutes, boy!"

He dropped the gun into his holster, and dismounted. The other rustler had removed his mask now, showing a hard face very much like the other's. The two evidently were near relatives, Rube Sparshott took a trail-ropes from his saddle, noosed the end, and flung it over a branch by the trail. And on the top of the bluff, the Rio Kid dropped a hand on the walnut butt of a gun. A hold-up on the trail was no business of his—he had no call to chip in, though he had found it hard to resist the impulse to do so. But this was his business—any white man's business. The Rio Kid rose quietly from his seat among the mesquite; a gun in his hand, and with silent footsteps crept down a winding path that led him to the lower trail.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Rio Kid Horns In!

KENT LORING stood motionless, the pallor showing through the tan on his cheeks, his eyes burning.

There was no sign of fear on his face: only the bitter knowledge that death was close at hand.

Rube Sparshott was fixing the rope

that was to swing him to death. Eben Sparshott stood watching him, with a grim grin of triumph on his hard-featured face.

"You coyote!" said the cowman, at last. "You'd never have got me, if you hadn't covered up your faces, and made me figure that it was just a hold-up! You was always a cowardly crew."

The elder Sparshott grinned.

"I reckoned we knew you was handy with a gun, Kent," he said. "If you'd been wise to us you'd have chanced a draw. I reckoned it was safe to get you fixed."

"You durned coyote."

"Shoot off your mouth while you've got time," said Sparshott, grimly. "The minutes are going. The Sparshott feud comes to an end to-day, Kent—you're the last of your crowd, and you're going up as soon as that rope's ready. You're going to be strung up like Peter Sparshott was ten years ago."

"Peter Sparshott was a cow thief."

"I guess the Lorings said he was," grunted Sparshott. "I guess they got a lynch crowd to believe it."

"It was true, you durned coyote; he rustled cows off a dozen ranches, and changed their brands," said Kent. "He was lynched because he was a cow thief."

"Keep it up!" jeered the other. "You ain't got much time. The Lorings lynched Peter Sparshott; but I guess they've paid for it. What became of your father, who led the lynching? Where are your uncles, who had a hand in it? Where's your brother, who shot a Sparshott in the Red Dog saloon at Wildcat? You're going after them, Kent, and you're the last of the crowd—the feud ends this day."

Kent made no answer; but his eyes gleamed up and down the trail. The elder Sparshott laughed grimly.

"There ain't no help coming to you," he said. "Nothing on this trail after the hack goes, you know that, Kent. I guess if some puncher should trail this way, he won't help you any—he'll find you swinging from that branch. If you've got any prayers to say, you don't want to lose any more time, Kent."

"I guess that rope's ready, Eben," drawled the younger Sparshott.

"You ready, Kent?" grinned Sparshott.

"You durned galoot!" muttered the cowman, huskily. "I guess if I had a hand loose, and a gat in it—"

"You won't never grip a gat again, Kent! You was too handy with a gat when you shot up George Sparshott last fall at Wildcat."

"He drew on me," muttered Kent. "Sure he did, and you beat him to it. But I guess we've beat you to it this time, and you're going up."

There was a movement among the rocks by the trail. The Rio Kid, silent and unseen, had wormed his way down from the high bluff at a little distance, and under cover of the rocks, he had reached the spot now. Both the Sparshotts started, as they heard that movement by the trail; but the Kid made no sound till it was too late for them to take warning. Their startled eyes fixed on the Texas puncher as he stepped into view, a gun in either hand, grinning over them.

"Let up on it, fellers," drawled the Rio Kid. "It ain't good enough. Don't touch them guns, I advise you."

Both the men had reached for their weapons, at that unexpected apparition.

"Let up!" rapped the Kid, with sharp menace in his voice. "Put up your paws, both of you, pronto."

The younger Sparshott lifted his hands. But the elder, with a curse, dragged the gun from his belt.

Bang!

Eben Sparshott gave a wild yell, as his right arm dropped to his side, his gun clanging on the stony trail. The limb had been broken by the Kid's swift bullet.

"I guess I warned you," said the Kid. "You asked for that, feller! You want to be thankful that I didn't put the lead through your cabeza. You other galoot want any?"

His eyes gleamed at Rube Sparshott. "None in mine, puncher," said Rube, and he held his hands high above his head.

The elder man sank down on a boulder, his tanned face white as chalk, gripping his wounded arm with his left hand. From his white face his eyes burned at the Kid.

"Darn you!" he muttered, thickly. "What call have you got to chip in here, you dog-goned puncher?"

"Nix," said the Kid, cheerily. "I guess I'm a galoot that never could mind his own business. That's always been my little trouble, Mr. Sparshott. I allow you've sure got cause to be mad at my horning into this rookus; but I guess the other side will be mighty pleased. How about that?" asked the Kid, with a smiling glance at the bound cowman.

Kent Loring breathed hard and deep.

"I don't know you, puncher," he said. "I guess you're a stranger in this section. But I allow I'm mighty glad to see you here. I reckon it was me for the long jump if you hadn't horned in."

"I guess so," assented the Kid. "I don't know the rights of this matter, and can't say I want to—I've happened on feuds in my own country, and I know they're powerful bad medicine for a stranger to horn into. But I wouldn't stand for seeing a white man strung up like a horse thief. No, sir."

"Let me loose—"

"All in good time," smiled the Kid. "I guess these Sparshott gents want attending to first. You Rube, if that's your call-by, you drop that gun from your belt—and don't happen to lift it, or there will be a dead Sparshott lying on this trail the next second."

Rube Sparshott's gun clanged on the trail. Then, at a gesture from the Kid, he elevated his hands again above his head.

"You sure are a good little man, and know how to take orders," smiled the Kid, approvingly. "I ain't come to Montana to horn into trouble with any man, and I don't want any Sparshott feud on my hands; but I'll sure make it last sickness for you if you try any gun-game. Chew on that, and stand where you are, feller."

"I guess I know enough to go in when it rains," said Rube Sparshott. "You've woke up trouble that will come home to you, puncher, if you hang on in this country. But you've got the pull now."

"I sure have," agreed the Kid.

He dropped one gun into a holster, stepped up to the wounded man who sat on the boulder, and disarmed him of a second gun and a knife.

"Now I guess we can talk quite comfortable and cosy, without any gun-play interrupting the harmony of the meeting," remarked the Kid, good-temperedly. And with Sparshott's knife he cut through the rope that bound Kent's wrists. "You want to get hold of your gun, Mr. Loring; I've sure got a hunch that you'll feel better with a gat in your grip, with all these Sparshotts around."

"You've said it," grinned the cowman.

Ebenezer Sparshott leaned back heavily against the rock. He was almost fainting with loss of blood; but his deep, sunken eyes burned at the Rio Kid.

"I'll remember you," he muttered, faintly. "I'll sure remember you."

"I guess I take that kindly," said the Kid, cheerily. "Remember at the same time that you want to be mighty sudden on the shoot, feller, if you stir up trouble with me next time we meet up; I sure might blow a hole through your cabeza next time. Mr. Loring, now you've got hold of your gun, likely this bulldozer Rube would jump at a leetle gun-play, with me looking on to see all fair and square."

"I guess I want him to," said the cowman, his eyes gleaming at the younger Sparshott.

"What about it, feller?" asked the Kid. "I've had to shoot up your pard, but your still spry and lively, and if you want to get on with this hyer feud, I'll hand you a gat and see fair play. Mr. Loring is ready and willing; what about you?"

Rube shook his head. "I guess I don't want any gun-play," he said, sullenly.

"Not on a fair break, what?" grinned the Kid. "Yep! I reckon I had sized you up pretty well, you dog-goned geck. You sure want to get the pull on a man, two to one, that's your style. That's what's the matter with you, you gink."

Rube gritted his teeth. "I've got to look arter my brother—he's sure hard hit—"

"He sure is, and you can look after him all you want," said the Kid. "Take him home and tell him to be a good little man when a Texan puncher is around." The Rio Kid whistled, and the black-muzzled mustang came loping from the mesquite thickets. "I guess these Sparshotts get my goat, Mr. Loring, and I'm hitting the trail pronto. If you're coming my way, I'll walk a piece with you—unless you figure on borrowing a Sparshott cayuse."

Kent shook his head. "I reckon I can walk," he said. "Let's get on, puncher—this gun sure burns my hand when there's a Sparshott around. You Rube, you reckon you don't want any gun-play?"

"Nope!" snarled Rube.

Kent beited the gun. "After this, it's shooting on sight," he said. "Chew on that, you dog-goned coyote! I'm ready, puncher."

And the Rio Kid and his new acquaintance walked up the trail towards Wildcat, the grey mustang following; and the Sparshotts were lost to view behind them.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Kid finds a Job!

THE Rio Kid was not given to walking; like a true cow-puncher, he hated being afoot, and would not have gone fifty yards out of the saddle by choice. But he walked cheerily enough with the young Montana cowman, who had to go afoot, the hack having long vanished from sight. And he did not find the walk dull, for he talked cheerily on the way with his new acquaintance, and learned a good deal of the new country he found himself in. Kent told him of the history of the Sparshott feud, which for ten years and more had accounted for most of the mortality in the Wildcat section. Such feuds the Kid had

heard of often enough; they were not uncommon in his own country of Texas; and the tale was not new to his ears. The quarrel had started with the lynching of Peter Sparshott, suspected of cow-stealing—the necktie party having been led by a Loring. The whole clan of Sparshott had taken up the quarrel, and shooting affrays in the streets of Wildcat, and in the lonely gulches, followed—now a Loring, now a Sparshott, had been found shot up; the slayer sometimes known, sometimes only guessed. It had gone on till of the Lorings only young Kent remained living; and of the more numerous clan of the Sparshotts only three—the two brothers who had held up Kent on the trail, and another who had not been on the scene.

"I guess it was a case of six of one, and just as many of the other," Kent told the Kid, frankly. "This is a wild country, and galoots are rather quick to shoot; and nobody knows for dead sure whether old Peter Sparshott did rustle them cows; though most folks figured that he did; they had more cows on the Sparshott ranch than ever they could have accounted for, and they've got more now, I reckon. But I was a little kid when it began, and I was sure willing to let it come to an end, and I told them so—it's a hard row to hoe in this country without packing a gun every time you go out to rope a cow or mend a fence. But they wouldn't let it drop—the Sparshotts are a hard crowd. They're yellow, too, the three of them that are left—look at the way they roped me in to-day. I guess it will be shooting on sight after this—I'm not taking any more chances of that sort. They're three to one and they may get me. I guess a Texas puncher won't be on hand to horn in next time," he added, with a smile.

The Kid grinned. "I'm sure glad I was on hand," he said. "I reckon it might be better for your health to pull up stakes and look for a new country."

"I guess so; but I ain't quitting," said Kent. "Besides, my land's here, and no Sparshott is going to drive me off it. Not that it amounts to shucks," he added, ruefully. "I had to fire my last man; what with cattle being run off or shot, and fences burned, and wells choked, and the rest of it, my ranch has gone all to pieces. The Sparshotts have a big ranch and a rough crowd of punchers, and they've been too much for me."

The Kid looked at him. They had come to a fork in the trail, and Kent halted.

"You going on to Wildcat?" he asked.

"That was what I figured on," said the Kid.

"I break off here to get to my shebang."

The Kid paused.

He liked the Montana cowman; and he found Kent Loring a fellow after his own heart. He was interested in him; and in the losing fight he was waging against his enemies. No doubt it was the Rio Kid's old besetting weakness that was finding him out once more: horning into another man's troubles.

"You allow you fired your last man?" the Kid asked, thoughtfully.

"Yep."

"Why—if you don't mind a galoot asking."

Kent laughed. "All Wildcat knows why," he answered. "Because there was nothing left to pay him another week's money."

"Then you're all on your lonesome now?"

"Just that."
"Ranching on your lonesome own?" said the Kid. "And with the pesky Sparshotts gunning after you. You sure have a day's work to get through every day, Mr. Loring."

"All that, and a little over," answered Kent. "I'd sell up and pull out, only I ain't letting the Sparshotts drive me away."

"Any stock left on the land?"
"Pesky few. A dozen cows and a couple of horses," answered Kent. "And I reckon I may find those cows drove, when I get back. I've been to Butte on the railroad to fix up a mortgage, if I could—but the money galoots don't want mortgages on Wildcat lands. They wouldn't give me ten dollars on a sale, let alone a mortgage. But I guess I'm keeping on."

"You want a new man?"
"I sure do, but I keep on tolling you there ain't any pay for a man on my ranch," he said. "And a man on the Loring lands has a good chance of being shot from behind a tree. You looking for a job in Montana?"

"You get me," assented the Kid.
"You'll find a better, and you couldn't find a worse," said Kent. "You ride on to Wildcat and you'll land a job fast enough if you know how to handle a rope and tie up a steer."

The Kid chuckled. "That's where I live," he said. "They used to say on the Double Bar that I was fairly good with the steers. Look here, Mr. Loring, I've a hunch that I'd like to work on your ranch for a spell."

"Forget it," said Kent. "No cowman works for no pay, and find himself in food."

"I guess that will suit me, for a spell," said the Kid. "If you've got only a dozen cows left, the work sure won't break me. And if the Sparshotts come gunning after you, I'm the very galoot you want around."

Kent paused. "Look here, puncher," he said. "I don't know your name—"

"You can call me Kid Carfax."

"Well, Kid Carfax, I get you," said Kent. "You'd like to lend a galoot a hand in his trouble, and you're a white man to make the offer. But it ain't good enough, Mr. Carfax. After shooting up Eben Sparshott, you'll have the whole crowd on your trail; and you want to ride, cowboy, and ride as fast as your critter can hit the trail; that's what you want. After what you've done for me, I should be real sorry to see you laid out on the plains with a bullet-hole through your head."

The Kid laughed. "You reckon you're obliged to me, some, for horning in yonder on the trail?" he asked.

"Yep."
"Make it square, then, by handing me a job on your ranch as long as I want to hang on. No pay, and grub-stake myself," said the Kid. "I've sure got a hunch that it will suit me."

"If you put it like that—"

"I sure do."
"Then it's a cinch," said Kent. "I guess you'll soon get fed-up and want to pull out; but so long as you want to hang on at my ranch, you're more than welcome, and I'll be dog-gone glad to have you there!" he added frankly.

"It's a cinch," said the Kid.
And with the grey mustang following, the Rio Kid turned off the trail with the cowman, and struck across country for the Loring Ranch.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Attack!

KID CARFAX—for the name of the Rio Kid was never used by him on his wanderings since he had pulled out of the Rio Grande country—looked round him with interest as he reached the home of his friend. Kent's description of the place had prepared him for poor quarters, and the quarters were poor enough. At one time it had been a prosperous little ranch, but frontier feuds did not make for a continuance of prosperity. Here and there round the buildings fragments of burnt fences showed in the grass—a burnt barn made a heap of black ruin—and on the shutters of the ranch house itself, unpainted for years, the gashes of bullets were clearly visible. More than once, the Kid figured, that little timber building had stood a siege, with plenty of lead flying. There were signs on all sides of the havoc wrought by bitter and unceasing enmity—an enmity that never slept by day or night. But desolate as the place was, Kent's face brightened when he reached it, and the Kid could see that he was relieved.

"I reckon they made sure of getting me, coming back from the railroad," Kent remarked. "I sure figured that they might have been hyer while I was gone to Butte, and I'd find the ranch burning when I got back. But they reckoned for sure they'd get me on the trail."

The Kid whistled.

"What about the sheriff?" he asked. "Ain't it his business to keep a man's house from being burned while he's away?"

"I guess the sheriff sings small when the Sparshotts are around," answered Kent. "They're a hard crowd, and they've got a tough bunch at their ranch, and the sheriff don't want no trouble with them. Besides, who's to prove it up against them? I reckon they don't bring witnesses with them when they burn my fences and fire my barns and drive off my cows. There's law and judges down at Butte if I want them, but I guess I've no use for them. It was sure Eben Sparshott who fired that barn, but his whole bunch would swear that he was at home at the ranch when it was fired. Feuds in the cow country ain't settled in law courts, Mr. Carfax."

"I sure know that," assented the Kid. "But you've got a hard row to hoe with that crowd against you, feller."

"Sure!" said Kent. "Every galoot in Wildcat figures that they'll get me soon or late, and I dare say they're right. What I'm afraid of is that they'll get you, Mr. Carfax, if you bed down here."

"I guess I'm chancing that," said the Kid carelessly. "Where's the horses and cows you told me of? I don't see them."

"The cows are at pasture in a hollow where they wouldn't be found in a hurry," said Kent, "and the hosses are trail-roped by the creek—among the cedars yonder. You can turn your cayuse into the shed. There's a heap of alfalfa there. Let's get into the shebang."

The Kid carried his slicker pack into the timber ranch house. Kent made a fire in the wide chimney, and the Kid carried water from the creek. The well close by the house, Kent explained, was choked—a dead mule had been pitched into it one dark night. The Kid's face was thoughtful as he sat at supper with the young rancher. He was not sorry that he had thrown in his lot, for the time, with Kent Loring; he was glad



THE CHALLENGE! Outside the hut, in the bright moonlight, a tall, powerful man could be seen beating on the door with a heavy quirt. "Come out, Kent Loring, you gol-darned skunk!" roared the intruder. "Come out, man to man!" (See Chapter 4.)

that he was there to help a white man who was down on his luck. But the game that Kent was playing was a losing game; the Kid could see that. He was playing a lone hand against big odds, and if the Wildcat galoots figured that his enemies were sure to get him, the Kid opined that the Wildcat galoots were not far off in their guess. All the more because he realised that very clearly, the Rio Kid was glad that he had happened on the Sparshott feud, and it was no regret to him that he found himself ranged on the weaker side against the stronger. That had always been the Kid's way. If ever a man needed a friend to stand by him, this Montana cow-man did; and the Kid, who was an outlaw in his own country, was just the man to do it.

"I guess they've got you, pard," the Kid remarked, as he negotiated beans and bacon, mostly from his own pack. "You don't figure on running off the cattle from the Sparshott Ranch, and burning their fences, and poisoning their wells."

"That's not a white man's game," said Kent. "They're yellow, and that's what's the matter with the whole crowd. I'd have let the feud end if they'd been willing; but if it goes on, I ain't following their methods."

"A yellow galoot fights yellow, and a white man fights white," said the Kid approvingly. "But they've got you if it goes on, feller. Looks to me as if it's coming near the finish."

Kent shrugged his shoulders. "All Wildcat's told me that," he answered. "I sure know it, but I ain't quitting."

"Good for you!" said the Kid. "Eben Sparshott will give you a rest

for a piece, anyhow. He won't use his gun again in a hurry."

"That pesky coyote Rube, and his brother Walt, will be getting busy," I reckon," said Kent. "Look here, puncher, it's an even break whether they round me up in this shebang this very night. They sure know I've got no men left on the ranch, and we're miles out of Wildcat; and if the Wildcat galoots knew, I reckon there isn't a galoot there who would come into the feud. I'd sure be glad of your company, but if you're here when they come you'll get rounded up along with me; and they'll be fighting mad when Eben is taken home with a broken arm."

The Kid looked at him curiously.

"You figure that they may round you up to-night," he said, "and you ain't riding?"

"Nope!"

"Same here," said the Kid cheerily. "If they round you up, Loring, they'll sure round up two of us; and maybe they'll be sorry they didn't stay at home in their little bunks. Quien sabe?"

The Kid looked out at the doorway of the ranch-house before bedding down. He locked the door of the shed where his mustang was bedded, and returned to the ranch-house; and Kent locked door and shutters before they went to their blankets.

The Rio Kid slept soundly and peacefully. He knew that he would awaken at the first sound of an enemy, came he never so stealthily. But it was not stealthily that the enemy came. The midnight moon hung over the timber building, when there was a clattering crash at the pine-wood door, which filled the rancho with deafening sound.

The heavy butt of a quirt was crashing on the door. The blows suddenly ceased, and a hoarse voice shouted:

"Kent Loring! Wake up, you galoot, wake up!"

Kent did not answer. He was fumbling with a rifle in the darkness of the interior of the ranch-house.

"You Kent Loring!" roared the voice. "You dog-goned coward, are you afeared to open your door?"

"That's Walt Sparshott!" murmured Kent. "I know his toot! I guess he was sure mad when Rube brought Eben home with a broken arm. You're for it now, puncher, as bad as me."

Crash! crash!

The quirt was beating on the door again. The Kid stepped to a wooden shutter, and put his eye to a crack; there was no glass in the windows of the Loring ranch-house. Outside, in the bright moonlight, he sighted a tall, powerful, black-bearded man, with two guns low-slung in his holsters, beating on the door with a heavy quirt.

"Come out, Kent Loring, you gold-darned skunk!" roared Walt Sparshott, crashing the quirt on the door again. "Come out, man to man!"

"You're alone?" called back Kent.

"Sure! If you ain't afeared to open your door, you'll sure see that I'm alone!" leered Walt.

The Kid heard Kent breathing hard, and there was a sound of a bar moving at the ranch-house door. In an instant the Kid gripped the cow-man's arm.

"Let up!" he whispered. "Wolves hunt in packs, you darn gink; and I guess there's a pack of them in cover. Let up!"

Kent drew his hand back from the door.

"You're sure?" he asked.

"You watch out!" breathed the Kid with a grin in the darkness.

He went back to the cracked shutter. Kent, with his eye to a chink in another shutter, watched. Where the Kid stood, the crack was wide enough for a bullet to pass; and his six-gun was in his hand now. The Kid's keen eyes was on the ruins of the burnt barn at a little distance. An insect stirring in the grass would not have escaped the Kid's watchful eye. From a heap of burnt timber, the brim of a Stetson hat showed, revealing a man hidden in cover—one of a crowd, as the Kid figured. He watched and waited, and as the quirt crashed on the door again,

and Walt Sparshott shouted taunts, the Stetson hat emerged more and more from its cover, as the man who wore it watched his leader. And when the Kid saw enough of the hat, he fired.

Bang!

There was a wild yell, as the Stetson went spinning, and a man leaped into view, with blood running down his face. He was out of sight again in a moment, though his yelling and cursing were still heard, and the Kid chuckled. Walt Sparshott ceased to beat on the door, and with a bound, vanished into cover. And the next moment, from nine or ten different points, rifle-shots rang out.

"What did I tell you?" chuckled the Kid.

Kent drew a deep breath.

"It's the whole Sparshott bunch?" he muttered.

"I reckon so—and they've found us at home, and ready for a rookus!" said the Rio Kid, and his laugh rang out cheerily, while rifle after rifle roared, and bullets crashed and rang on the ranch-house.

(How the Kid fares in this amazing adventure you will learn in next week's roaring tale of the West.)

THE END.

"LEVISON'S TRIUMPH!"

(Continued from page 11.)

head, but there was a sound of rapid running feet on the footpath.

The ruffian paused, and glared round, with an oath.

"Help!" yelled Mr. Selby. "This way! Help!"

He would have given a year's salary at that moment to have seen a policeman's helmet.

But it was not a constable, it was a breathless schoolboy who dashed up. It was Ernest Levison. Levison had only been a little way further in the woods, where his minor had caught him up. Frank had been explaining why he had followed his brother when the Form master's cries had fallen on their ears. Those cries had spurred Ernest into immediate action.

"Stand back, you young fool!" shouted the footpad, as Levison rushed on the scene, and the footpad swung up the cudgel.

Levison did not heed.

Right at the ruffian he dashed, his eyes gleaming, his face set. The cudgel swept down, but a rapid swerve saved Levison from the blow. It grazed his arm as he sprang upon the footpad.

With a spring like a tiger he was on the ruffian, and the burly rascal went staggering backwards under the rush.

Crash!

The man was on his back, Levison on top, clutching at him desperately. The cudgel went into the grass as the man sprawled.

But he caught at Levison, and grasped him in his powerful hands.

Frank Levison came tearing up.

Levison and the footpad, grasping each other desperately, were rolling over and over in the grass in desperate conflict.

It was boy against man, and the man was burly and muscular; but the boy was as hard as nails, and desperately determined. Frank halted, gasping, staring at the terrible scene with starting eyes. He saw the cudgel in the grass, and made a spring for it, and caught it in his hand.

"Help! Help!" Mr. Selby was yelling; but it did not come into his terrified mind to help himself.

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Frank leaped towards the struggling combatants, grasping the cudgel, his eyes blazing. The footpad released one hand; his fist was clenched, and he dashed it with terrible force at the junior who was grasping him. The blow landed between Ernest Levison's eyes—a blow that was like the kick of a horse. A faint moan escaped Levison of the Fourth, and his hold on the ruffian relaxed, and he rolled helplessly in the grass, stunned by that terrible blow.

The footpad, panting, was staggering up, when Frank's blow reached him. With all his force the fag struck, and the cudgel crashed on the ruffian's head.

There was a yell from the footpad, and he collapsed in the grass and lay still.

"Ernie!"

Frank Levison dropped the cudgel, and fell on his knees in the grass beside his brother.

"Ernie!" he panted.

Levison did not speak.

Frank raised his head; it hung like lead in the fag's hands. Ernest Levison's eyes were closed; there was blood on his face, and he was quite insensible.

Mr. Selby tried to pull himself to—"Ernie! Ernie!"

The hot tears ran down Frank's face, and dropped on the white, insensible face of his brother.

The hot tears ran down his face, and dropped on the white, insensible face of his brother.

"Is—is that Levison? Is—is he hurt?" panted Mr. Selby huskily.

"Oh, heavens! He is killed!"

"Impossible!" gasped Mr. Selby.

He bent over him. His own face was ghastly white.

"He is not dead!" he breathed. "He is stunned! We must get him back to the school, Levison minor!"

He lifted Levison's shoulders, and Frank took his feet; and between them the insensible junior was carried up the footpath, back towards Rylcombe Lane.

It seemed an age to Levison minor before they reached the stile, and his brother was lifted over into the lane. Mr. Selby leaned on the stile and panted for breath. There was a gleam of bright head-lights in the shadowy road; the whir of a car. Frank Levison ran into the middle of the road, and held up his hand, and shouted.

The motor-car whirred to a halt.

"What—"

"Help!" panted Frank. "My brother's hurt, dying, perhaps! Give me a lift with him, for the love of Heaven!"

The motorist jumped down.

A few hours later that evening all St. Jim's was in a buzz. Ernest Levison had been brought back to the school in a car by Mr. Selby and his minor, and there was not a fellow from the Sixth to the Second who had not heard the story of the expelled junior's gallantry.

The fellows went about speaking in low voices, for Levison was lying in the sanatorium, still unconscious. All the next day his condition was serious, but on the following morning brighter news reached the anxious juniors outside the sanatorium walls. Levison was improving! He was getting better rapidly, and now there was no fear of his losing his life.

It was great news, for in those two dark days Ernest Levison had regained his old popularity. And there was something else which cheered the waiting school. It started as a rumour, but developed into solid fact, that Ernest Levison was not to leave St. Jim's!

When Levison was well enough to receive visitors, Tom Merry & Co. were the first to be shown to his bedside. They found him sitting up in bed, his forehead still bandaged, but there was a bright smile on his pale face.

"Jolly glad to see you fellows," he said. "My luck's held good, after all."

"You mean you are not going?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yes; the Head told me I'm to stay."

"Bwavo!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "The fellows will be pleased to see you again."

And Gussy was quite right. When Levison resumed his old place in the Fourth Form, he received a hearty welcome there from his Form-fellows—and from all the Lower School, for that matter. There was hardly a fellow in School House and New House who did not rejoice at Levison's Triumph!

THE END.

(*"ST. JIM'S TO THE RESCUE!"* is the title of next week's rousing long story of Tom Merry & Co., of St. Jim's. Don't miss it!)