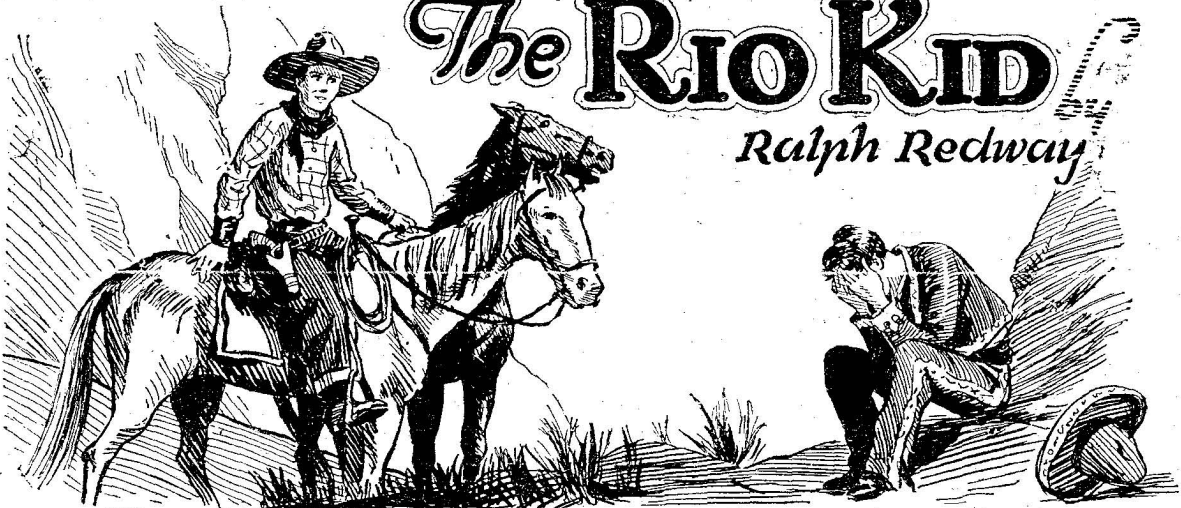


THE TENDERFOOT

He was sitting on the trail crying when the Rio Kid first met him—this tenderfoot. What he was doing in such a wild country as Colorado the Kid did not know—but he did know that this greenhorn wanted looking after!

The RIO KID

Ralph Redway



ANOTHER ROARING, LONG COMPLETE TALE OF WESTERN ADVENTURE!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Kid in Colorado!

THE few pilgrims whom the Rio Kid passed on the Hard Tack trail, in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, stared at him. The Kid knew why, and he did not mind. He knew that he cut a rather singular figure in the mountain mining country.

It was long since the Kid had ridden with the Double-Bar bunch, on the banks of the Rio Frio; but the Kid was never anything but a cowpuncher, in outward aspect, at least.

The Stetson hat and the neck-scarf were common enough in the Hard Tack country; but the baggy goatskin chaparejos and the jingling spurs were rare; and the riata coiled at the Kid's saddle-bow was probably the only lasso within fifty miles of Hard Tack. He looked like a puncher who had wandered far—very far—from the cow country, and the pilgrims who passed him on the trail no doubt wondered what he was doing there.

The trail he was following led to nowhere but Hard Tack; and Hard Tack was a mining town, tucked away in the remotest recesses of the sierra.

But the Kid rode cheerily on his way, heedless of curious glances. The pilgrims who passed him were few; and fewer and fewer as the steady lope of the black-muzzled mustang carried him higher and higher into the rugged mountains.

There was little traffic to Hard Tack—far from the railways, far from telegraph and telephone, unvisited even by a stage-coach. Traffic to Hard Tack went on foot or on horseback; baggage went on packed burros; and there was little enough of either.

The trail, scarcely marked, followed the bottom of a vast canyon, with rugged steep and rocky ridges on either side, deep rocky draws, and arroyos dried up in the sun. Somewhere at the upper end of the canyon lay the camp of Hard Tack—as wild and primitive a mining-camp as any in the Rocky Mountains.

In a day's ride the Kid had passed only three or four pilgrims—all but one

This week:

"THE TENDERFOOT!"

obviously mining prospectors. One had looked more like a gunman; and that one, after staring at the Kid's chaps and riata, had measured him carefully with his eye. Whereupon the Kid had smiled, and carelessly dropped his hand on a gun. And the stranger, thinking better of it, had passed on his way, having read in the Kid's sunburnt face that he was not a suitable subject for a hold-up.

Hold-ups, the Kid had been told, were common enough on the Hard Tack trail. He had no objection whatever to breaking the monotony of a lonely ride by a little "rookus" with a hold-up man. The Kid was not looking for trouble; in fact, it was to get away from trouble that he had left his own country of Texas; but if it came along the Kid was cheerfully prepared to meet it.

For some hours now the Kid had passed no one, and heard no sound but the clinking of his mustang's hoofs on the hard trail. Once or twice he had picked up signs which showed, to the puncher's keen eye, that there was another horseman ahead of him on the trail, and he had wondered whether he would overtake the rider before he reached Hard Tack.

When the silence of the great canyon was broken at last, the break came suddenly. Ahead of the Kid, the encroaching rocks of the canyon sides narrowed it to a mere gorge, through which the trail wound irregularly. From the gorge came a sudden clatter of hoof-beats, and a riderless horse came charging wildly back towards the Kid, with reins and stirrups dangling.

The Kid grinned.

The rider ahead of him, whoever he was, had lost his horse. The Kid had all a cowpuncher's contempt for a

galoot who could not ride. But he was good-natured. The man who had been dismounted, and whose horse had run away, was in a hard case; for it was still some miles to the camp, and the going was rough. The Kid was more than willing to help. He drew in his mustang, and jerked the riata loose from the bow of his saddle.

The runaway came galloping down the rocky trail with clattering hoofs and tossing head. He shied away from the Kid, and rushed on. And as he rushed the Kid cast the rope with an unerring hand.

Whiz!

The loop settled over the tossing head.

The black-muzzled mustang braced himself for the shock, with forefeet firmly planted, as in the old days when the Kid had roped in steers on the grasslands of Texas.

The runaway rushed on till the slack of the rope tautened out; and then came the shock.

As if a giant's hand had plucked him from his feet, the runaway went over, with flying heels.

There was a wild crashing of hoofs, as the terrified horse scrambled to its feet.

The Kid smiled, and drew in the slack of the rope.

The horse, wild enough a few moments before, came in like a lamb. The Rio Kid caught the dangling reins, and then unhooked the lariat and coiled it. Leading the recaptured horse, he rode on into the gorge.

The horse's owner could not be far away, he knew. He wondered what sort of a tenderfoot it was who had allowed his horse to throw him and get away.

"Shucks!" ejaculated the Kid.

He came suddenly in sight of the stranger.

On a boulder by the side of the trail a figure was seated—a slim, slight figure, which looked like that of a boy, younger than the Kid himself.

His hat had fallen off, revealing thick, glossy black hair. From that, and the velvet jacket, the red sash, and

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the long spurs, the Kid guessed that the dismounted rider was a Mexican.

The Kid made a grimace.

"A greaser!" he murmured. "And what the thunder is he doing?"

The stranger's face was buried in his hands.

The Kid stared at him blankly

He could not believe his eyes or his ears: but there was no doubt about the fact.

He was crying!

"Well, carry me home to die!" ejaculated the Kid.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Tenderfoot!

"SAY, BO!" the Kid shouted as he rode up, leading the horse.

The lad seated on the boulder gave a convulsive start, and dropped his hands from his face, and stared at the puncher.

His cheeks were wet with tears.

The Kid grinned; he could not help it. The face he was looking at was a very good-looking face—a smooth, beardless face, almost too soft in its outlines to be called handsome. That the fellow was a tenderfoot was obvious at a glance; and he was about the tenderest tenderfoot that the Kid had ever struck.

Contempt the Kid could not help feeling. That any galoot more than six years old could sit down and cry because his horse had thrown him and run away, the Kid could not have believed had he not seen it with his own eyes, and undoubtedly it got his goat. But his contempt was good-natured. He slipped from his mustang, still holding the reins of the recaptured runaway.

"Say, bo! Is this your critter?" he grinned.

The tenderfoot started up.

His handsome, dusky face was flushed.

"Oh, senior! You have caught him for me!" he exclaimed.

"Just that!" grinned the Kid. "I guess it was easy enough to rope him in, feller. Don't you know how to ride?"

"Si, si, senior! But——"

"He's sure an ornery cayuse," said the Kid. "You going on to Hard Tack?"

"Si, senior!"

"You're a long way from your country, feller," said the Kid, eyeing him. "I guess there ain't many Mexicans up here in Colorado."

"Si, senior."

The boy stepped towards the horse.

"You figure you can manage him now?" asked the Kid. "I'll sure put the rope on him if you say so."

The boy flushed again.

"But I can manage him," he said. "He would not have thrown me, but—but I was tired, and—and——" He broke off and picked up his hat, and then swung himself into the saddle.

"If you're hitting Hard Tack, I guess I'll ride a piece with you, feller," said the Kid. "I'll sure keep an eye on that cayuse, and see that he don't play any more tricks."

"May bien, senior."

The soft Spanish came pleasantly to the ears of the Rio Kid. It was a tongue he had hardly heard since the day he had ridden out of Texas across the Staked Plain. The Kid did not like greasers. He had all the prejudices of the Texas cowpuncher. But he could not help taking some interest in this tenderfoot—the most utterly helpless tenderfoot he had ever struck, and who

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seemed so utterly out of place in the wildest section of the mining country of Colorado.

"You ain't on the wrong trail, feller?" he asked.

The boy started.

"Is not this the trail to Hard Tack?" he exclaimed.

"It sure is."

"Then it is the right trail for me."

"Now, look here, feller!" said the Kid seriously. "It ain't my business to horn in, and I guess I've no call to sling around advice to strangers. But a galoot of your heft had better keep clear of Hard Tack. Savy?"

"Porque? Why?"

The Kid grinned.

"Hard Tack is sure a rough proposition," he answered. "It's the wildest camp left in these parts. They pack guns at Hard Tack, feller, and use them mighty sudden, so I've heard. It sure ain't any place for a tenderfoot, and you're likely to hit up against a lot of trouble. You want to hit the back trail, feller, and get out of this country just as fast as your cayuse can scatter the dust."

The boy shook his head.



The greenest tenderfoot in the West—but the Rio Kid's strange companion through many still stranger adventures.

"Look here!" said the Kid. "I ain't pressed for time. I reckon I'm my own boss these days. I'll sure ride back down the trail with you, and see you come to no harm. I'll land you at White Pine, where you can pick up a hack for the railroad and get clear. You don't want to be cavorting round in this sierra hunting for trouble. You'll find a whole heap. Is it a cinch?"

The boy looked at him, and, to the Kid's surprise, smiled.

"You are very good, senior. But I am going to Hard Tack."

"You don't belong there, I guess?"

"No, I am a stranger in this country. But I have business at Hard Tack, and I must go."

"You got friends there?"

"No; I know no one."

"Shucks!" said the Kid.

It was no business of his, he told himself. If this tenderfoot wanted to horn into the wildest, roughest mining camp in the Rocky Mountains, it did not matter to anyone but himself. That he would hit trouble there was certain, and the Kid had not come into Colorado to collect up other galoot's troubles. But the Kid simply could not let the matter rest where it was.

"You pack a gun?" he asked.

"No, senior."

"Know how to use one?"

"Very little."

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid again. "I tell you, feller, what you want to do is to beat it out of this country just as fast as you know how. Why, they hold up pilgrims on this trail every other day. Half the hombres at Hard Tack are wanted by sheriffs all over the State. I tell you it's a bad man's camp."

"I know it all," said the boy, with a nod, "and I am going there. Adios, senior!"

He rode up the trail.

The Rio Kid stared after him, gave his mustang a touch, and followed. They rode up the gorge side by side.

"I reckon we'll hit Hard Tack together, feller," said the Kid cheerfully. "I reckon we'll make it by nightfall."

The Mexican nodded, and they rode on side by side. Many times the Kid's puzzled glance rested on his companion. What business the little tenderfoot could have at Hard Tack was a puzzle to him. The Kid judged his age at about sixteen. If he was older he did not look it. He could hardly be a prospector. He had no miner's outfit, and the Kid grinned at the thought of the boy prospecting for gold in the rugged mountains among the rough men of Hard Tack. He had sat down and cried when his horse threw him and left him. Yet there must be pluck in him somewhere, or he would not have kept on the trail after the warning the Kid had given him. The Rio Kid made a grimace. He knew what was going to happen. He was going to take this ornery tenderfoot under his wing and see him through. It was his way to help a lame dog over a stile, and he could not help it.

Thinking of his companion and of that troublesome prospect in store, the Kid was perhaps a little off his guard. Certainly he was taken by surprise when a horseman suddenly pushed out of a rocky draw, with a Winchester rifle at a level in his grip, and rapped out:

"Hands up!"

And the Kid, starting from his reverie, looked into the muzzle of the levelled Winchester and shrugged his shoulders, and obediently lifted his hands above his head.

It was a "hold-up"!

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Kid Takes the Chance!

"PONY UP!"

The command came harshly and gruffly.

The man with the rifle held the drop, and the Rio Kid knew better than to disregard a levelled Winchester with a finger on the trigger, and a keen, ruthless eye gleaming over it. He held his hands steadily above his head, submissive, smiling, watchful as a cat for a chance to come his way. The Rio Kid was not an easy man to hold up, or to get through when he was held up. But while he looked steadily at the road-agent, with the tail of his eye he observed the boy tenderfoot. He expected to see the dusky lad crumple up with terror, perhaps burst into tears. The Kid would have been surprised at nothing of that sort after what he had seen before. But he was surprised at the coolness of the tenderfoot, which was unexpected. The lad held up his hands as ordered over his sombrero, but they did not tremble, and his dusky face was calm, his black eyes steady.

The Kid was glad to see it. For although he was sitting his horse quietly with his hands up, covered by a repeating rifle ready to eject a stream of bullets at a second's notice, the Kid had a hunch that matters were not going all the hold-up man's way. And he did

not want any sob stuff going on when the shooting started.

Certainly, at the moment, the Rio Kid did not look as if he was thinking of shooting. There was a resigned grin on his face, and he nodded to the horse-man, whose face was hidden behind a black scarf, drawn round it to hide his identity, only the eyes being left visible.

"You call the game this time, pardner," said the Kid cheerily. "If there's anything you want give it a name."

"I guess I want your roll, puncher," said the masked man, "and I sure hope they paid you off when you left your ranch."

The Kid chuckled.

"I guess it's dog's ages since I was paid off on a ranch, feller," he said. "But there's sure a roll in my belt. I guess I'm willing to oblige; but how am I going to pony up while I'm reaching for the sky, pardner?"

"Keep 'em up!"

"It's your say-so," assented the Kid amiably. "I'll keep 'em up till the cows come home if you want."

"And not so much chewing the rag!" granted the road-agent. "You try any tricks, puncher, and this hyer rifle goes off, pronto."

"Do I look like trying tricks?" said the Kid in a pained tone. "I sure know when I'm at the little end of the horn, pardner, and I ain't bucking agin a Winchester at close range."

The horseman pushed closer. Keeping the rifle at a level, with the butt under his right arm, his finger on the trigger, and the muzzle nearly touching the Kid he reached out with his left hand and jerked away the puncher's guns.

It was neatly done—the Kid covered all the time, without a chance to resist unless at the price of a bullet through his body. As a man who knew how to handle guns himself, the Kid rather admired the road-agent's style; though his determination was not lessened to get the better of him before they parted. Evidently the man knew the game, and this was not the first time he had held up pilgrims on the trail. For, all the while, he had one eye on the tenderfoot, and was ready to shift the rifle and shoot him down if he showed a sign of lowering his hands. But the boy remained motionless on his horse, his hands up, evidently not dreaming of resistance.

"Now light down, puncher," came the order.

"Sure!"

The Rio Kid alighted.

"Up with 'em!"

The words were snarled out as the Kid's hands strayed seemingly by accident towards the pocket in his chaps. And the Kid laughed and his hands went up again. The road-agent leaned over and jerked out the little hidden derringer from the pocket of the chaps.

"You know the whole game, feller," said the Kid. "I guess you've sure had some practice on the trails."

"I reckon I've seen a puncher shoot from the pocket before now, hombre," answered the road-agent. "Stand back and keep 'em up!"

"You bet."

The Rio Kid began to wonder whether he really was beaten to it this time. He was disarmed now, and the eyes that gleamed over the black scarf were watchful as a cougar's.

The road-agent turned to the tenderfoot, and yet he was watching the Rio Kid all the time.

"Light down, tenderfoot!"

The boy obediently alighted.



AT CLOSE QUARTERS. The Kid plunged at the robber so quickly that the rifle was knocked up even as it was turned upon him. Bang! The bullet sped over the Kid's shoulder, and the next moment the road-agent staggered back under a crashing blow. (See Chapter 3.)

"Line up beside that hombre."

"Si, senior."

The tenderfoot backed to the side of the trail, standing beside the Rio Kid, only a couple of feet from his side. The Kid's mustang was standing like a rock in the trail; but the young Mexican's horse was pawing the ground restlessly. Suddenly he swerved round and dashed away back up the trail, with a jingle of bridle and stirrup. The road-agent took no heed; but there was an exclamation of dismay from the tenderfoot.

"My horse—"

"I guess he's gone. Stand back, you loosed geck!" snarled the road-agent; and the tenderfoot, who had made a move forward, stood back obediently.

The runaway horse vanished in the shadows of the canyon.

"I guess I'll give you a lift on my mustang into town, when this gent is through with us," said the Kid cheerily. "That cayuse is sure ornery."

"Pony up!" came the rapping order from the road-agent. "You first, puncher. Show up your roll."

He dismounted, and stepped towards the Kid.

"Pronto!" smiled the Kid.

"You can put down your paws. Get a move on!"

The Kid drew a roll from the little pouch inside his belt. There were fifty

dollars in that roll; and the Kid's face did not betray there was twenty times as much concealed in his boots.

Since he had lost a roll in the sheep country of Wyoming, the Kid had been very careful. He tossed the roll to the road-agent, who caught it with his free hand, looked at it, and dropped it into a pocket. Fifty dollars was as much as he expected to raise from a fellow who looked like a cowpuncher, and he gave a grunt indicating that he was satisfied. He returned to the tenderfoot.

"Here you, Mex!" he snapped.

"Senior, I have very little—"

"Every little helps, I reckon!" grinned the hold-up man. "I ain't grumbling at that, if you hand over all you've got. Pronto!"

The tenderfoot hesitated.

"Pony up, feller," advised the Kid. "This gent holds the drop, and he ain't here to argue. You want to pony up."

"You sure do, Mex," said the road agent. "I guess you want to hurry, too, if you ain't looking to be fixed for the coyotes."

Slowly the tenderfoot drew a little leather purse from an inner pocket of his velvet jacket.

He opened it and took out a small roll of bills, which he handed over to the trail-robber.

"Hold on!" grinned the road-agent.

as the boy was about to replace the leather sack. "I reckon there's more to it than that."

"Oh, no, senor; I have given you all the money I have!" exclaimed the Mexican. "I have left only papers."

"Hand them over!"

"They belong to me, and I cannot give them to you," said the tenderfoot in an unsteady voice, but with an obstinacy that astonished the Kid. "I swear that they are only papers, and I must keep them."

The road-agent stared at him, over the black scarf that disguised his hard face.

The muzzle of his rifle was only three feet from the graceful, delicate figure of the tenderfoot. A pressure of his finger was instant death. Yet the boy replaced the little leather sack in his pocket and faced him, pale as death, but evidently determined.

"Oh, sho!" gasped the Kid.

This was the tenderfoot he had seen weeping on the trail—defying an armed thief to whose demands the Kid himself had yielded, knowing that the cards were against him. The Kid felt a throb of shame for the contempt he had felt for the boy.

"Waal, search me!" ejaculated the road-agent in astonishment. "If you want to hear this rifle talk, I guess it's your say-so, Mex. I guess I can lift that grip from your carcass after I've spilled your vingar over these here donicks. Hand over that grip, sharp, or——!"

"I will not!" exclaimed the boy passionately. "I tell you it is only papers, and I will not give them up!"

The blaze of ferocity that came into the road-agent's eyes over the black scarf told of his intention. On his own account the Rio Kid probably would not have taken the chance. He knew when to take a chance, and when not to take one; and this was a chance that was not to be taken by a wise man, if he could help it. But to see the tenderfoot shot down by his side was not in the Kid's programme.

If he had any chance at all it was because the road-agent's rage and amazement at the boy's defiance fixed his attention on the little Mexican. And when the Kid moved it was with the swiftness of the lightning flash. He plunged at the robber so suddenly that the rifle swung round on him a second too late as it roared. Instead of the muzzle meeting the Kid's chest, the barrel struck on his shoulder six inches from the muzzle—a fraction of a second made all the difference. The bullet rushed, with the stream of smoke, behind the Kid, as his clenched knuckles drove like a mallet into the masked face.

As he staggered under the crashing blow, the road-agent fired again, but his rifle unconsciously lifted as he staggered, and the bullet smashed through the crown of the Kid's Stetson, barely grazing the top of his head.

For a third shot the trail-thief had no time, for the Kid grasped the rifle with his left and forced it up, and his knee jammed into the pit of the robber's stomach with sickening force. The masked man crumpled up and fell on his side, gasping stertorously; and the next second the rifle was in the Kid's hands, the muzzle thrust into the bull neck of the trail-thief, grinding into the flesh.

"You want to keep quiet, feller!" drawled the Kid, and the dazed and breathless ruffian, who was grabbing at

a gun in his belt, desisted, just in time to stop the bullet from speeding.

"You darned gink!" he panted.

"Give your bean-box a rest, feller," smiled the Kid. "I guess this is my game, after all! I sure don't know why I don't blow your cabeza into little pieces, you gold-darned geek; but I sure will if you give me any trouble. Lie still, you coyote!"

And the road-agent lay still, his eyes burning at the Kid over the black scarf that masked his face.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

At Hard Tack!

"MADRE di Dios! Nuestra Senora!" panted the tenderfoot breathlessly.

He reeled against a rock by the trail, as if the strain had been too much for him, and he was shaking from head to foot.

"I guess it's all O.K. now, feller," said the Kid. "This gent is sure being reasonable, like a good little man. I guess you can take off his hardware."

"Si, amigo mio."

The tenderfoot pulled himself together.

While the Kid held the rifle-muzzle jammed in the trail-robber's neck, the tenderfoot bent over him and removed the revolver from his belt. He tossed it away among the rocks.

"New pick up my guns, feller."

The tenderfoot handed the Kid his guns. The Kid lowered the rifle, and stamped on the lock, and tossed it away. A six-gun was in his hand now, and the road-agent, watching him like a cat, did not move. The Rio Kid would have shot him up without the slightest compunction had he resisted, and his icy glance showed as much.

"Now take that rag off his face and tie up his paws with it, feller," drawled the Kid.

"Si, senor."

The road-agent made a convulsive movement, but he did not resist. The Kid's six-gun enforced obedience.

The black scarf was unwound from his face, and the Kid looked at him rather curiously. He saw a hard set of features—the face of a "bad" man, hard and ruthless; but the face was that of a stranger to him. With deft hands the tenderfoot bound the ruffian's wrists together.

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POPULAR WIRELESS

Out on Thurs., Aug. 30th. Make sure of a Copy.

"I reckon you can get on your hind legs now, hombre," said the Kid. And the man scrambled up.

He stood panting, his face contorted, far from recovered from the hard usage he had received at the Kid's hands.

"I guess I'll trouble you for my roll, hombre," said the Kid, and he took back his fifty dollars and the smaller roll that had been handed over by the Mexican. "You sure ran up against a snag when you horned in here, hombre."

"Ah, but you are a brave caballero, senor," said the Mexican, his dark eyes on the Kid's face.

The Kid laughed.

"I guess I'd never have taken the chance," he said. "I sure allowed it wasn't good enough, if you hadn't been such an ornery little cuss and as obstinate as a Mexican burro. Next time you get held up by a gunman, feller, you don't want to argue with him while he's got a gat in his grip. You want to talk turkey to a galoot with a gun."

"I could not give up the papers, senor," faltered the Mexican.

"They must sure be valuable papers, feller; but I guess they wouldn't be much use to you on the other side of Jordan."

The tenderfoot shook his head.

"I will die rather than part with them," he said.

"Then I reckon you shouldn't have toted them into the Hard Tack country," grinned the Kid. "Now you've had a sample of the country, do you want to hit the back trail? I'll sure make good my offer to see you safe down to White Pine."

Again the Mexican shook his head.

"I must go on," he answered. "I must go to Hard Tack. You do not understand, senor; but I have no choice."

"I sure don't catch on a whole lot," admitted the Kid. "But if you're still for Hard Tack, that goes. I reckon we'll tote this galoot along and hand him over to the town marshal."

The Mexican glanced down the canyon. The shadows were lengthening as the sun sank lower behind the mountains of Colorado, and the hoof-beats of the runaway had long died into silence.

"My horse is gone."

"You can sure borrow this galoot's cayuse," said the Kid. "He ain't fixed to raise any objections."

The tenderfoot smiled.

"Si, senor."

"You're going to hoof it, hombre," said the Kid. "Hit the trail ahead of us, and walk. Pronto!"

"You ain't toting me into Hard Tack?" muttered the road-agent savagely.

"I sure am," replied the Kid. "And if you figure on dodging away, hombre, remember that this six-gun will go off the same minute."

"I guess——"

"Quit chewing the rag, you gink! It ain't your say-so now! Get moving!"

A glint in the Kid's eyes warned the trail-thief to obey, and he slouched savagely along the trail. The Kid held the robber's horse for the tenderfoot to mount, and then swung himself upon the grey mustang.

With the road-agent, his hands bound behind him, tramping and stumbling along the rocky trail ahead, the Kid and his companion rode on towards the camp of Hard Tack.

There was a smile on the Rio Kid's sunburnt face. Every chance had been

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THE RIO KID!

(Continued from page 6.)

against him in the tussle with the road-agent, and he knew that he would never have taken that desperate chance had it not been to save the life of the young Mexican. But he had got away with it. And the Kid was glad that he was not, after all, going to ride into a town like Hard Tack without his guns. For the roll he cared little; but in Hard Tack it was much more likely than not that he would want his guns. Every man at Hard Tack packed a gun, and from what he had heard, the town marshal, Jeff Oakes, was as rough and ready as any gun-man in the camp. He needed to be, to keep anything like law in the wildest camp in Colorado.

"I reckon I ain't hornin' into your business, feller," the Kid remarked, as they rode at a walk behind the stumbling, cursing road-agent, a dozen paces ahead of them on the trail. "But if them papers in your sack is so pesky valuable, you want to keep 'em safer."

"They are of value, senor," stammered the Mexican. "At least, one paper is valuable—"

"Then why the thunder did you bring it into this country?" asked the Kid. "It ain't safe in your hands, feller, nohow."

"I know—I know! But it is only of value here—"

The Kid chuckled. "You've got some prospector's map to a gold-mine, I guess," he said, and he chuckled again as the tenderfoot started and coloured. "Sho! I ain't asking you questions, feller; but if it's any good, don't tell them about it at Hard Tack. And don't keep it where it is now. There's galoots in this section who will have it off you before you can say 'no sugar in mine.' You got a lining in your hat?"

"Si, senor." "Stick the paper under it, then, and keep it there. I guess your pockets will be gone through a dozen times before you've been a week in this country."

"Quien sabe?" said the Mexican, with a sigh. "It is good advice, senor, and I will take it."

The Kid rode a little ahead, placing himself between the tenderfoot and the road-agent, in case the latter should glance round. He was not keen to see the paper that the Mexican drew from the leather purse and concealed under the lining of his hat. It was no 'business' of his; moreover, the Kid did not believe for a moment that there was any value in it, as the little tenderfoot did. This tenderfoot was not the first, by many a hundred, who had come up into the sierra believing that he held a clue to a gold-mine.

With a clatter of hoofs, the Mexican rejoined him. "He gave the Kid a smile and a nod.

"All O.K. now?" asked the Kid, smiling, too.

"Si, senor."

A few minutes later the camp of Hard Tack was in sight—a straggling row of shacks and cabins strung along the vast wall of the canyon, with a mountain stream leaping and splashing by. Among the smaller buildings one large timber edifice stood out prominently, which the Kid guessed was the Hard Tack Hotel. Miners could be seen in the distance coming in from the claims—rough, red-shirted men with picks, and every man with a gun in a holster at his belt. Outside the hotel six or seven men were lounging. The stumbling road-agent turned his head, and gave the Kid a glare of savage enmity.

"You reckon you're totin' me into camp?"

"I sure do!" called back the Kid amiably. "Hoof it!"

"I guess you'll be sorry."

"I'm taking my chances on that," smiled the Kid. "Hoof it, I keep on telling you!"

The road-agent turned again, and stumbled on. Then, with a sudden bound, he sprang away among the rough boulders beside the trail.

The Kid's hand flashed to a gun.

The man, with desperate haste, scrambled away among the rocks, where a horse could not follow him. But the Kid's gun gleamed out in the sunlight, and in a second more a bullet would have sped. But the tenderfoot reached cover and caught the Kid's arm.

"Senor! Stop!"

"Let up!" shouted the Kid.

"Senor—"

For a moment the Rio Kid's eyes

glinted with anger. With a wrench, he tore his arm loose from the tenderfoot's grasp. The revolver gleamed up, aimed after the fleeing trail-rober.

But the respite, brief as it was, had been enough for the fugitive. He had plunged out of sight among the broken rocks and boulders. His scrambling movements could still be heard, but he was no longer to be seen.

"Thunder!" exclaimed the Kid angrily. He jammed the revolver back into its holster. "You dog-goned gink!"

The tenderfoot flinched under his angry look.

"I could not see you shoot him, senor! He is a thief, but his life—"

"You loobod mosshead!" growled the Kid. "Did you figure that I was going to send him up the flume, and him with his paws tied? I'd have dropped him with a crease on his cabeza, like I used to the ornery steers down in Texas, and he wouldn't have been a red cent the worse. Now he's got clear—unless I stalk him among them donicks like a pesky jack-rabbit, which I reckon I ain't going to do, nohow. Durn your ornery sass—"

"On, senor!" The tenderfoot's lips quivered and the Kid, to his alarm, saw traces of coming tears on the dark eyelashes.

"Oh, can it!" exclaimed the Kid. "I guess it's all right, feller. You sure got my goat, but I ain't mad with you, boy. Forget it."

He burst into a laugh.

"You're sure too soft for this country, boy. Look here, I guess I've told you before that you want to hit the back trail, and I'll ride herd over you and see you safe to White Pine. Hard Tack isn't the place for a baby tenderfoot. Say!"

The boy shook his head.

"I must go on," he said. "I must—"

"Oh, shucks!" grunted the Kid. "You sure make me tired! Then it's me to ride herd over you at Hard Tack and see you through."

And they rode on together into a straggling street of Hard Tack.

(You'll learn more about this strange tenderfoot in next week's stirring tale of the Rio Kid. Don't miss: "THE MARCHAL OF HARD TACK!"—it's a brilliant yarn, and quite the best of this grand Western series!)

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