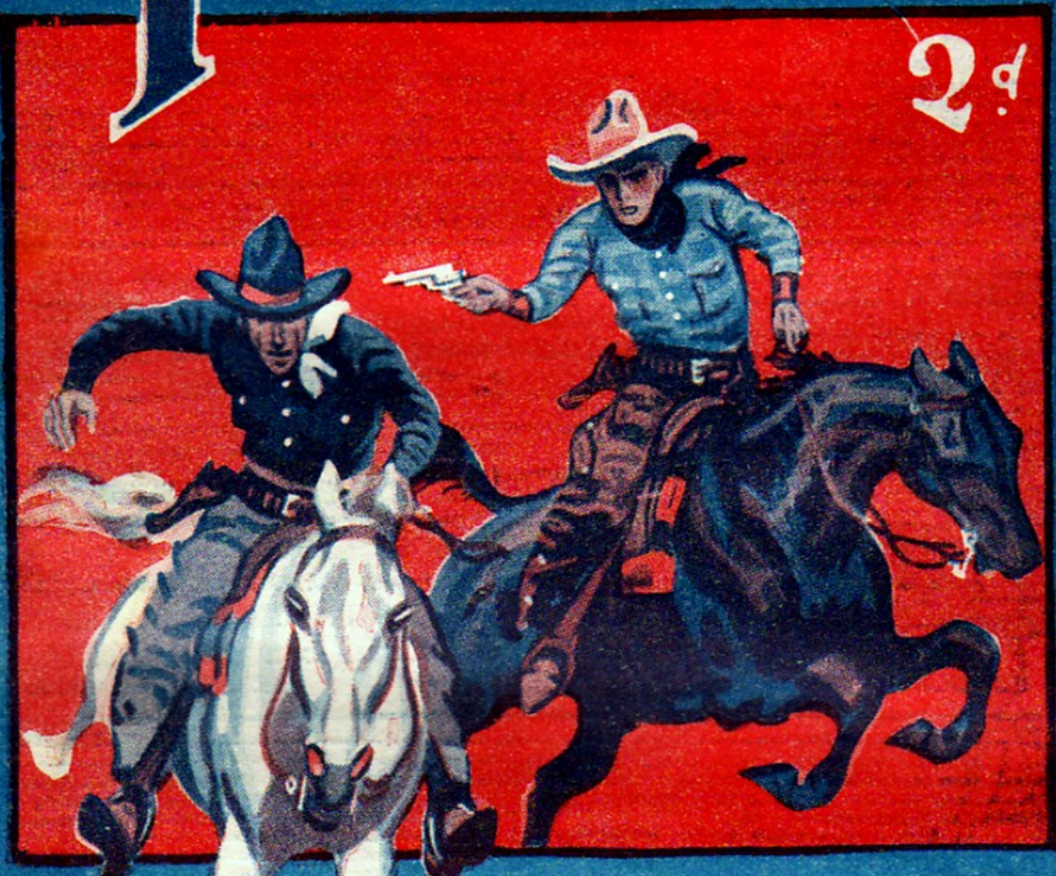


X SPECIAL PAGE of COMIC PICTURES *inside!* X

The POPULAR

EVERY TUESDAY. Week Ending September 29th, 1923. New Series. No. 505.

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You'll Jump at
OUR ROARING
TALES OF THE
WEST!

TROUBLE IN THE COW-COUNTRY.

The Rio Kid has been in many a tight corner in his adventurous wanderings, but never so tight a hole as the one in which he finds himself this week, when he is roped in as a range-ruster!

THE RIO KID!

By RALPH REDWAY



ANOTHER ROARING LONG COMPLETE TALE OF WESTERN ADVENTURE.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
A Mystery of the Prairies!

THAT cattle had been driven by the trail, was plain as noonday to the Rio Kid; but the puzzle was, where had they gone? Riding under the slanting rays of the sun that was setting to the sierra in the west, the Kid pondered over that problem, and wondered.

It was no immediate concern of the Kid's; but he could not help wondering. It had been sheer joy to the Kid to find himself riding a cattle-trail again. A cow-puncher, born and bred to the saddle and the riata, the Kid could not feel at home in the mining country where he had lately sojourned. Even in the cow country of Montana, though he liked it better than diggers' country, he had not felt at ease. His heart had pined for the wide, waving grass-lands, the winding rivers, the shadowy chaparrals, of his own country of Texas.—Now he was in new Mexico, on the trail back to Texas, and in ranch country; and the Kid was in cheery mood, and when he struck the cattle-trail, he gave the black-muzzled mustang a touch of the spur, and rode on faster, to overtake the drive and have a word or two with the cowmen in charge. Cowmen's talk would have been a boon and a blessing to the Kid, after long days in the mountains of Colorado.

But he did not overtake the drive, and no cowmen appeared in sight. And the trail ended with startling suddenness.

When the Kid came to the end he pulled in his mustang, staring at the ground, scarcely able to believe his eyes.

For long miles he had ridden on the track of a cattle-drive. It ran over grass-land, bordering the base of a low range of hills. The trail was fresh enough—not many hours could have passed since the long-horns had gone that way. The tracks of more than a hundred head of cattle deeply scored the soil. A hundred head of cattle could not rise into the air like a flock of wood-pigeons; or scuttle into the earth like frightened gophers. Yet the trail came to a sudden end, in the open prairie; and the Rio Kid sat in his saddle and stared. Thus far had the cattle-drive gone, and no farther; be-

This Week:
The Mysterious Trail!

yond the end of the trampled trail, the grass was fresh and untrodden; not a hoof-print, not a foot-print, not a sign of horse or cow, of man or beast. Nothing!

What had become of the cattle-drive, and of the riders who must have been in charge of it? It seemed like black magic to the Kid, as if drive and drivers had vanished into thin air.

"Search me!" muttered the Kid, in wonder.

It was a mystery, and the Kid did not like a mystery that he could not fathom. It puzzled him, it got his goat. Surely, it did not concern him; he was only passing through the Rio Bajo cattle-country on his way to Texas. But the puzzle of it got his goat, and he could not make up his mind to ride on his way and leave that puzzle unsolved.

He dropped from the saddle, and scanned the tracks. No Apache or Navajo could have taught the Kid anything about trailing. All that sign could tell, the Kid could read.

But there was nothing to read. The trail ended abruptly, as if the cattle-drive had been lifted on the wings of the wind and wafted away. It had not gone on; it had not gone back; it had not turned to right or left, so far as any sign remained to tell. It had simply terminated; as if that bunch of cows had suddenly ceased to exist, and dissolved into vapour. Which, of course, was impossible; though what had become of the cows was unfathomable to the Rio Kid.

"You can sure search me, old hoss!" said the Kid, addressing the grey mustang with the black muzzle. "You can carry me home to die! This sure gets my goat, old hoss."

Leaving the mustang standing at the end of the trail, the Kid trailed back a piece.

Back along the trail, the sign was thick enough for a blind man to read. A hundred cows at least had passed, and

the heavy hoofs had every one told its tale in the thick, soft grass.

But among the many tracks, there was not a single back-track; not a cow had turned back. All had gone forward, to that point where the trail ended, and then—vanished! For the absence of a further trail showed that they had trod no farther.

Among the tracks of the cows, the Kid looked for the hoof-prints of the cattle-drivers, and soon found them. He picked up the tracks of two horses with ease. There had been two riders in charge of the cattle-drive; and they, like the drive, had vanished from the prairie without leaving a further trail.

Deeply perplexed, the Kid examined the trail, up and down and round about. The print of boots was discovered in one spot, and the Kid examined the footprints with curious care.

He reckoned that one of the drivers had dropped a quirt, or a pipe, and dismounted to pick it up, for there were only a few foot-tracks to be seen. The man had not walked any distance.

But the Rio Kid's eyes, accustomed to reading all that "sign" could tell, read more in those few foot-prints than many an eye would have read. The track of the right foot was clearly marked, well impressed; like that of a fairly heavy man who trod firmly. But the track of the left was light and lagging. For some reason, the man who had dismounted had never let his weight fall on his left leg.

The Kid nodded and grinned. "I reckon that galoot picked up a squashed leg in a stampede, one day," he told himself. "He sure limps some! But where is he—and where's his partner—and where's the cows? Search me!"

Save for the discovery that one of the vanished riders had a limp, he learned nothing from the trail. The mystery of the disappearance of the cows was as deep as ever. On either side of the trail stretched green savannah—to the west, broken up, as it approached the low range of hills, behind which the sun was sinking. On neither side was a single track of cow or horse.

"Oh, shucks!" exclaimed the Kid, irritably. "The mystery of it worried THE POPULAR.—No. 505.

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'A dog-goned herd of cows can't mosey off into the pesky air. But—'

He stood by his patient mustang, thinking. Many a long mile lay between him and the cow-town of Bunch Grass, where the Kid aimed to shelter for the night. But he was loth to leave the spot with that strange mystery unsolved. It was a relief to him to see two Stetson hats bobbing over the thick grass in the distance, back along the cattle-trail.

"Cowmen!" said the Kid. Two range riders were coming on at a gallop. The Kid watched them as they came up, with no anticipation of trouble. The sight of the bronzed, hard-bitten cow-punchers was welcome to his eyes. But he noted, as they came nearer, that their faces were dark and grim; and their eyes fixed on him keenly and searchingly. They came on at a gallop, and dragged in their bronchos only a few feet from the Kid, and then, to his surprise, two guns leaped into view, and he was covered.

"Hands up!" The Kid stared blankly. "Say fellers, what's biting you?" he asked. "Who are you, anyhow?" "Put 'em up!" said one of the riders grimly. "I'm Buck Wilson, foreman of the Carson ranch; and I guess I'm after the rustlers that have shot up Tommy Tucker and run off his bunch of cows, and I allow you're one of them. Put 'em up."

The Kid held up his hands with a smile. "I'm sure no rustler, feller!" he drawled.

"Get his hardware, Posy Pete," rapped out the Carson foreman.

The other man dismounted, and disarmed the Kid. The Kid made a restless movement as the walnut-butted guns were jerked from their low-slung holsters. But with a levelled Colt looking him in the face, he kept his hands up quietly. He would not have been averse from trying his luck, even against two foes who had their guns out; but the Kid was not hunting trouble. And he had a cowman's sympathy with cowmen who were hunting rustlers, even though they had made a mistake in their man.

"And now," Buck Wilson's gun came a little nearer. "Now, you durned cow-thief, where's the cows?"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Held on Suspicion!

"SEARCH me!" grinned the Kid. "He's sure a cool cuss, Buck!" "Remark Pete.

Buck Wilson scowled. "You're pesky—cow-thief, I'm asking you a question," he said. "Where's the cows you've lifted from Tommy Tucker's range?"

"Oh, sho!" said the Kid, good-temperedly. "You've sure got hold of the wrong gopher, feller. I guess I've never heard of Tommy Tucker, or you either, and I ain't seen hide nor hair of your dog-goned cows. Forget it."

"What are you doing here, then?" "Hitting the trail for Bunch Grass," answered the Kid cheerfully. "When you gents are through, I reckon I'll mosey on."

"You won't mosey on yet a piece," said Buck Wilson grimly. "You was standing here on the trail when we sighted you."

"I reckon I was waiting for you galoots to mosey up," explained the Kid. "I'd sure like to know what became of the bunch of cows that left that trail. It sure gets my goat, figuring out where they're gone. If you savvy, put a galoot wise."

"I reckon you savvy better than I do," growled the foreman. "This ain't the first blind trail we've followed after stolen cows. There's been a gang of rustlers at work on the Carson ranges for years now; and this hyer is the first time we've roped in one of them."

"And now you've roped in the wrong man," grinned the Kid. "I keep on telling you I'm a stranger here, jest riding through on the trail to Texas."

"That's your say-so!" grunted the foreman. "I guess you'll have to prove it, if you don't want to go up to a cottonwood branch at the end of a lariat. Git on your cayuse."

"I guess I'm too polite to argue with a gent that holds the drop," said the Kid agreeably, and he mounted the black-muzzled mustang.

"Put your rope on the critter, Pete."

"Sure!" "You want me to take a little pasear with you?" asked the Kid, still good-humoured.

"I reckon we're taking you to the ranch," answered Buck Wilson. "Colonel Carson will sure make you spill what you've got to say."

Pete looped his lariat over the black-muzzled mustang's neck. The Kid, disarmed, his horse roped, was a prisoner. But he was not feeling uneasy. In his own country of Texas, where he might have been recognised as the Rio Kid, wanted by half the sheriffs in the State, his danger would have been real enough. But he did not fear recognition on the Carson ranch in New Mexico. He had no objection to riding to the ranch with the two punchers.

"You git ahead, Posy Pete."

"Sure." The puncher rode on, leading the Kid's mustang after him. Buck Wilson turned his horse to ride by the Kid's side. His gun was still in his hand. He uttered no threats; but his look was enough to tell the Kid that any attempt to escape would be followed by a swift shot. But the Kid was not thinking of escape. He did not believe that he had anything to fear on the ranch; and he was keen to learn something of the mystery of the vanished trail. That mysterious trail was a new and surprising thing to the Kid; but he had gathered from the foreman's words that it was no new thing on the wide grasslands of the Carson ranch.

Buck's eyes had scanned the end of the trail, and he made no comment, and evidently the strange thing was not new to his eyes as it was to the Kid's.

"You've sure seen a blind trail like that before, feller?" asked the Kid, as they struck eastward across the rolling prairie.

"The foreman glanced at him grimly. "Yep!" he said briefly.

"I guess it sort of surprised me," said the Kid. "Where do you reckon them cows have got to, feller?"

"I reckon they're in the hands of the gang that have been robbing the Carson ranch for three years," answered Buck.

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid. "If the cows have been lifted, I reckon I don't need telling it was rustlers that worked the rifle. But I want to know the how of it, feller? How did they get them cows away without leaving a trail where they went?"

"Search me!" answered the foreman. "I reckon it's happened twenty times or more, and there's always a blind trail to foller, and no man has ever trailed down the cows after the tracks stopped. They've jest vanished."

The Kid whistled. He had happened upon rustlers, many a time, in his own country of Texas. He had known rustlers who could blanket

a trail with all the skill of a pursued Indian, leaving scarcely a sign for the keenest eye. But this was something new. No rustler in the Kid's knowledge had ever been able to blanket the trail of a hundred head of cows; the thing was impossible. Yet here it had happened.

"And what have you punchers been doing about it?" asked the Kid.

"Looking for the rustlers," grunted Buck.

"And you ain't ever got them?" "I reckon we've got one now!" said the foreman.

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid. "I tell you—"

"Stow chewing the rag," interrupted the foreman. "I reckon you can spill all that at the ranch."

The Kid shrugged his shoulders, and was silent. But he was thinking as he rode on with the Carson punchers. The gang of rustlers who were "working" the Carson ranges, were working on some new method of which the Kid's experience told him nothing, and his interest in it was keen and deep. By what mysterious means did they blanket the trail of a herd of cows, leaving no sign for a pursuer to follow? The Kid thought it over, long and hard, but he could not find an answer to the question. It beat him to a frazzle, as he candidly admitted. But he was keen to take a hand in solving that strange mystery, if circumstances permitted.

It was a long ride to the ranch-house, for the Carson lands were wide, ranging over scores of square miles. The Carson ranch, as the Kid knew, was one of the largest in that part of New Mexico. The sun had gone, and the stars were glinting overhead, long before the two punchers and their prisoner rode up to the ranch. The Kid saw, in the starlight, a large building of adobe, built in the fashion of Old Mexico, with a great doorway leading into the saguan that gave access to the patio, in the centre of the building. Nearer to him was a block of timber buildings—the familiar glare of lighted lamps, and five or six punchers were lounging on benches outside, smoking pipes or Mexican cigars. There was a shout to greet the foreman as he rode up with Posy Pete and the Rio Kid.

The Kid eyed the crowd in the bunk-house with a smiling face. He came as a prisoner to the Carson ranch; but it was a pleasure to him to see that bunch of sun-tanned, long-limbed range riders as like the old Double-Bar bunch as two peas are like one another.

But the rough good-humour of the punchers vanished suddenly as Buck Wilson blurted out, as he drew rein:

"Tommy's gone up."

"Shot up!" added Posy Pete. "Shot up by durned rustlers who've lifted his bunch."

There was a growl of wrath from the Carson outfit, and every face grew grim, and hands reached for guns. Grim looks were cast on the Rio Kid.

"Tommy Tucker shot up!" exclaimed three or four voices.

"We found him laid out, on his range, when I took Posy Pete to relieve him," said the foreman. "And we follered the trail of his bunch of cows, till it fizzled out in the prairie, same as it always does; only we found this hyer galoot nosing around on the trail, and roped him in. He allows he don't know nothing about the rustlers; but I reckon the colonel will want to see him. Is the colonel to home, boyees?"

"He's over at the southern range, but he allowed he would be back arter sun down."

"I guess this galoot will keep."

"He sure will!" said the Rio Kid, speaking for the first time. "And if there's supper going, this hyer galoot ain't saying no to bacon and beans."

The punchers stared at him curiously. "He sure don't look like a rustler, Buck," remarked one of them.

"You've said it, feller," smiled the Kid. "I guess I'm a puncher, same as you-uns; and mighty glad to strike this bunch. I jest stopped on the prairie where your foreman picked me up, because I was kinder curious about that bunch of cows whose trail sort of petered out. It got my goat, kind of."

"I reckon it's got the goat of every galoot on this ranch," said the puncher. "I guess if you know anything about it, the colonel will sure make you squeal."

The Kid laughed. "You could put all I know about it into your Stetson, feller, and leave heap plenty room for your cabeza!" he answered. "What about them beans and bacon?"

"You can sure give the cuss some supper, cooky," called out Buck Wilson. "Ain't the colonel's nevy to home neither, you'uns?"

"He rode over to Bunch Grass this morning," answered a puncher.

Buck Wilson grunted. "Give that fire-bug some supper, and keep an eye on him," he said. "If he's white, we ain't no call to hurt him; but if he's had a hand in shooting up Tommy Tucker, he's going up."

"He sure is!" growled half-a-dozen voices.

The Kid slid from his horse.

"Gents, I ain't wise to what happened to Tommy Tucker," he said. "But I'm a cowman, and I'd sure ride a hundred miles, and more to that, to plug lead through a rustler who's shot up a cowman and lifted cows."

"You'd talk turkey, anyhow, I guess, now you're got by the short hairs," grunted Buck Wilson.

"You're sure a suspicious galoot, Buck," said the Kid. "Forgot it, feller, and trot out them beans."

And the Rio Kid sat down to supper in the Carson bunk-house, with a dozen men eyeing him, not unfriendly, but ready to pump lead through him if he showed a sign of attempting to make a break.

THE THIRD CHAPTER

What the Kid Knew!

GALLOP!
Gallop!

From the shadowed prairie came a beat of hoofs.

The Rio Kid had finished his supper.

He had eaten with a good appetite; and while he ate he listened to the talk of the Carson bunch.

That talk enlightened him a good deal as to the state of affairs in the Carson ranch.

For three years some unknown, untracked gang of rustlers had been preying on the

Carson herds; and so far they had defied discovery and pursuit. When a bunch of cattle was lifted, it vanished always in the same mysterious way; the trail could be followed to within a short distance of the hills, and there it was lost. By what means the rustlers blanketed so heavy a trail no one knew or guessed; but pursuit was always baffled in the same way; and feeling on the ranch ran high on the subject. There was not the slightest doubt that any rustler caught at his work, would be shot at sight. But so far, the cattle-lifting had not gone to the length of "shooting-up" the cowmen. Tommy Tucker was the first of the bunch who had fallen in doing his duty. And the murder of Tucker enraged the bunch deeply. The puncher had been found on the prairie, his gun in his hand, and it appeared clear that he had spotted the rustlers at work, had intervened, and had been shot down. The rage of the Carson bunch was deep and savage; and the Kid, as he listened to their talk, fully shared their feelings. He would have been glad to take a hand in the game against the gang of cattle-thieves.

More than once, the Kid learned, traps had been laid to catch the rustlers at work—bunches of cattle left in temptingly lonely spots, secretly watched from a distance. But by some uncanny means, the cattle-lifters always seemed to know when a trap was afoot, and they never fell into the snare. That had led to a suspicion that some member of the outfit was in league with the rustlers, and put them wise; a suspicion that caused much discomfort and distrust. But if there was any confederate of the rustlers in the outfit, he was as loud as the rest

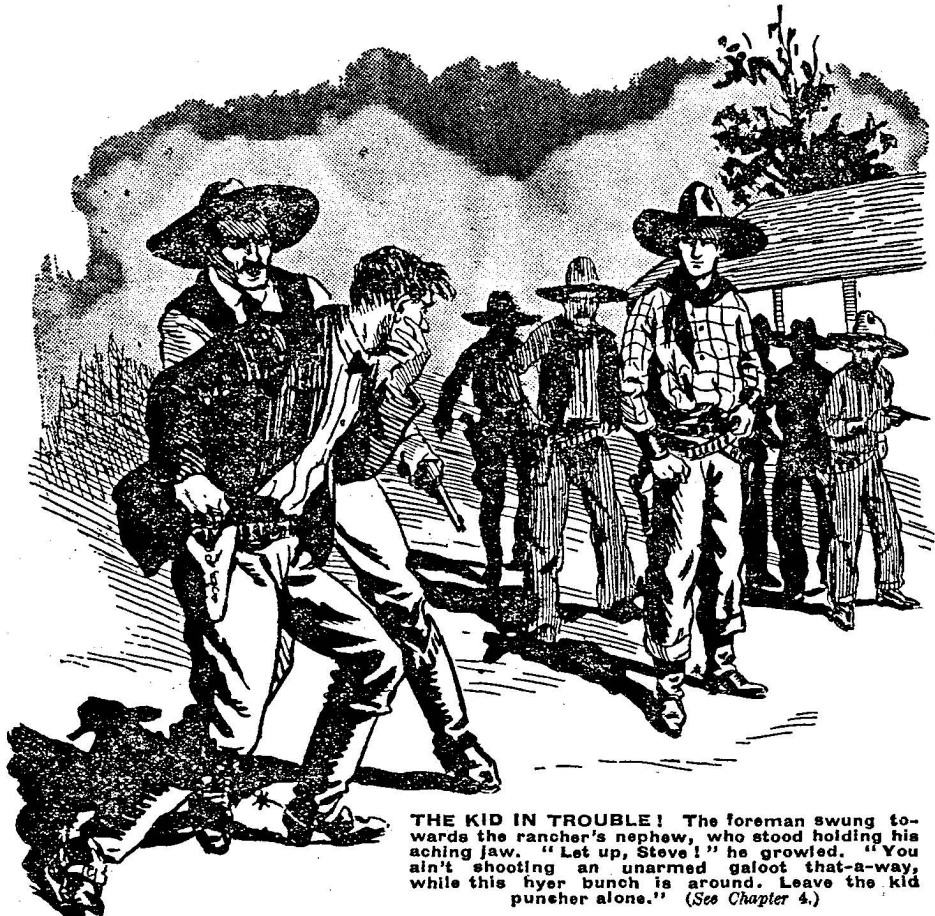
in his denunciations of the cattle-thieves.

The Kid finished his supper, and lounged out of the bunk-house, and sat on a bench outside, in the cool starry evening of New Mexico. The punchers were round him, and there was no escape for the Kid if he wanted to escape—which he did not. More and more the Kid was inclined to take a hand in this strange game, and bring to justice the unknown fire-bug who had shot up the cowman on his lonely range. He awaited with some curiosity, but with complete equanimity, the outcome, when Colonel Carson should return to the ranch.

The manner of the bunch had not been unfriendly to the Kid, at the beginning; but by this time it was quite friendly, and he joined in their talk as if he had known them for years. Even Buck Wilson, who smoked his pipe and watched the Kid, seemed to have forgotten his suspicions. The Kid's frank, cheery manner disarmed suspicion; and the foreman had to admit that his being found "nosing around" on the cattle-trail was no proof; any galoot passing that way might have been struck by the sudden, unexplained ending of the trail in the prairie. It was a mystery that had worried the Carson bunch for three years on end; and might well have surprised and interested a stranger who was a puncher himself.

"I reckon if you're white, this bunch ain't going to hurt you any, puncher," grunted Buck, as he knocked out his pipe. "But we're sure mighty suspicious of strangers in this hyer section, arter what's been going on. I reckon you'll understand that, and you ain't got no kick coming."

"Sure!" assented the Kid. "I ain't



THE KID IN TROUBLE! The foreman swung towards the rancher's nephew, who stood holding his aching jaw. "Let up, Steve!" he growled. "You ain't shooting an unarmed galoot that-a-way, while this hyer bunch is around. Leave the kid puncher alone." (See Chapter 4.)

got no kick coming, nohow! You want to keep your eyes peeled, with rustlers around on the ranges. I guess if your boss has got room for a good man, I'd sure want to sign on in this bunch, and take a hand agin them coyotes. I reckon I can pick up a trail as easy as the next man."

"You've sure got gall, anyhow," grunted Buck. "Do you figure that this bunch ain't wise to trailing, and that we ain't tried hard and often to run down them rustlers? We don't want to larn lessons from a kid puncher out of Texas."

The Kid smiled cheerily. "I ain't allowing you do, feller," he answered. "But if I was a man in this hyer bunch, I reckon I wouldn't be long in nosing out one of the two galoots who ran off Tommy Tucker's herd."

"How do you know they were two?" demanded Posy Pete.

"There was the prints of two horses among the cows," said the Kid, in a tone of gentle patience.

"Sure!" assented Buck. "We picked up the trail of two riders among the cows. And how do you reckon you'd get wise to one of them more'n the other, puncher?"

"I reckon there ain't a whole lot of galoots in this section that limps in the left leg," said the Kid.

"What?" ejaculated Buck. "The effect of his words on the group of cow-punchers was startling to the Kid.

Every man made a movement, and two or three of the punchers started to their feet.

Every eye was fixed on the Kid, in amazement, and it seemed to him, in angry indignation.

The Kid stared round at them. "What's this rookus?" he asked. "I sure haven't said anything to get your goats, have I, galoots?"

"You pesky, dog-goned nobody from nowhere," exclaimed Buck. "What do you mean by a galoot what limps in the left leg?"

"Oh, shucks!" exclaimed the Kid. "Mean to say there's a galoot on this ranch with a limp in his leg! Is that it?"

"There sure is."

"Search me!" said the Kid. "I wasn't wise to that; and I reckon I ain't saying he's the galoot that run off the cows. But I'll tell you that one of the galoots that ran off that bunch of cows limped in the left leg, and I stand to that."

Buck Wilson's hand had dropped on the gun in his belt. But he withdrew it slowly.

"I reckon you're just chewing the rag to get our goat," he grunted. "You want to be careful how you shoot off your mouth hyer, you gal-darned burro."

The Kid shrugged his shoulders. "Leave it at that," he answered carelessly.

"If you ain't jest chewing the rag promiscus, what do you mean?" demanded the foreman angrily.

"Jest what I've said," answered the Kid. "There was sign on that trail that I could have read before I was as high as your gun-belt. One of the galoots had got off his cayuse—I reckon he'd dropped his quirt, and got down to pick it up. That's all. A galoot can't tread on soft grass without leaving a sign."

Buck grew more attentive. "I reckon I never picked that up," he said. "If it's true, you've got an eye on you. You spotted foot tracks?"

"I sure did."

"And how do you make out that the galoot limped?"

"Easy as falling off a bucking broncho," answered the Kid. "He left a dozen tracks that any Texas cowman could have picked up; and in every one the left foot tracked lighter than the right. I reckon he wasn't jest hopping about to amuse his little self, out there on the prairie. He trod light with the left because he limped."

Buck made no answer.

"I reckon that galoot had had an accident some time, and hurt his left leg," said the Kid. "Heap plenty galoots get a leg jammed in a herd, specially riding in a stampede. I ain't accusing any galoot! But if there's a pilgrim sashaying around here with a game leg, I'd sure like to ask him where he was when Tommy Tucker's herd was run off this morning."

It was then that the galloping of hoofs rang from the darkened prairie, and all eyes turned on a dim figure far out on the plain under the stars.

A horseman was approaching the ranch at full gallop.

The Kid looked at the oncoming rider.

In the starlight, the clear starry brightness of the south, he saw a young man, dressed in natty riding-clothes, and evidently not a cowboy, though he rode as easily and swiftly as one.

"That ain't the colonel, I reckon?" he asked.

"It's the colonel's nevvv, Steve Carson!" grunted Buck.

"And I reckon when he rides in, you'll be able to ask him where he was when Tommy Tucker's herd was run off!" grinned Posy Pete.

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid blankly.

The horseman came up with a clatter of hoofs. He sprang to the ground, and came towards the group of punchers outside the bunkhouse.

And as he came, the Kid watched him, and noted that he limped with the left leg.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. The Man with a Limp!

STEVE CARSON gave the group at the bunkhouse a nod. His eyes lingered for a moment on the Rio Kid, sitting easily on a bench, with his back to the bunkhouse wall.

The Kid watched him quietly from under the shadow of his Stetson hat. The young man was well-built and muscular, and carried himself well, and he was well-dressed, from his Panama hat to his handsome riding-boots. His face was handsome, and bronzed by the blazing sun of New Mexico; but there were lines of dissipation on it, that were not to be missed by the Kid's keen glance. And he limped with his left leg.

The Rio Kid knew that he was not mistaken in the sign he had picked up on the cattle trail. One of the rustlers who had shot up Tommy Tucker and driven off his cows, had a limp. The sign on the cattle-trail had told him that, and there was no doubt of it. But the Kid wished now, from the bottom of his heart, that he had not mentioned the circumstances to the Carson outfit. But how could he have guessed that the rancher's nephew also had a limp?

"Evening, boys," said Steve Carson. "Any news?"

"Tommy Tucker's shot up, and his cows driven off—blind trail as usual, Steve," said Buck Wilson.

"Shot up! The rustlers again!"

"Sure!"

"I reckon something will have to be done to clean up the rustlers in this section," said Steve Carson. "You've got a stranger here?"

Buck Wilson explained, the colonel's nephew eyeing the Rio Kid as the foreman spoke.

"I reckon he wouldn't know anything of the rustlers," said the young man carelessly. "You can let him ride."

"He sure allows that he does know something, Steve, and more'n any galoot in this hyer bunch knows," grinned Posy Pete.

The young man started.

"What does he know, then?"

"Chew the rag, stranger," said Posy Pete maliciously. "You told the boss' nephew what you've found out. You sure know a whole lot, according to your say-so."

The Kid coloured with discomfort.

"I reckon I ain't gone on chewing the rag," he snapped. "Let it drop."

"That won't do!" struck in Steve Carson, and his hand dropped on the gun in his belt. "Stand up and let's get a look at you, stranger; and if you know anything about the rustlers, you've sure got to spill it. Stand up."

The Kid rose to his feet.

He looked coolly and calmly at the rancher's nephew, who scanned his face with searching eyes.

"Now what have you been telling the boys?" demanded Steve.

"I reckon I ain't got any hunch for spilling it over again," objected the Kid.

"Spill it, darn your hide!" Steve Carson's eyes glittered, and a very ugly look came over his face. The revolver was half-drawn from his holster.

"You don't want to pull on him, Steve—he's got no gun," said Buck.

Steve Carson did not heed.

"Spill it, darn you, or I'll drop you in your tracks!" he exclaimed. "We've sure had enough of the rustlers in this section, and if you're one of the gang, you've come to the place where there's a rope ready for you. Spill it."

"I guess I'll put you wise, if you've a hunch to hear it," drawled the Kid. "I picked up sign on the cattle-trail; and the sign was left by a galoot with a limp in his left leg."

A dead silence followed.

Steve Carson's eyes were fixed on him, and a burning gleam had come into them. His hand closed hard on the butt of the half-drawn Colt.

"You darned cattle-thief!" he said, at last, the words coming almost in a hiss.

"I reckon it's easy to call a galoot fancy names, when you've got hold of a gun, and he's got none," said the Kid disdainfully. "If that pesky foreman of yours will hand over my guns, I'll make you eat your words so fast they'll choke you."

He was watching Steve Carson like a cat.

"You don't want to make any mistake," he went on quietly. "I picked up that sign on the trail, and I told these galoots to put them wise. I never knew anything about you, and I sure ain't saying that the nephew of the ranch boss knows anything about the rustling, for that ain't hoss-sense, nohow. I reckon there's more than one pilgrim in New Mexico with a limp. You've sure no call to get your mad up."

"The puncher was jest chewing the rag, Steve," said Buck Wilson anxiously. "He's a stranger here, but I reckon he's white, though he sure shoots off his mouth too free."

Steve Carson burst into an angry laugh.

"You're sure a bunch of jaspers, you-uns," he snapped. "Tommy Tucker's been shot up, and Tommy was as white a man as ever cinched a saddle. You've

(Continued on page 28.)

"THE RIO KID!"

(Continued from page 6.)

got one of the rustlers hyer, and if he ain't the man that shot up Tommy, I reckon he's one of the gang. And he's sure going where he sent Tommy."

The revolver flashed out of the holster as he was speaking. A second more, and the bullet would have cascaded into the handsome, sunburnt face of the Rio Kid, and the long adventurous trail of the boy puncher of the Double Bar would have come to a sudden end.

But the Rio Kid was watchful. He knew what was coming to him, and he was ready. Three of four hands were lifted to restrain the man with the gun, but they were not in time.

Ever as the six-gun was leaving its sheath, the Kid leaped forward, quick as a panther. His knuckles, hard as iron, struck the rancher's nephew on the point of the chin, and Steve's arm involuntarily flew up as he staggered back. The report of the gun rang out with a roar, but the bullet flew over the roof of the bunkhouse.

The rancher's nephew sagged backward helplessly; and the next moment the gun was wrenching from his hand, and was gripped by the Rio Kid.

A dozen six-guns flashed in the light from the bunkhouse. "Hands up, you!" roared Buck Wilson.

The Rio Kid was holding the revolver by the barrel, as he had snatched it. With a disdainful laugh, he tossed the weapon away over the bunkhouse.

"I guess I ain't shooting," he said carelessly. "If this bunch stands for shooting a galoot unarmed, get on with it."

"We don't stand for nothing of that kind, and you know it," growled Buck Wilson. "I guess Steve wouldn't have pulled only he had his mad up with you." The foreman was frowning as he swung towards the rancher's nephew, who had staggered to his feet, dazed and furious. "Let up, Steve! You ain't shooting a galoot down that-a-way, while this hyer bunch is around.

Steve stared round him, one hand to his bruised chin. There was grim condemnation in every face; and three or four of the punchers had gathered round the Kid defensively. Carson muttered something under his breath, turned, and limped away to the ranch-house. The foreman watched him go, and when he disappeared, turned to the Rio Kid. And the Kid, meeting his eyes, thought that he read there something that was in his own mind.

THE END.

(Be sure you read next week's yarn of thrilling Western adventure, entitled "THE RUSTLERS OF THE RIO BAJO". It's full of exciting situations.)

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"PLAYING THE GAME!"

(Continued from page 27.)

Tom Merry swept off his topper gracefully and headed the ball into the net, and then replaced his silk hat.

"Goal!"

"Oh, the rotters!" gasped Wally. Five minutes later Talbot put the ball in; three minutes more, and Lowther landed it. To their surprise and wrath Wally & Co. found themselves confined to their own side of the half-way line. With the toppers they had some success—ono, two, three of the shining silk hats were captured and crunched. But with goals the hapless Third were nowhere.

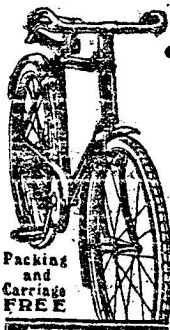
At half-time seven goals were up to the credit of the Shell and the fags were in a rather pumped state. But "No surrender!" was Wally's motto. Right to a finish the breathless fags played out the game, hoping wildly to score one goal and break their duck! But that consolation was denied them. Seven more goals were added to the Shell score, amid shrieks of laughter, and then the final whistle went.

Then Tom Merry & Co., with sedate faces, walked off the field, raising their silk hats gracefully to the chortling crowd as they passed. And Wally & Co.—sadder and wiser fags—crawled away to hide their diminished heads.

The semi-finals were over. The last struggle was to come—between Tom Merry & Co. and Levison & Co. And all St. Jim's looked forward with keen interest to the following week and the fight in the final.

THE END.

(Now look out for the last story in this magnificent series, chums, entitled, "THE FIGHT FOR THE CUP!" You'll vote it the real goods.)



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