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February 15th, 1930.
No. 577 (New Series).



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GEE, BOYS! OUR WESTERN YARNS ARE GREAT!

THE RIO KID'S NEW PAL!

BY
RALPH REDWAY.



Ride the trails with the Rio Kid; camp in the hills with this daring boy outlaw, for he will lead you into adventures galore!

THE FIRST CHAPTER. Comrades of the Bar-One!

THE Rio Kid hummed the tune of a Mexican fandango as he came out of the bunkhouse at the Bar-One Ranch in the bright sunny morning. The morning was bright, but not brighter than the face of the Kid. Life seemed good in these days to the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. It had seemed good to the Kid ever since he had joined Colonel Sanderson's outfit at the Bar-One, and the Kid reckoned that it was a lucky day when he had first struck the Kicking Mule country. Mesquite Bill, the foreman of the ranch, gave him a nod and a grin. He liked the new recruit, as every other man in the bunch did. What they would have thought had they known what he was called in other parts of Texas the Kid sometimes wondered. But they did not know, and the Kid had no hunch to tell them. His name was Carson at the Bar-One, and he was a cowpuncher like the rest, and he was more than content to let the Rio Kid fade out of existence. "Say, you look like you'd lost a Mexican cent and found a Texas dollar!" said the Bar-One foreman.

The Kid laughed. "I'm sure pleased to belong to this outfit," he answered. "The Bar-One suits me fine! It's a good ranch, and a good boss, and there ain't a guy in the bunch that ain't a white man. Say, where's Yuba?"

"Waitin' for you in the corral." The Kid swung away towards the corral gate, the foreman's glance following him approvingly. Boy as he was, the Kid was as useful a man as any in the bunch, and the oldest hand could teach him nothing about riding and roping. They knew little of him; he had never told them whence he came, or with what outfit he had ridden before. But there were plenty of galoots in Kicking Mule who had no hunch to talk about the past. The Kid was taken at face value; and if he needed a recommendation, all Kicking Mule knew that

he had roped in Black George, the road-agent, who had been the terror of the cow country for years.

The Kid walked into the corral and looked round for Yuba Dick, the horse-wrangler.

Dick was sitting on a rail, with a well-worn deck of cards on his knee, patiently and solemnly dealing himself hands. Yuba Dick was a young man, not many years older than the Kid—a good-looking young man, rather given to touches of elegance in his clothes, as straight as a die, but with one besetting weakness—a passion for draw poker. He was a gambler to his finger-tips, and an unlucky one; and when he drew his pay, it seldom lasted him twenty-four hours. More than once, on leave to the cow-town, Yuba Dick had trudged home on the hoof, having lost his cayuse as well as his dollars at his favourite game.

The Kid's sunny face clouded a little at the sight of Dick's occupation. He had become more friendly with Yuba than with any other man in the bunch, from a similarity of age and tastes, but that taste of the horse-wrangler's for draw poker the Kid did not share. And he disliked to see his friend the slave of such a weakness.

"Say, Yuba, it's burning daylight," said the Kid.

Yuba finished the hand he was dealing and examined it before he looked up; then he glanced at the Kid and grunted.

"It sure gets my goat!" he said. "Look at that hand! A full house, three aces, and two jacks! I never corral a hand like that when I'm playing poker at Kicking Mule. It gets my goat!"

"Aw, forget it!" said the Kid. "We got to get that string of hosses over to the Joshua-A, and you fooling around with a deck of cards while we're burning daylight! Forget it!"

Yuba Dick sighed, slid from the rail, and slipped the deck of cards into his pocket.

"Say, I reckon the luck will turn one of these days, Two-gun," he said.

"I've sure had a hunch for a long time that I'm going to make a ten-strike. I dreamed last night that I'd won a thousand dollars from a man from San Antone."

"You won't never do it while you're awake," said the Kid. "I guess I will—some day," said the horse-wrangler confidently. "I tell you I got a hunch."

"Dog-gone your hunches!" said the Kid. "Come and pick out the cayuses for Carter, or the boss will have a hunch to boot you off'n the ranch and get a good man."

Yuba Dick grinned and proceeded to select the horses. The Kid saddled up his own mustang, Side-Kicker, for the ride. The wrangler soon had the horses on the string, and saddled his own broncho; then he paused to look at the Kid's mount and to give the Kid a curious look.

"Say, what's the big idea?" he asked. "How come?" asked the Kid, though he guessed what was coming.

"You got that cayuse painted with brown stockings," said Yuba. "If you want a painted hoss, why don't you buy yourself a pinto? What's the big idea in painting him brown stockings?"

"Just a fancy of mine," said the Kid indifferently. "I like him better that-away."

Yuba chuckled. "I guess if we didn't know you was a white man, Two-gun, the boys would figure that you'd rustled that cayuse," he said. "I guess he would look plumb different without them stockings."

"Well, I never rustled him," said the Kid. "I've had that critter since he was big enough to carry me. And I reckon it's time we was riding hosses, instead of talking about them, Yuba."

"Sure!" And they mounted and rode, with the string of half a dozen bronchos trailing behind the horse-wrangler.

There was a shade of thoughtfulness on the Kid's brow as he rode away

from the Bar-One. Side-Kicker, the grey mustang, was as well known as his master, and the Kid had painted him brown stockings when he first rode into the Kicking Mule country. When he located at the Bar-One it would have been wiser to part with that well-known cayuse, but the Kid had no hunch to part with Side-Kicker.

Yuba Dick was looking thoughtful, too; and the Kid wondered whether he was thinking about the grey mustang's stockings. But as the ranch disappeared from sight behind and Yuba Dick began to talk he soon showed that he was thinking of his own business. His talk ran on the subject of the "hunch" he had that some day he was going to win a pot of dollars at poker. Yuba was looking forward to his next leave, when he hoped that that luck was going to materialise.

"Say, I guess we might as well take in Kicking Mule on our way," Yuba remarked after a time. "It ain't more'n a few miles out of the trail for the Joshua-A, and—"

"You dog-goned bonehead!" said the Kid. "You figuring on getting into a game of poker while you're on the boss' business, with a string of hosses in charge? You sure are the world's prize boob!"

"There's a man in Kicking Mule that cleared me out last pay-day," said Yuba. "Now, I got a hundred dollars, and I guess I'd like to see the guy."

"And you'd leave your hundred dollars in his rags, and hit the Joshua-A after sundown," said the Kid.

"I tell you I got a hunch—"

"And I tell you you're a bonehead!" said the Kid. "The boss will be hoppin' mad if you don't get them critters over to the Joshua-A before sundown. Forget it, I'm telling you!"

Yuba sighed, with a glance towards a distant patch of smoke on the blue sky that told where the cow-town of Kicking Mule lay. There were a hundred dollars in Yuba's pockets, and money always burned in his pockets till he had lost it at poker.

But he yielded the point, and the two cowmen gave Kicking Mule a wide miss, and rode on with the string of bronchos across the solitary prairie towards Carter's ranch.

"You don't never play poker?" asked Yuba.

"Too much savvy," answered the Kid. "You won't never make a fortune punching cows!" declared Yuba.

"I guess I'll make a fortune punching cows afore you make the price of a can of beans playing poker!" grinned the Kid.

And they rode on with the clattering string of horses towards the ford of the Kicking Mule creek, where they aimed to stop for food. And it was at the ford that they met up with the stranger.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Yuba Dick Makes His Ten-Strike!

THE stranger was camped at the ford.

Wide and shallow, the creek flowed through muddy banks, glimmering in the noonday sun. Tracks of cattle and horses led thickly down to the ford. Beside the trail, within a lasso's cast of the creek, a buckboard was drawn up, with a horse tethered by it, and the stranger sat in the shade of the buckboard, eating canned beans and bully beef. As the two cowmen rode up and pulled rein he looked at them under the brim of his Stetson, nodded, and called out "Howdy!"

"Howdy!" answered Yuba Dick civilly, and the Kid nodded.

The stranger was a prosperous-looking man. He wore riding-clothes that

had been made in a town, rings on his fingers, and a diamond in his tie. His face was fat and rosy, but his eyes hard and cold, and the Kid had no liking for his looks. He had the eyes of a sharp, the Kid reckoned. But on a lonely prairie trail Yuba Dick was glad to meet up with a stranger, and the Kid was not sorry; and the cowmen from the Bar-One camped down, and ate their beans and bacon in company with him.

The Kid was not much of a talker; he had learned silence on many a lonely trail in his outlaw days. But the stranger talked enough for two, if not for three or four. He was a drummer, he told them, and his name was Brown—Nathaniel P. Brown. He was from Austin, and he was drumming the cow country for orders for a special kind of stirrup-iron; and he had taken so many orders that he guessed he was satisfied. He slapped a fat wallet that was fastened to his belt, and announced that he'd lost count of the dollars he'd taken since he had hit the cow country.

The Kid heard him almost in silence; Yuba Dick with a good-humoured grin on his sunburnt face. The man was talkative, boastful, confidential, and fond of the sound of his own voice; but the Kid had met boobs and boneheads before, and did not mind.

After feed, the stranger produced cigars, and they were good and expensive cigars. Yuba Dick accepted one; the Kid politely declining. The Kid, whose life had often depended on the accuracy of his shooting, could not afford to smoke cigars.

The stranger smoked, and Yuba Dick smoked, and Mr. Brown's conversation turned from the subject of his successful drumming, to a game of poker he had played at his last stop, at Post-Oak. He illustrated that game by taking a pack of cards from his wallet and dealing the various hands; and Yuba Dick, with the keenest possible interest now, watched and listened.

The Kid grew restless.

He reckoned that they had halted long enough, and that it was time they were riding. And he had a well-founded fear that, at the sight of the cards, Yuba Dick would propose a little game; and he figured that Mr. Brown, with all his chatty blether, was the man to skin Yuba down to his boot soles.

"Say, I reckon we want to beat it, feller," said the Kid at last. "We sure got to hit the Joshua-A before sundown!"

"Aw, sit down and chew the rag sociable a piece!" said Yuba. "I was jest going to ask Mr. Brown if he'd care for a hand at poker."

"I'm your antelope, with the wool on!" announced Mr. Brown, and he handed the cards to Yuba to be shuffled.

The Kid grunted.

They began to play poker, with a box from the buckboard as a table. The Kid looked on for a few minutes, and then strolled away to the horses. Horses were good company for the Kid.

After a while, however, he sauntered back, and found the gamblers still going strong.

Yuba Dick's face was excited.

On the other hand, there was a very serious expression on the countenance of Mr. Brown, of Austin.

The Kid stared at them. Judging by their looks, Yuba was winning.

It was seldom that Yuba won anything like a stake at poker; and when he did he would always play on till he lost it again.

The Kid sighed.

If Yuba had lost his hundred dollars to the stranger the Kid would

have been sorry for his friend; but at least they would have pulled out for the ford and hit the trail for the Joshua-A.

But with Yuba Dick winning it looked like a long halt at the ford. So long as he had anything left he was not likely to tell himself away.

"Say, feller—" hinted the Kid.

Yuba stared up at him.

"Can it!" he said briefly.

"Feller, we're on the boss' business."

"Aw, can it, I tell you!"

Evidently Yuba Dick was not moving yet; he would not have moved if Colonel Sanderson had been going to fire him for delaying. Draw poker had him in its grip, heart and soul.

The Kid waited patiently. The string was in charge of the horse wrangler, and the Kid could not take them on without him, even if he had been disposed to leave his friend. He leaned against the buckboard and watched the game.

It looked as if Yuba Dick's hunch was coming true. For he was winning in that game hand over fist.

Little pots were raked in by the stranger; every now and then he corralled ten dollars, or fifteen dollars, or twenty dollars, in small bills. But whenever there was a big pot it seemed to go to Yuba Dick automatically.

More than once the stranger felt in his pockets in vain for small bills, and had to throw a large bill into the hat that served as a pool, and take out change. Yuba Dick's face was glowing.

He gave the Kid a delighted grin.

"What'd I tell you about my hunch, feller?" he asked. "Say, you want to believe in that hunch, you surely do. Look!"

"I'll say you're the prize poker player of Texas, hombre!" said Mr. Brown disconcertedly. "I sure never hit such a bad streak. Look here, ain't your pard taking a hand?"

"Nope!" said the Kid.

"Aw, take a hand and be sociable. Two-gun!" said Yuba. "I guess this hombre is aiming to leave his dollars in Kicking Mule, and I ain't no hog. I don't want to cinch the whole caboodle."

"I guess I can afford to lose some dollars," said Mr. Brown boastfully, "and your friend's sure welcome to corral all he can!"

But the Kid shook his head.

"I guess poker ain't my long suit," he said. "I'm powerful glad to see you in luck, Yuba; but we got to hit the Joshua-A—"

"Dog-gone the Joshua-A!" snorted the horse-wrangler. "I'm telling you, my luck's turned, and I ain't quitting while Mr. Brown has got the sand to keep on!"

And the Kid waited as patiently as he could. But he was glad to see that Mr. Brown lacked the "sand" to keep on, after a time. He gave a grunt and rose.

"I'm quitting!" he said. "I got to get on to Juniper, and I ain't travelling after dark. I'll see you again some day, cowboy, and win all them dollars back."

"I'll sure be glad to see you any time you like to horn in at the Bar-One!" grinned Yuba. "Sure you'll quit?"

"You've said it!"

And Mr. Brown harnessed his horse to the buckboard, said farewell to the cowmen, and drove away by the rugged trail. He drove in the direction of Juniper; but when a fold of the prairie hid him from sight, Mr. Brown changed his direction, for reasons best known to himself.

"Well, we hitting the trail, Yuba?" asked the patient Kid.

"Aw, wait a piece, while a guy counts up his dollars!" argued Yuba. "Say, feller, I've struck it rich this time! Look at that!" He held up a hundred-dollar bill. "Five hundred—six hundred—seven—and fifty! Feller, I sat down to this game with a hundred dollars in small bills."

"And you've cinched seven hundred and fifty?" asked the Kid, in great wonder.

"Nope! Six hundred and fifty. That guy's got my small bills," said Yuba. "He's sure welcome to them, when he's left me his big ones!" Yuba Dick chuckled jubilantly. "I guess I've made just about six hundred and fifty clear. And how long you reckon I'd take to make that punching cows and tcting around horses?"

"Some luck!" said the Kid.

"Did I say I had a hunch?" chuckled Yuba. "Did I, feller? I guess I did. Say, I'm the poker-player from Pokersville! I guess I'm getting leave from the boss and hitting Kicking Mule to-night, and makin' the most of it while it lasts. Say, I'm going to round up the town! You believe me."

And Yuba was grinning as the comrades rode on across the ford with the string of horses. All the remainder of the ride to the Joshua-A ranch, Yuba talked of his good luck, and of making the most of that wonderful vein of fortune while it lasted.

The Kid smiled and nodded, but it was not pleasant hearing to him. He did not reckon that Yuba's seven hundred and fifty dollars would last out the night once he got among the poker sharps at Kicking Mule, and he could not help figuring that it would have been better for Yuba if he had lost instead of winning. But he would not dash the joyousness of his friend by handing out unwelcome wisdom.

They reached the Joshua-A, and the horses were handed over; and Yuba Dick, speaking for himself and his companion, declined the hospitality of the Carter bunkhouse and rode homeward at once. He was in haste to hit the Bar-One again, and get leave from the boss for his projected raid on the poker sharps of Kicking Mule.

"Say, I guess we're going hell-for-leather, Two-gun!" he said, when they rode away from the Joshua-A. "Let that cayuse of yours out!"

And he dashed off at a gallop, the Kid easily keeping pace on Side-Kicker. They kept up the pace, hot-foot, all the way back to their ranch, and arrived at the Bar-One long before sundown. And they came up to the Bar-One with sweating horses in a cloud of dust.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Trouble in the Bunkhouse!

MESQUITE BILL, standing before the bunkhouse at Bar-One, stared at the two riders as they halted, covered with dust and foam.

"Say, you guys was in a powerful hurry!" he said. "What's been biting you?"

"I guess I got to hit town to-night!" said Yuba Dick, as he slid breathlessly from his sweating broncho.

"Guess agin!" grunted the foreman. "You ain't got leave!"

"I'm sure getting leave, old-timer!" "You surely ain't!" retorted Mesquite Bill gruffly. "You've had your leave, you pesky bonehead, and you're wanted to earn your corn! Take that

head!" he said "He's a pesky, sour, all-fired boob! I don't give a Continental red cent for Mesquite! Say, if I don't get leave, I'll get fired! What'll I care when I can make my fortune playing poker?"

"Oh, great gophers!" said the Kid, in dismay.

"Scrapin' cayuses in a corral when I can make hundreds of dollars a day at poker!" sneered Yuba. "Aw, I ain't that size in boneheads, and don't you forget it, feller! I'm gettin' that leave, or I'll know the reason why! You watch out!"

He strode to the bunkhouse, where most of the outfit were gathered to supper. There was a determined expression on Yuba's face and a glint in his eyes, and his jaw looked very square.



The Kid leaped at Yuba, grasping his gun-arm, and forcing it upwards. "Quit that silly game, you gink!" he snapped.

cayuse and rub him down, if you ain't forgotten how to treat a boss! You got him in a pesky lather!"

The Kid was already taking Side-Kicker into the corral, to rub him down after that wild race back to the ranch. Yuba Dick followed him in, with a frowning brow. He cared for his broncho; but there was a black look on his handsome face while he was doing it, and he made a string of uncomplimentary remarks concerning Mesquite Bill. When he left the corral with the Kid, the latter touched his arm.

"Forget it, feller," the Kid advised, "Bill is foreman of this outfit, and what he says goes. Kicking Mule will sure keep."

Yuba gave an angry snort. "I'll tell you I'm hitting Kicking Mule this night, Two-gun! You come along with me and see the fun."

"But you can't go without leave, feller, and you don't want to hunt trouble with Mesquite," urged the Kid. Another snort from Yuba.

"Mesquite's a durned dog-goned bone-

The Kid followed him, with misgiving. He liked and respected the foreman of the ranch; but Mesquite Bill ran the bunch with a firm hand, and he was not the hombre to take back-chat from a man in the bunch. The horse-wrangler had had his leave, and he could not be spared from the ranch; and the foreman was certain not to let him go, and the Kid could not blame the foreman. But Yuba was his friend, and the Kid was troubled.

Yuba strode into the bunkhouse, and a dozen pairs of eyes were turned on him. Mesquite Bill gave him a rather grim look. Yuba dragged a bunch of bills out of his pocket and held them up. "Look at that!" said the horse-wrangler.

"Say, you been holdin' up the bank at Juniper?" exclaimed Tucson.

"Stoppin' pilgrims on the trail," asked Colorado Jim.

Yuba grinned. "I sure been playing poker!" he announced.

There was a roar of laughter in the bunkhouse.

"Say, you guys can snicker!" exclaimed Yuba Dick. "I'm telling you I met up on the trail with a drummer from Austin, and I cleaned him out of that boodle! Yes, sir!"

"Say it again!" chuckled Mesquite.

"Ain't it true, Two-gun?" demanded Yuba.

"It's a cinch, you-uns!" said the Kid, with a nod. "Yuba sure cleaned that drummer guy out of six hundred and fifty."

"Great gophers!"

"And I'm sure going to follow the vein while it lasts!" chuckled Yuba. "I sure am, you guys! I'm hitting for Kicking Mule immediate after supper, and I guess I'll come back with thousands!"

"You'll come back on foot, arter losing your money and your hoss!" grinned Colorado.

"Aw, talk sense!" said Yuba. "I allowed I'd got a hunch that I was going to win a big stake. Don't this look like it?" He crammed the bills into his pocket. "I'm coming back with thousands, and don't you forget it!"

"You ain't coming back at all, because you ain't going, Yuba!" said Mesquite Bill. "You got to be on hand to fix up the remudas!"

"I'm asking you for leave to Kicking Mule, Mesquite!"

"And I ain't giving you none!" Yuba's eyes gleamed. The Kid touched his arm persuasively, but the horse-wrangler shook off his hand. Yuba was in a state of excitement now that brooked no argument. He was like a man intoxicated with wine for the time. And the Kid, who liked him, was sorry to see it, and he wished that that dog-goned stranger from Austin had camped that day anywhere but at the Kicking Mule ford.

"You ain't giving me leave, Mesquite Bill?" demanded Yuba.

"I sure ain't!"

"Then, dog-gone you, I'm taking it!" roared the horse-wrangler angrily. "And you can chew on that, darn your hide!"

"You take leave you ain't given, and you're fired out of this bunch!" rapped Mesquite gruffly.

"And who cares a Continental red cent if he's fired out of this bunch?" snorted Yuba. "Aw, go into a corner and shake yourself, Mesquite! Fire me out of this bunch as soon as you darn like! Say, you figure that I'm freezing out to hoss-wrangling when I can make hundreds of dollars a day at poker! Say, I guess I'm quitting horse-wrangling, sir, and taking up poker! Yes, sir!"

"You dog-goned jay!" said Mesquite.

"I guess that man from Austin must have been the world's boob to let you win money from him at poker! You won't strike another boob like that in a dog's age!"

"I guess I'm going to have the poker sharps at Kicking Mule busted afore the night's out!" boasted Yuba. "I'm sure going to round up the town! You hear me talk? Yes, sir! I'll say that my hunch is good, and I'm the poker player from Pokerville! Yes, sir!"

"You're the big stiff from Stiffville, you mean!" growled Mesquite. "Shut your bean trap, and sit down to your supper! You want to get to your bunk; you got to see to the cayuses in the morning!"

"Dog-gone the cayuses, and you, too, Mesquite! Ain't I shouting out to you that you can fire me as soon as you darn like?"

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"You ain't fired yet, and you ain't hitting Kicking Mule!" said the foreman. "You can walk up to the house and ask the colonel for your time, if you want! But if you quit sudden when you're wanted on the ranch, arter the boss has always treated you fair and square, you're a dog-goned, white-livered greaser, and if you was worth shucks I'd pull a gun on you! But you ain't worth burning powder, you all-fired scallywag, and if you quit I'll take my quilt to you, and whip you off'n the ranch like you was a half-breed's mangy dog!"

Yuba crimsoned. The foreman was angry, and he did not measure his words, and the feeling in the bunkhouse was on the foreman's side. Even the Kid shared it, though he could feel for Yuba in his keen desire to follow up his "hunch" while it lasted.

"You'll take your quilt to me!" roared the horse-wrangler. "Why, you long-legged, pie-faced son of a Digger Injun, you ornery bean-feedin' Piute, I guess you ain't the size of man to take a quilt to me. If your face wasn't ugly enough already to frighten a bull buffalo I'd sure make it, if you talk to me about your quilt, you buldozin' pie-can! Shut up that barranca you call a mouth, afore I lay you on the floor of this bunkhouse!"

Mesquite Bill leaped to his feet.

"That sure does it!" he roared, and he grabbed down a quilt that hung on the bunkhouse wall.

Yuba's hand flew to his gun.

The punchers were all on their feet now, the bunkhouse in a roar. The Kid leaped at Yuba, grasped his gun-arm, and forced it upward.

"Let go, darn you!" yelled Yuba.

"Ain't letting go none," answered the Kid. "Quit that gun, you darned bonehead!"

"I'm telling you to let go!" shouted Yuba. "By thunder, you ain't no friend of mine if you don't let go my arm! Mesquite, you buldozin' Greaser, you pack a gun! Quit that quilt, and pull your gun, darn you! Stand out of the way, you, Carson, or you'll get yours!"

Mesquite Bill promptly pulled his gun.

"Stand aside, Carson!" he rapped out.

But the Kid did not stand aside, and he still held Yuba's wrist in a grip of steel, rendering his gun-arm useless.

"I ain't standing away a whole lot," drawled the Kid. "You guys ain't going in for gun-play, unless you want to put the lead through me, and you're sure welcome to do that if you want."

It was dangerous work to stand between two angry and excited men, with guns in their hands. Every other man in the bunkhouse had crowded back to the walls, out of the line of fire. But the Kid was cool as ice, though he well knew his danger.

"Stand back!" roared Mesquite.

"Git away, you pesky bonehead!" yelled Yuba.

"Not by a jugful," said the Kid. "I tell you that gun-play ain't coming on in this picture."

"Right!" said a voice at the doorway.

"Put up your guns, you 'uns, and tell your boss what's the trouble."

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Surprise!

COLONEL SANDERSON stood in the doorway of the bunkhouse.

The tumult ceased abruptly at the sight of the rancher and the sound of his voice.

Mesquite Bill jammed his gun back into its holster, and Yuba ceased to struggle in the grasp of the Kid. He allowed the Kid to drag down his hand

and force the gun into the holster. And the crowd of punchers ceased backing to the walls.

The boss of the Bar-One eyed them sternly.

"What's this trouble?" he demanded. There was silence for some moments; then Yuba Dick spoke sulkily.

"I guess I'm asking for my time, boss."

"I reckon if you're tired of this ranch you can quit when you want," said the colonel. "What's your grouch?"

Yuba looked a little shame-faced.

"I ain't got no grouch, sir."

"He's sure got a hunch!" chuckled Colorado; and the punchers laughed.

Yuba glared round at them.

"Snigger all you want!" he snorted. "I got a hunch, and I made a ten-strike, and there ain't no two ways about that. Boss, I've sure got to hit Kicking Mule. That pie-faced Mesquite ain't giving me leave, and I guess I want to be fired. That's the whole piece."

"I sure don't want to fire you, Yuba," said the colonel. "You're a good man with hosses, though I reckon you're some bonehead in other ways. What's bitin' you to go to Kicking Mule when you know you're wanted on the ranch?"

"I guess I'll come back if you want, and as long as you want me, sir," said Yuba, "though I reckon I'll never need to draw your pay no more. No, sir!"

"Yuba's made a ten-strike, sir," explained the Kid. "He met up with a man from Austin to-day, and won six hundred and fifty dollars from the jay, and it's sure got into his head a few."

Colonel Sanderson raised his eyebrows.

"Yuba won six hundred and fifty dollars from a stranger!" he ejaculated.

"Sure!" said Yuba. "I had a hundred, and I won six hundred and fifty. Now I got seven-fifty in big bills—and here they are, sir."

Yuba flourished his wad.

"This sure has got me guessing," said the colonel, in astonishment. "That man from Austin couldn't have known how to play poker, I reckon."

"He had the dust," said Yuba, "and he lost it like a little man. I been telling the guys for days that I got a hunch I was going to make a ten-strike, and I sure done it. And I aim to follow it up while it lasts, and that piecan Mesquite ain't going to stop me!"

Mesquite gave a snort.

"I'll say—!" he began.

But Colonel Sanderson stopped him with a gesture.

"Leave this to me, Mesquite," he said. "It sure has got me guessing what the man from Austin let Yuba win his dollars for."

"Let me nothing!" snapped Yuba. "I won them dollars at poker, and I'm telling this outfit that I can play poker, jest a few! Yes, sir!"

"He sure won it, sir," said the Kid. "That Austin guy won Yuba's little bills, and sure took them away with him; but Yuba won as many big bills as he lost little. It surprised me a whole lot. That galoot Brown's got Yuba's tens and fives, but he's left his hundreds and fifties with Yuba, and there they are. But that ain't no reason for the jay to hit Kicking Mule and lose it all again!"

"Lose your great-grandmother!" said Yuba derisively. "Ain't I shouting out to you that I'm going to clean out Kicking Mule like it was a can of beans?"

He turned to the colonel.

"I don't like quitting this outfit, sir," he said. "But I got a hunch, an' I'm following it up. Mesquite can sure go and shake himself; but I'll say to you, sir, that I'm sorry, but I got to go—I sure got to! I'm quittin' horse-wrangling for poker, sir; and maybe I'll come

back later and buy your ranch off'n you."

"Let me see them bills close," said the rancher.

"I guess you can see them all you want, sir," said Yuba; and he handed the wad to the colonel.

Colonel Sanderson examined them with a keep eye. All the punchers in the bunkhouse watched him, wondering what was in his mind—wondering still more when the colonel's thoughtful face broke into a grin.

He handed the bills back to Yuba. "That guy from Austin sure knowed what he was about when he corralled your small bills, Yuba, and let you win his big ones," he said.

"What?" gasped Yuba. "You hit Kicking Mule as soon as you like," said the colonel. "But don't you take them bills along and part with them."

"Why not?" demanded the horse-wrangler.

"Because you'll get four years in the pen, if you do, for passing counterfeit bills," answered the rancher.

Yuba staggered. "Counterfeit bills!" he repeated faintly.

"That's the size of it," said Colonel Sanderson. "And if you was anything but a boneheaded mutt you'd have guessed why you was let to win. That galoot from Austin has got away with your hundred dollars, and he's left you a bundle of wastepaper that you'll be cinched by the sheriff for passing, if you pass it. You get me?"

"Counterfeit bills!" gasped Mesquite. "Haw, haw, haw! That was why Yuba

won the dollars from the Austin guy! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Green goods!" gasped Colorado. "Sawdust!" stuttered Tucson.

"Yuba's lost a hundred dollars, and won a bag of sawdust! Ha, ha, ha!" The bunkhouse rocked with laughter.

The Rio Kid joined in it; he could not help it. The expression on Yuba Dick's face was too much for him.

Yuba stood thunderstruck, gazing at the wad of bills in his hand.

He had made his ten-strike, and had wondered at his luck. It dawned on him now that that cunning Mr. Brown had wanted him to win, that the poker game was a stunt for passing counterfeit money, and that Mr. Brown was quite content to pocket small bills while he was losing large ones, because the small bills were good and the large ones were not.

"You—you sure, boss?" gasped the hapless horse-wrangler at last.

The colonel laughed. "Plumb sure," he answered. "But you can ride over to Juniper, and ask them at the bank."

"By the great horned toad," gasped Yuba, "I'll sure ride over to Juniper. That scallywag was going to Juniper, and if I strike him I'll fill him so full of holes that he will pass for a colander!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the punchers.

"Aw, snigger all you want!" snorted Yuba; and he rushed out of the bunkhouse for his horse, followed by a roar.

Late that night Yuba Dick came riding in from Juniper.

He had left seven hundred and fifty dollars there. They were not worth

carrying home, after he had shown them at the bank and heard an opinion on them.

He was late, for he had hunted through Juniper, with a gun in his hand, for Mr. Brown. But the man from Austin and his buckboard had not been seen at Juniper, and Yuba rode away at last, disappointed. Mr. Brown, probably, was very far away by that time, doubtless looking for a game of poker with some other unsuspecting cow-puncher in another section, with an unlimited supply of hundreds and fifties to lose in exchange for tens and fives.

Yuba Dick did not take his "time." He did not hit Kicking Mule, and the poker sharps in the cow-town were not "busted" by the horse-wrangler from the Bar-One. For a whole day Yuba went about with a grouch, while his comrades chuckled and grinned, and asked him when he was going to make another ten-strike.

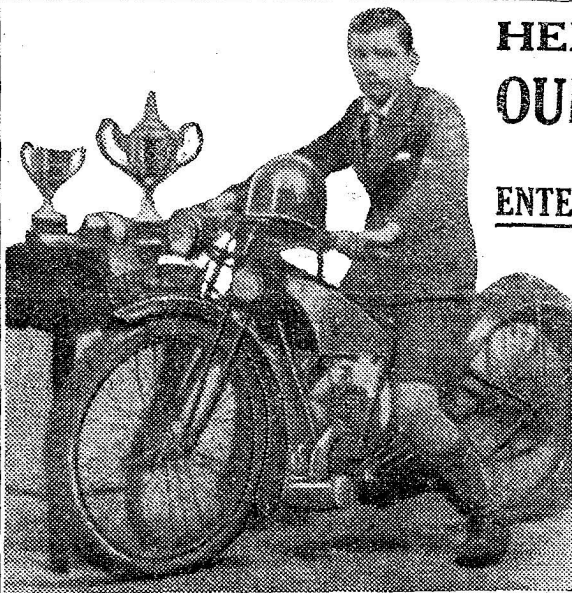
By the next day Yuba had recovered his spirits.

"I guess one swallow don't make a summer, Two-gun," he said to the Kid. "I got a hunch that I'm going to make a ten-strike, and it will sure come off some day. You watch out!"

And the Kid chuckled, and agreed that he would watch out, though not with any expectation of ever witnessing Yuba Dick's ten-strike!

THE END.

"YUBA DICK'S LAST GAME!" is the title of next week's roaring long tale of the Wild West!



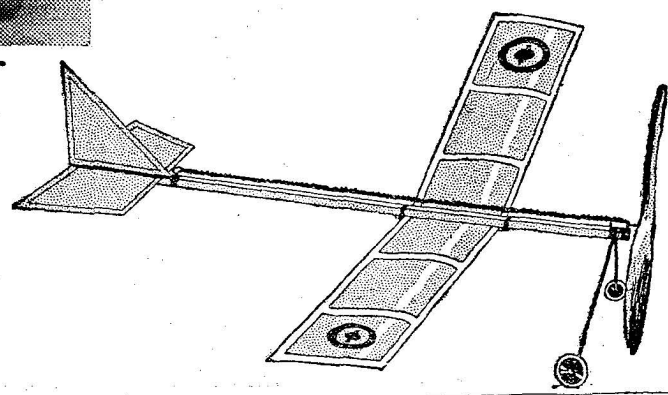
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