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The POPULAR

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AT GRIPS WITH CATTLE THIEVES!

One of the many thrilling scenes from
this week's roaring Wild West Yarn!



The Rio Kid and the "Scallywag" come to grips with cattle-thieves on the wide ranges of the Bar-One Ranch.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Bar-One Prodigal!

COLONEL SANDERSON, boss of the Bar-One Ranch, came over to the corral, where the Rio Kid was saddling his mustang. The Kid glanced round, and saluted him politely.

"Mornin', sir!"

"Mornin', Two-gun!" said the rancher.

He leaned on the corral gate and watched the Kid, as the boy puncher bent to secure the cinch. There was a thoughtful, subdued expression on the rancher's face. His grizzled brows were knitted, his lips a little set.

The Kid figured that he knew what

was on the boss' mind. Two or three days ago the rancher had been looking forward keenly to the return of his son, who had been three years absent from the ranch. Frank Sanderson was home again now, the prodigal son had come back. But the return of the prodigal had not brought his father the satisfaction he had expected, and every man in the Bar-One bunch knew it.

The rancher had come to the corral to speak to the Kid, that was clear, but he seemed in no hurry to begin. The boy puncher rose after fastening the cinch, and glanced at him. The Kid was riding that morning to collect a herd from a distant feeding-place, and he had to start early. But he waited, with his hand on the grey

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mustang's rein. He knew that the colonel had something to say.

"You're riding this morning, Two-gun?" said the rancher, breaking his silence at length.

"Mesquite wants the cows brought in from Lizard Creek, sir," answered the Kid.

"Hold on a piece."

The Kid held on.

what was in his mind. Frank Sanderson had returned to the ranch, the same man as before, older and harder, but the same reckless and self-indulgent scallywag that he had always been, and it had taken the rancher very little time to learn as much. And it troubled him.

"I'll put it plain," said Sanderson at last. "I missed Frank the day I

rode over to Juniper to meet him coming home, and I guess I heard he had been painting the town red. Since then he's ridden twice into Kicking Mule, and I guess there ain't a dive in the town where he ain't played poker and drunk bootleg whisky. He's not a bad

had, Two-gun, but weak as water—and when a bunch of scallywags get hold of him, he hasn't a will of his own."

The Kid smiled faintly. He opined that there was no scallywag in Kicking Mule who could give young Frank points in that line. But he was not likely to say so to Frank's father. Still less was he likely to mention that Frank was no stranger to him, and that up in Montana he had seen him, a "finhorn" gambler under the name of Ace-High Saunders. The Kid was carefully keeping that a secret.

"I want you to take him in hand, Two-gun!" went on the colonel. "You 'member what I said to you the day I was expecting him home—you're the guy to keep him straight, if he can be kept straight. And he's got to be. This

The SCALLYWAG of the BAR-ONE!

By Ralph Redway.

Again the rancher was silent, the Kid waiting. Yuba Dick, the horse-wrangler, passed them going into the corral, glancing rather curiously as he passed at the rancher's sombre face.

"My son's home again now, Two-gun," said Sanderson.

"Yep!" said the Kid.

"I figured," said the rancher, "that Frank had made good up in Montana. But—"

He broke off, and the Kid was silent. "There was trouble before he left here, three years ago," resumed the rancher. "Bad trouble. But I reckoned he had made good in the cow country up north, and the old trouble's forgotten here now—or near enough. I was glad to get him back. But—"

Again he paused. The Kid knew

ranch, the biggest in the Kicking Mule country, will be his some day, and I guess I don't want it to be sold up for the benefit of the poker sharps and tin horn sports of this section."

"I'll sure do anything I can, sir," said the Kid soberly. "But—"

"Frank's going to work," said the rancher curtly. "Pears like he's come back here to loaf and drink and play poker. That ain't good enough for the Bar-One. Frank's goin' to ride with the bunch, and earn his corn punching cows."

The Kid whistled softly.

It was a decision that might have been expected of the boss of the Bar-One, but the Kid wondered how Frank Sanderson was likely to take it.

"He will ride with you this morning," added Sanderson, "I want you to make friends with him, if you can. Two-gun."

"I'll try, sir!" said the Kid.

"Come over to the house when you're ready to ride."

"Sure!"

The boss of the Bar-One strode back to the ranch-house.

The Kid followed him, with Side-Kicker's reins looped over his arm.

On the ranch-house porch, Frank Sanderson was standing, with a dark look on his rather handsome, dissipated face. A Mexican peon was holding a pinto horse by the steps.

"You ready, Frank?" asked the colonel.

Frank gave the Kid an inimical look, and then glanced in a sidelong way at his father. Obviously the prospect of riding after cows that morning was not pleasant to him.

"I've told you, popper, that I want to see a guy in Kicking Mule this morning," he said.

Sanderson compressed his lips.

"You've seen enough of the guys in Kicking Mule, Frank. You're riding this morning to Lizard Creek after cows."

"That's a good twenty miles," growled Frank.

"Ain't you good for twenty miles on a cayuse?" asked his father. "And you a Sanderson, brought up on hosses."

"I got business in the town."

"Cut it out!"

"I guess I can't cut it out," said Frank sullenly. "This isn't what I expected when I came home, father."

The rancher's jaw set grimly.

"You're riding after cows, Frank," he said. "You're goin' with Two-gun Carson here. If you ride to Kicking Mule instead—" He paused.

"Well?"

"If you do, stay there," said the rancher briefly. "I ain't no use for loafers and scallywags and gamblers on this ranch even though you're my son. You got to choose between raisin' cows and raisin' Cain; and there ain't no two ways about it. There's your hoss, mount and ride."

With that, and without waiting for a reply, Colonel Sanderson went into the house.

Frank glanced after him, set his lips in a bitter sneer, and then descended the steps, jerked the pinto roughly from the man who held it, and leaped into the saddle.

With a black brow, he rode away from the ranch with the Rio Kid.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Trouble on the Trail!

"DOG-GONE my cats!" murmured the Rio Kid softly, under his breath.

For three miles, the two horsemen had ridden in silence.

The Kid did not want to talk, and his companion was plunged into a black and sullen humour.

If the colonel had been disappointed, there was no doubt that his son had been disappointed too. Life on his father's ranch was not what he had expected it to be.

It was irksome to the Kid to ride with the fellow, still more irksome to think of making friends with him. But the Kid's devotion to the boss had no limits, and he was prepared to do all he could.

The rancher had been a kind and generous friend to the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. He, alone, on the ranch, knew who the Kid was; knew all that was said against him all over Texas, and yet trusted him. That was a debt the Kid would have been joyful to repay. If he could repay it by helping this sullen, selfish, wayward scallywag to keep straight, the Kid would be glad of the chance. He doubted whether he could; but he was going to try hard, for the boss' sake.

Frank Sanderson broke his sullen silence at last, glancing at his companion in the furtive, sidelong way he had.

"You ain't let on about what you know of me up in Montana?" he asked.

"Not a word, sir," said the Kid.

"Seems as the popper sort of takes to you, Two-gun," said the young man, with a sneer.

"He's a good boss to me, and to all the bunch," answered the Kid. "There's powerful few things I wouldn't do for the boss."

"And you ain't told him what you know?"

"Nopo!"

"He's down on me—and me only a few days home!" growled the young man discontentedly. "This ain't what I looked for. Might as well have stayed up in Montana. I guess if I wanted to punch cows, I could have got a job without riding down to Texas for one."

The Kid made no answer to that.

"I got to play up," went on Frank Sanderson. "The popper's capable of making a will leaving the ranch away from me, and I've got cousins that'd be glad to step into my shoes, if they could. I sure got to play up. He thinks more of the ranch than he does of his son. He always was a hard case, and three years ain't softened him any."

Frank drew in his horse.

The Kid followed his example, wondering what the rancher's son was stopping for. Away to the east, smoke on the sky told where the cow town of Kicking Mule lay, but the cowmen's route lay far from the town.

"You're hitting Lizard Creek this morning?" said Frank.

"We are," said the Kid.

"Not me!" Frank glanced back; they were far out of sight of the ranch. "I got to see a man in Kicking Mule this morning. I'm quitting you here."

The Kid was dismayed.

"But your father figures—" he said.

"He can figure what he likes. I guess you'll hit the ranch again with the cows about sundown."

"Yep!"

"I'll join up with you here, then, and ride in with you," said Frank. "The old man won't be any the wiser, if you hold your tongue. You get me?"

"But—" objected the Kid.

"Can it!"

Frank Sanderson swung his horse away. The Kid, puzzled and dismayed, rode after him.

"I guess you want to think it over

agin, sir," he said earnestly. "The boss may ask me about it—"

"Tell him any lie you think of, then."

The Kid flushed.

"I sure ain't telling the boss no lies, sir," he answered. "If he asks me was you at Lizard Creek rounding up the cows, I got to tell him."

Frank Sanderson laughed contemptuously.

"You're sure powerful particular, for a cowpuncher!" he said. "You trying to touch me for a ten-dollar bill, or what?"

"I guess I wouldn't touch your ten-dollar bills at no price, sir," said the Kid, his colour deepening. "But if the boss asks me questions, I got to tell him the truth, and there ain't no two ways about that. Give them sharps in Kicking Mule a miss to-day, sir, and ride with me to Lizard Creek."

"You'll tell him I was at Lizard with you!" said Frank Sanderson, in a tone of menace.

"I sure will not!" said the Kid.

Frank Sanderson halted again, and the two horsemen sat in the saddle looking at one another—the Kid's face quiet, though troubled; Frank's sullen and savage and bitter.

"I can't afford to quarrel with the popper," said Frank at last. "I've come back to the Bar-One broke to the world, and that ranch is worth a hundred thousand dollars, and the old man can't live for ever. I got to keep in with him."

"Keep in with him by playing a straight game," said the Kid.

"I'm hitting Kicking Mule, and you're telling the boss that I was with you the whole day at Lizard."

The Kid shook his head.

"Forget it," he said.

"You won't?"

"Not by a jugful!"

Frank Sanderson's eyes burned, and his hand hovered over the gun in his holster. The Kid looked at him steadily.

"Don't!" he said quietly. "I'm quicker on the draw than you are, sir—and I'd hate to drill the boss' son! Forget it, sir, and ride to Lizard Creek with me peaceable."

"You dog-goned, pesky, back-talking cow-wrestler!" said Frank Sanderson.

"When the Bar-One comes into my hands, you're the first man in the bunch that I'll fire!"

"Just as you like, sir," said the Kid.

"But that cuts no ice jest now. We're wasting time."

"You ain't standing by me?"

"Not to the extent of telling the boss lies," said the Kid. "No, sir!"

A flush of rage came over the face of the rancher's son. His hand closed on the butt of his gun, and he whipped it from the holster.

Bang!

There was a roar as the Kid fired from the hip.

Frank Sanderson uttered a yell as the gun was torn from his hand by the bullet, and fell smashed into the grass by his horse.

A stream of curses poured from his lips. He nursed his numbed right hand with his left.

The Kid smiled faintly, as he returned the smoking six-gun to his holster.

"I sure told you I was quick on the draw, sir," he said quietly. "You don't want to play that game on me. I sure was raised on gun-play. Let's ride."

He swung his mustang round in the direction of Lizard Creek. Frank Sanderson stared after him, white with rage, and glanced once in the direction of the smoke of Kicking Mule. Then, cursing savagely, he rode after the Kid.

THE THIRD CHAPTER. The Brand Blotters!

"GEE-WHIZ!"

The Kid uttered that ejaculation suddenly, and Frank Sanderson cast a sour look at him at that moment.

Five miles on they had ridden in silence, the Kid's brow clouded, the young rancher's black and sullen. Without the Kid backing him by deceiving his father, the scallywag of the Bar-One dared not carry out his intention of riding into Kicking Mule and spending the day at a poker joint, gambling and drinking. For along with the old rancher's affection for his only son was a grim sternness that Frank had plenty of reason to fear. An idle and dissipated waster was not wanted on the ranch, and there was no room for him there. He had to live a man's life or go. And only too well he knew that if his father gave up hope of his reform, the Bar-One would pass into other hands. The colonel would never leave it to be wasted in dissipation.

Between the grim necessity of standing in with his father, and the fierce desire for self-indulgence, the scallywag of the Bar-One was not in a happy mood, nor a pleasant one. When he glanced at the Kid there was hatred in his glance. This cowpuncher could have seen him through, had he liked, at the cost of a few falsehoods, and he had refused.

Had the disgruntled waster still possessed a gun, he would have been tempted, in his rage and sullen resentment, to pull it on the Kid as they rode north-westward. But his gun lay smashed in the grass miles behind—which was perhaps just as well for Frank Sanderson. The Rio Kid was a bad man to crowd.

The Kid, rising in his stirrups, shaded his eyes with his hand, and stared across the sea of grass before him. They were drawing near to Lizard Creek now, one of the most outlying feeding-grounds on the wide ranges of the Bar-One. The creek flowed through the bottom of a vast hollow in the plain, muddy and shallow, winding on its way to the Kicking Mule River. And from the hollow ahead there rose a thin spiral of smoke against the blue of the Texas sky.

It was upon that spiral of smoke that the Kid's keen eyes were fixed, and Sanderson saw a grim look come over his handsome, sunburnt face.

"Gee-whiz!" repeated the Kid.

"What's there?" grunted Sanderson.

"Brand blottin', I reckon."

Frank Sanderson showed a little interest at that.

"Brand blotters—in the hollow?" he asked.

The hostility in his looks and manner faded away, with an interest in common with his companion.

"I reckon."

Frank Sanderson watched the spiral of smoke; so thin and faint in the distance that a keen eye was needed to pick it out against the sky.

"Might be some guy campin'," he said.

"Might be," said the Kid. "But it ain't, sir. Who'd be riding from no-

where to nowhere across the Lizard hollow? I guess that fire was built to heat a runnin' iron."

"Some puncher—"

"Nary a puncher at Lizard. The nearest stockman's shebang is ten miles. Anyhow, we'll soon see."

The Kid gave his mustang a light flick of the quirt, and rode on at a gallop. Frank Sanderson cut his pinto sharply, and the animal leaped after the Kid. There was a trace of excitement in the scallywag's face now.

"If it's brand blotters, we may be hittin' trouble," he said, as he rejoined the Kid.

"Trouble for them guys, I guess," said the Kid grimly. "I sure ain't lettin' them change the brands on the boss' cows, while I got a finger that will work the trigger of a Colt."

"I've got no gun," said Frank sullenly.

"You sure ain't, sir," assented the Kid.

"You pack two."

The Kid paused a moment; then he drew one of the walnut-butted guns from his holster, held it by the barrel, and passed it to Frank Sanderson.

"I guess you want to be heeled, if we're hittin' brand blotters," he said. "They'll sure shoot."

Sanderson looked at him as he took the revolver. There was something like compunction in his face at the simple good faith of the puncher. It did not seem to have crossed the Kid's mind that the young rancher might make a treacherous use of the gun now that he was armed. If such a thought was in the young man's mind he dismissed it, and dropped the six-gun into his empty holster.

They rode on together at a gallop. The Kid noted, with satisfaction, the flush of eagerness in the young rancher's face. If he found excitement in a fight in defence of his father's herds, it was sure better, the Kid reckoned, than the excitement of a poker game in a smoky joint at Kicking Mule. The Kid, for the first time, felt that it might be possible to feel friendly towards this fellow, as Colonel Sanderson so much desired, and as the Kid himself desired for the boss' sake.

The horsemen reached the brow of the hollow, and pulled in their horses, saddle-deep in grass, and looked down the slope before them.

Far away across the hollow the Lizard creek glimmered in the bright sunshine, a winding ribbon of silver.

Half-way to the creek there was a belt of thick chaparral; and on the edge of the thickets the fire was built. Three men, small in the distance, were gathered round the fire.

Two of them were holding ropes that secured a struggling beast. The third had an iron in his hand that had just been taken from the fire, and glowed with heat.

Even at the distance the horsemen could hear the squeal of the cow as the hot iron seared the brand.

"I guess that cinches it," said the Kid. "Brand-blottin', sir. We got to get them three jaspers."

"Who'd you reckon they are?" asked Frank.

The Kid's eyes were fixed on the trio. "I guess I've seen them loafing around Kicking Mule," he said. "That guy with the runnin' iron is Jas Cassidy—"

Sanderson started. His eyes were good, but not so eagle-like in their keenness as the Kid's. He could see the three men, but he could not pick out their features as the Kid could.

"Jas Cassidy?" he repeated.

"Yep. He runs a ranch of sorts over the Kicking Mule river—the Bar Cross he calls it," said the Kid. "I guess I've heard guys allow that he's got more cows on that ranch than he ever raised there; and I reckon I'm wise now where he got them. A man with a runnin'-iron can soon change the brand of a cow from Bar-One to Bar Cross. It's easy, I guess." He glanced at Sanderson. "You know that guy, sir?"

"I knew him at Kicking Mule three years ago," said Frank. "I've played poker with him."

"I guess he plays more poker than he raises cows," agreed the Kid dryly. "And he sure helps himself to cows from your father's herd, sir, as you can see with your own eyes."

"The durned skunk!" said Sanderson. "Them two other guys are the same brand as Jas," went on the Kid. "The one with the red beard is Frenchy, and the other's a Greaser; he's Mexican Pete. I've seen them guys in Kicking Mule many a time since I struck this country, and never thought a whole lot of them. But they're all three tough men, sir, and quick on the shoot. You want to keep your eyes peeled, and your gun handy when we get them."

There was a momentary irresolution in Frank Sanderson's looks. The sight of the associate of his old wild days seemed to have changed the current of his thoughts.

"I was friendly with Jas," he muttered.

The Kid gave him a quick look. "You ain't standing for brand-blottin', sir, and on your father's own ranch as well?" he said.

"Sure not," said Frank. "But keep off gun-play if you can, puncher. I ain't keen to pull a gun on an old friend."

"I guess that's natural," said the Kid, with a nod. "Look here, sir, if you'd rather stand clear, I guess I'm ready to ride down to that gang on my lonesome."

"You'd handle the three?" said Sanderson. "You think a whole heap of yourself, Two-gun."

"If I can't keep my end up agin three pesky jaspers like that crowd, sir, I'll sure buy me a store and sell groceries," said the Kid. "You leave it to me if you like, Mr. Sanderson, sir."

"Cut it out," growled Frank. "What'd my father say, and what'd the bunch say, if I let you go it alone? You take me for a coward?"

The answer pleased the Kid. There was some sort of good somewhere, he figured, in this scallywag. The fellow was a waster; but he was ready to face gun-play against three of the toughest gunmen in the Kicking Mule country—ruffians who were certain to be desperate when they found themselves discovered in the very act of crime. In the cow country there was no room for a guy who was caught blotting brands. Prison at the county town was their certain fate, if they did not meet a quicker and surer fate by bullet or rope, as was more probable. There was no shadow of doubt that powder would be burned when the brand-blotters found themselves rounded up by Bar-One men.

"We're going it together, then, sir," said the Kid cheerfully. "And I guess it won't be us that comes out at the little end of the horn."

He shook his reins and rode down into the grassy hollow, Frank Sanderson following fast.

The Cassidy gang were so intent on their work that they had not noticed



The Kid rode into the shallow creek, splashed through, and dashed up the opposite bank in pursuit of the Mexican.

the two figures on the skyline. Not a glance had they cast towards them. The freshly-branded cow was cast loose, and another roped animal sprawled in its place. And Cassidy was bending over it, the hot iron in his hand, ready to change the Bar One into the Bar-Cross, which would make the beast indistinguishable from his own herd when once driven safely home to his ranch.

But at the thunder of hoofs coming down into the hollow the brand-blotters turned and stared, and the running iron dropped from Cassidy's hand into the grass, and he reached for a gun. Swift as their leader the other two rascals grabbed their hardware, turning with desperate eyes towards the oncoming riders.

Crack, crack, crack, crack! rang the six-guns, the lead whizzing round the horsemen as they charged on.

Bang! roared the Kid's gun, as a bullet clipped by his ear; and the man with the red beard dropped in the grass, and never stirred again.

Frank Sanderson was firing at the same moment, though with the distance, and the rapid motion, his fire was as wild as that of the brand-blotters.

Bang! the Kid's gun roared again; and Mexican Pete yelled and leaped for the chaparral, and vanished into the bushes, blood streaming from a gash along his dusky cheek.

Jas Cassidy stood his ground desperately, gun in hand, standing by the struggling cow in the rope that he had been about to brand. A bullet tore the Stetson hat from his head and a strip of skin along with it, and the blood ran down over his eyes from the gash. With a curse, he leaped away for the bushes,

to escape; but there was no escape for the chief of the brand-blotting gang. The Rio Kid held his fire; he would not shoot down a man who was running. But he spurred on Side-Kicker, grasping his lasso as he spurred; and the rope flew, the loop dropping over Cassidy's shoulders while he was still yards from cover.

There was a yell from the cattle-thief as the rope jerked him backwards, and he sprawled in the grass.

The Kid rode up, dismounted, and grasped him. The riata was knotted round Cassidy's arms, and he staggered to his feet, a prisoner.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Rounded Up!

"CINCHED!" said the Rio Kid. "You bet!" grinned Frank Sanderson, dismounting breathlessly from his pinto.

Cassidy, his arms secure in the knotted rope, stood cursing. Mexican Pete had vanished in the chaparral, and the distant beat of horse's hoofs showed that he was mounted and making his escape. In the grass lay Frenchy, the man with the red beard. The Kid gave him only one glance. Frenchy had blotted his last brand.

"We got two, Mr. Sanderson, sir," said the Kid cheerfully. "But I reckon we want that Greaser."

"Sure!" said Frank. "He's sure fighting out like he was sent for," grinned the Kid. "But I reckon Side-Kicker will put paid to his cayuse. I'll get him afore he hits the creek."

Jas Cassidy spat out a curse.

"What you doin' with me?" he snarled.

"You!" said the Kid contemptuously. "You're goin' to be led on that rope to the Bar-One; and I reckon it's you for the county gaol, if the boss don't have you strung up to a cottonwood. And if he says the word, I guess the boys will string you up so fast it will make your head swim. That's for you, you cow-thief!"

"And you'll let them do it, Frank Sanderson, and me your old side-pardner," said Cassidy, with a savage stare at the rancher's son. "Me that stood by you when you shot up Tom Nelson, that you had to ride out of the country for three years ago."

"Aw, can it!" said Sanderson. "That cuts no ice, when you're caught stealing my father's cows."

"I guess—"

"Can it, I tell you!" snapped Sanderson. He turned to the Rio Kid. "Say, you Two-gun, you get after that Greaser, and leave me to take care of this jasper."

"Sure!" said the Kid. He picked up Cassidy's gun, and handed it to the young rancher. "Say, that's a good Colt; and I guess I'll take my own hardware, sir. I always was a two-gun guy."

A moment more and the Kid was on Side-Kicker, riding through the chaparral towards the creek, in pursuit of the Mexican.

Mexican Pete had a good start, and the track of his horse lay clear in the scrubs as the Kid rode in pursuit. The Kid was soon through the belt of chaparral, which shut off the brand blotters' camp and Frank Sanderson from his sight, as he rode out by the muddy banks of the creek. Across the creek he sighted the Mexican now, on the other side, riding away to the north as fast as his cow-pony could carry him.

The Kid rode into the shallow creek, splashed through, and dashed up the opposite bank. On the rolling prairie beyond he let Side-Kicker out to full gallop.

The brand-blotter was riding hard, seeking only to escape, and he had a good horse. But there was no cayuse in the Kicking Mule country that could show his heels for long to Side-Kicker, and the Kid gained with every stride. And the Kid was the better rider; he knew how to get every ounce out of a horse without straining him. Stride by stride he gained on the fleeing cow-thief; and Mexican Pete, looking back over his shoulder, glared desperately as he saw himself overhauled.

Ere long he was within easy pistol-range, and the Kid had a gun in his hand. But he did not fire. It would have been easy to send the cow-thief

rolling from the saddle, with a bullet through his body; but the Kid was not the man to let daylight through a fleeing foe. Unless the Mexican turned to fight, the Kid was not going to burn powder on him.

"Say, you yeller-skinned guy!" the Kid shouted, laughing as the wind lashed his face in the desperate race. "Say, you're sure fixed! You want to pull in that cayuse, feller."

The Mexican spurred madly.

Bang!

The sombrero spun round on the Mexican's head, as the Kid clipped its broad brim with a shot. The Kid laughed at the convulsive start the cow-thief gave.

"You want the next through your cabeza, feller?" called out the Kid.

He was close behind now.

Desperately the Mexican swung round his cow-pony and came charging back at the Kid, gun in hand. Bang, bang, bang! the Kid's six-gun roared, clipping dark locks of hair from the Mexican's head, the Kid grinning as he pulled trigger. Mexican Pete, yelling with terror, threw down his gun, dragged his pony to a halt, and put up his hands.

"Let up!" he yelled. "Nombre de Dios! Let up!"

"Sure I was only fanning you, hombre," grinned the Kid, as he rode up to the brand-blotter. "I sure ain't fertilising Colonel Sanderson's land with your vinegar, if you don't make me. Keep 'em up!"

He rode close to the Mexican, jerked the long knife from his belt, and threw it into the grass. Then with Mexican Pete's own sash he bound the brand-blotter's hands behind his back. Taking the reins of the cow-pony, he led the captured man back towards the creek.

The Kid was in a cheery humour as

he rode through the creek and back to the brand-blotters' camp, leading his prisoner. All three of the gang had been rounded up now, one of them beyond the reach of justice, the other two booked for the "pen." The latest recruit to the Bar-One bunch had cause for satisfaction.

But a change came over his face as he rode out of the chaparral and came up to the smoky-fire the brand-blotters had been using. The fire still smouldered. Beside it lay the running-iron Jas Cassidy had dropped, and the still figure of Frenchy; and Frank Sanderson stood there beside his horse. But of Jas Cassidy, the chief of the brand-blotting gang, there was nothing to be seen.

The Kid stared round him.

"Say, where's that brand-blotting' guy, Mr. Sanderson, sir?" he exclaimed. "You ain't never let him make tracks?"

Frank Sanderson gave him a sidelong look.

"He sure got away!" he muttered.

"He got away?" repeated the Kid.

"I've said it."

The Kid compressed his lips, and picked up his riata. The rope had been cut, and it was not the bound man who had cut it. Frank Sanderson watched him sulkily, furtively.

The Kid quietly coiled his lasso.

"You've got the other guy," said Frank, after a long silence, with a glance at the scowling Mexican.

"I sure got him," answered the Kid.

"Cassidy had a hoss in the thickets," said Frank. "He got to his horse and lit out."

The Kid made no reply. He knew that Frank Sanderson had released the chief of the brand-blotters, the old associate of his wild old days in Kicking Mule. Had he been anyone but the boss' son the Kid would have had some-

thing to say about it—something emphatic. As it was he had nothing to say. Jas Cassidy by this time would be too far away for pursuit, and the Kid had to let it go at that.

"We're here to drive the cows, Two gun," said Frank Sanderson, after a long pause. "What you doin' with that Greaser guy?"

"Keeping him safe," answered the Kid. "I guess that cow-thief has got to get to the ranch."

"I guess you can tie him to a tree, and leave him safe while we're rounding up the cows."

The Mexican gave Frank Sanderson a quick look. But the Kid, as well as the brand-blotter, read what was in the mind of the one-time side-partner of Jas Cassidy.

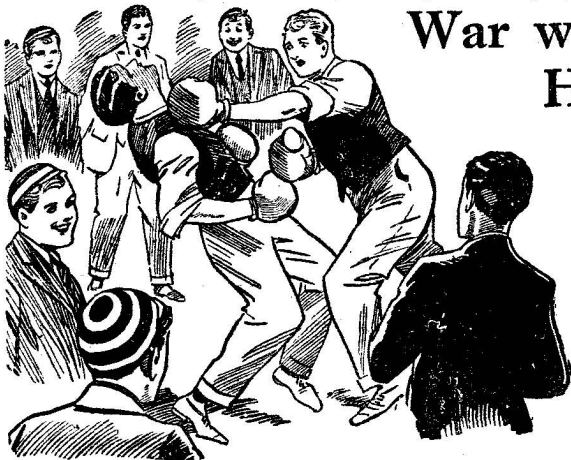
"I guess some guy might happen along and let him loose while I wasn't lookin'," said the Kid. "That Greaser's riding with me while we round up the cattle, sir." He gave the Mexican a look. "You get me, hombre? You're riding with this baby; and if you get a hunch to ride any other way, say your prayers at the same time, for I'll sure drop you off'n that cow-pony with a bullet in your cabeza."

And during the hours that the Kid—with perfunctory assistance from Frank Sanderson—rounded up the bunch of cows from the banks of Lizard Creek, the prisoner rode with him. And when the cows were gathered, and the drive home to the ranch started, the prisoner was still riding under the eye of the Kid.

But as the herd trailed on under the sunset, and shadows lengthened on the prairie, the Kid wondered a whole lot whether he would reach the ranch without gun-play with the scallywag of the Bar-One.

THE END.

(There certainly are wild adventures in front of the Rio Kid with the wayward scallywag of the ranch. But for his boss, the Kid would have "pulled a gun" on Frank Sanderson long ago. For the sake of the great-hearted rancher, the Kid just has to "stand" Sanderson junior, knowing full well that he is heading for trouble. Next week's Wild West story is entitled: "FRIENDS OR FOES?" and is a winner!)



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