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The POPULAR

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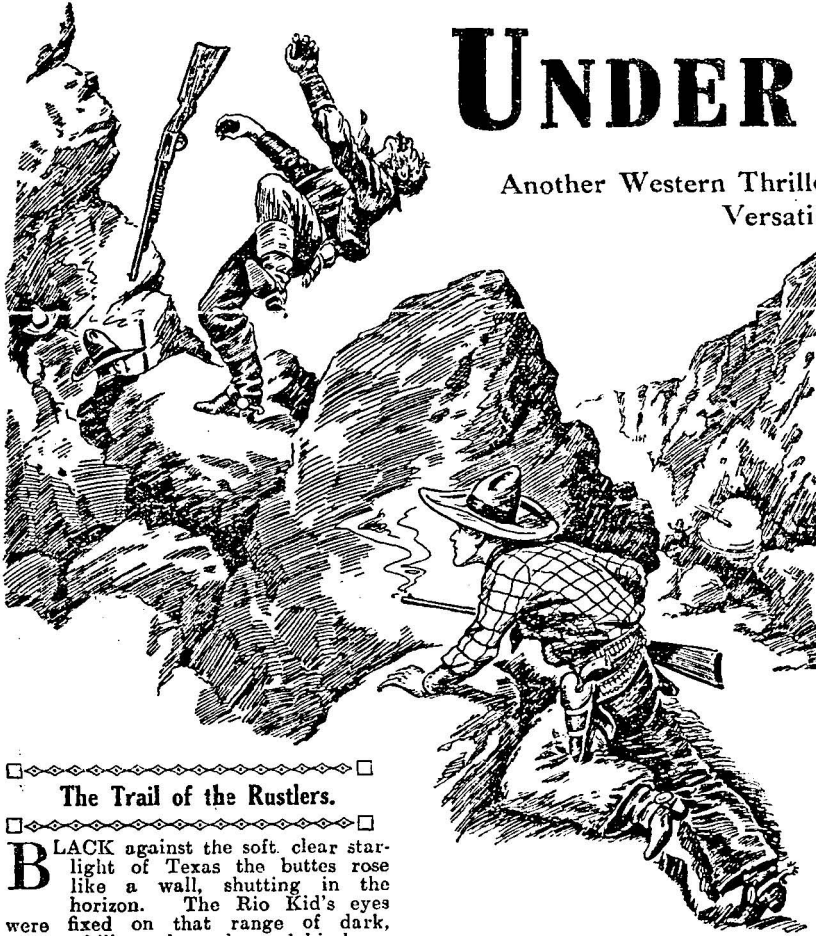


A WESTERN THRILLER and 4 OTHER COMPLETE YARNS FOR YOU!

THE BOY SHERIFF AND HIS POSSE FIND THEMSELVES—

UNDER FIRE!

Another Western Thriller from Ralph Redway's
Versatile Pen.



The Trail of the Rustlers.

BLACK against the soft, clear starlight of Texas the buttes rose like a wall, shutting in the horizon. The Rio Kid's eyes were fixed on that range of dark, stumpy hills as he rode, and his brow was very thoughtful. Somewhere within the dark recesses of the buttes, lurked Cactus Carter and his crowd, and the cows they had run off from the Bar-2 ranch. The Kid was aiming to get back the rustled cows, and to get Cactus, if he could; but he admitted to himself that it was not going to be pie. In the rocky recesses of the buttes there were a hundred places where a few desperate men could hold off pursuit, and take a heavy toll of their pursuers; and the nearer the grey mustang carried him to the buttes the more thoughtful grew the Kid's brow.

The trail, so far, was broad and clear. The track of a herd of cows, and of the horsemen who had driven them off from the ranch, could have been followed by a blind man. The Kid was riding at an easy gallop, hardly needing to glance at the trail as he rode. But when they left the prairie and entered the buttes, he knew that it would be a different matter; "sign" would be hard to seek in the stony waste yonder. And likely enough, the Kid figured, watchful eyes were looking from the dark hills, watching the bunch of riders that swept rapidly across the plain. At any moment the Rio Kid would not have been surprised to hear the crack of a rifle.

And he slackened speed as the dark buttes drew close, and the Plug Hat men who rode with him slackened also.

But with the Plug Hat posse rode the Bar-2 outfit, and the cow-punchers were fiercely eager to get to close quarters with the rustlers, and recklessly regardless of what might lie ahead. Mohave Dave, foreman of the Bar-2, did not slacken rein, and the Bar-2 bunch surged ahead of the Kid and his party. "Say, you-uns, go slow!" called out the Kid.

Mohave Dave looked round. "What's biting you?" he demanded, reining his broncho and riding nearer to the Kid. "You want to let them rustlers get clear with the cows?"

"Aw, forget it!" said the Kid. "I guess now I'm sheriff of Plug Hat there

cow town, when the rustlers came on the ranch and drove off the herd. And they had left two dead punchers behind them when they rustled the cows. Every man in the Bar-2 bunch was burning for vengeance, and in no mood for caution.

"What's the game, then?" demanded Mohave sourly. "I'll tell a man we ain't wasting any time in getting after them guys, sheriff."

The boy sheriff of Plug Hat nodded.

"We surely ain't," he agreed. "But we got to keep our eyes peeled, and I reckon we ain't riding into the buttes before daylight. I guess Cactus is watching out, and if we ride into an ambush, that won't help us none."

"I guess that's hoss-sense," said Colorado Bill, chief deputy in the Plug Hat posse that rode with the Kid. "It sure is asking for bad medicine, to horn into them buttes in the dark."

Mohave Dave let loose a string of swear-words, echoed by the Bar-2 punchers in a chorus. So far, the punchers had followed the lead of the sheriff of Plug Hat. But a break was coming now.

"This bunch ain't beddin' down on the prairie to wait for daylight," said Mohave Dave, with savage emphasis. "They got the cows from the Bar-2, and they done shot up two Bar-2 boys. We're after that crowd, Mister Sheriff Brown."

"We sure are after them," said Buck Peters, "and we ain't hanging back none. If you Plug Hat guys have got cold feet you can hang back till the cows come home; but we're riding after them rustlers."

"Talk sense!" said the Kid sharply. "I'm telling you—"

"Can it!" interrupted the Bar-2 foreman. "I allow you can shoot, Mister Texas Brown, and you can use your hands; but I guess you ain't no great shakes of a sheriff. You can get back to your schoolmarm, boy, and leave a man's work to growed-up men!"

The Kid's eyes gleamed for a moment. Boy as he was, he was as good a man as any in the outfit—as even Mohave would have admitted had he been wise to it that Mister Texas Brown, sheriff of Plug Hat, had been known in other parts of Texas as the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. But the Kid kept his temper; he had no hunch for trouble with the Bar-2 punchers. There was trouble enough ahead, with Cactus Carter and his crowd, for the whole outfit. The Kid drew rein.

"Halt, there!" he said crisply. "I tell you, fellers, we got to keep our eyes peeled, and if there ain't an ambush

FIVE HUNDRED COWS DISAPPEAR INTO THIN AIR!

ain't going to be any rustlers evorting loose in Sassafras county. We sure are going to rope in Cactus and his crowd. But I guess we ain't going to do it by running our heads into bad trouble. We got to keep our eyes peeled while we're combing the buttes for them rustlers."

Mohave Dave snorted again. The foreman of the Bar-2 was in a fierce and vengeful mood. Most of the bunch had been on a "bender" in the

waiting for us in the buttes, then I guess Cactus don't know enough to go in when it rains. And that guy sure is a jobc-wolf, and has his eyes wide open."

Mohave answered with an oath. "You Plug Hat guys stopping?" he demanded.

"Sure," said Colorado. "Ain't we under the orders of our sheriff? And I'm telling you that there ain't no sheriff in Texas that can lay over the sheriff of Plug Hat."

"Dog-gone you, then, for a crowd of pesky yellow greasers!" roared Mohave. "Stay here if you want, but this bunch ain't staying none. We're going after them rustlers. What about it, boys?"

"You bet!"

There was a roar of assent from the Bar-2 bunch.

"We're with you, Dave!"

And the Bar-2 bunch swept on at full gallop, towards the dark line of the buttes, back against the glimmering stars.

The Kid sat motionless in his saddle. For a moment or two perhaps he hesitated, loth to remain inactive while the reckless punchers dashed on into danger. But he shook his head. The Kid was not an outlaw now, playing a lone hand. He was sheriff; and he was responsible for the lives of the men who stood by him to maintain law and order in the cow country. For some moments he sat in the saddle and watched, with a troubled face, the Bar-2 bunch disappearing in the dusk of the stars, with a thunder of hoofs. Then he quietly dismounted.

The Plug Hat posse looked at him, and looked at one another. They shared the Kid's feelings, unwilling to stay behind while the reckless punchers rode on. But the boy sheriff had his men well in hand, and there was no disputing his orders.

"I guess we stake out the cayuses hyer, fellers, and wait for sun-up," said the Kid quietly. "We sure shan't rope in the rustlers by horning into an ambush in the dark. Light down!"

And the Plug Hat men dismounted and staked out their horses, and lay down in the thick grass to rest till daylight. But there was little sleep for them. In the silence of the night they listened for the expected sound of shooting from the darkness of the buttes. And ere long it came, and the roll of rifle-fire and the sharp cracking of revolvers, borne on the wind from the buttes, told that Mohave Dave and his men had ridden into trouble.

The Ambush in the Buttes!

FROM the open prairie, a narrow gulch split the steep sides of the buttes, and into the opening ran the clearly marked trail of the stolen herd, and the rustlers who had ridden with it. Mohave Dave and his bunch rode into the gulch without drawing rein. Behind them, the prairie shimmered white in the starlight, the long grass waving like shimmering silver. But once in the buttes, the shadows were long and dark. The hoofs of the bronchos rang loudly on stony soil, the sound ringing far through the night. On either side of the Bar-2 bunch rose ragged walls of rock, with here and there a bunch of skinny pines or firs, a trailing patch of juniper or sa-safraz. There was cover for an army

there, and even Mohave Dave, angry and reckless as he was, could not help seeing that the bunch were asking for bad trouble, if the rustlers had halted to watch for pursuers.

But the Bar-2 foreman rode doggedly on, and behind him his men rode, gun in hand, only too eager to get to close quarters with the rustlers.

On the stony ground the trail was fainter, but so far there was only one way the herd could have gone—right up the rocky gulch from the prairie. But at last Mohave had to draw rein and look for a sign. A mile from the prairie the gulch split into many others, and there were a dozen paths the rustlers might have taken with their prey.

But a herd of five hundred cows could not fail to leave sign, even on the hardest ground, and Dave was soon going on again, his men after him. The way led up a stony arroyo—a water-course that was now dry and arid, but which, in the rainy season, was the bed of a torrent that swept down from the higher ground. The arroyo was narrow—between the steep rocky walls there was only room for two horsemen to ride abreast. Yet up that narrow way it was certain that the herd had been driven only a few hours ago.

With all his angry impatience, Mohave could not gallop now. The bronchos had to fall into an easy trot in the steep, rugged arroyo. Some of the punchers glanced up at the steeply sloping sides, patched here and there with dwarf pecans, cumbered with great boulders which looked as if they would roll down at a touch. If there was an ambush, as the sheriff of Plug Hat figured, this was a death-trap. But the stolen herd had passed that way, and the Bar-2 bunch followed.

Mohave Dave drew rein suddenly, with a ringing oath.

The bunch had reached the end of the arroyo.

Before them rose a wall of rock, up which neither horse nor cow could possibly have gone. In the wet season it was a waterfall; now it was dry, but inaccessible. The Bar-2 foreman dragged in his broncho and stared up at a rocky wall ten feet high, and cursed.

"Jumpin' snakes!" said Buck. "The cows never went that way, Mohave."

The foreman gritted his teeth.

"There was sign all the way!" he grated. "There's sign here now, and it'll stop till it's washed away by the next rains. There's been cows in this arroyo. But—" He broke off with another oath.

The bunch, in a jingling, trampling group, stared about them. They had come to the end of a blind alley—a cul-de-sac. Sign of the stolen cows had led them all the way, yet it was impossible that a single cow could have scaled the steep sides of the arroyo. If the herd had been driven there, it had, apparently, been driven back again, and that was a puzzle.

For several long moments, Mohave Dave made the air lurid with his curses. He was quite at a loss.

"They been here!" he snarled. "They been here, for shore. I'll tell a man, this has got me beat."

"We want to beat it outter here, Mohave," said another of the bunch uneasily. "The cows sure ain't here, but I ain't so sure that the rustlers ain't, nohow." And he cast an anxious glance up at the rocky slopes, dim in the glimmer of the stars overhead.

Mohave gave a curt nod and wheeled

his broncho. The bunch swung round to ride down the arroyo again.

Crack!

It was a sharp, ringing rifle-shot, from a bunch of thicket high up the steep side of the arroyo.

"Great gophers!" yelled Buck, as the bullet spun his Stetson on his head. "They're here—and we're in a trap." As if the shot had been a signal, there was a roar of sudden rifle-fire from a dozen different points on either side of the ravine.

The reports came so swiftly that they were almost blended into one. From a dozen points, high among the rocks and scrub, far out of reach of the horse-men, came the whistling bullets.

Mohave uttered a yell of rage. The sheriff had been right. Mohave had led his men into a trap—a death-trap! All the way up the arroyo, the rustlers, in their cover, had watched them, waiting for the bunch to be helplessly delivered into their hands. Now they had to ride between rocky walls spotted with rifle-men, before they got out of the narrow ravine.

Crack-ack-ack!

"Ride!" yelled Mohave. "Ride for your lives!"

Three saddles were empty already—three riderless bronchos careered madly, with jingling stirrups. The bunch spurred their horses frantically as they galloped down the steep way. Steep as it was, broken and rugged and rocky, they rode at full pelt, heedless of the dangers underfoot—heedful only of the rifles that flashed and roared from every side. They were helplessly exposed to the fire of the men in cover, and to clamber up the rocks to get at the hidden enemy was impossible—it was only asking for sudden death. Only a rapid gallop and good luck could save even a remnant of the Bar-2 bunch from the death-trap into which they had thoughtlessly ridden.

Crack, crack, crack!

The punchers blazed away desperately with their revolvers as they rode down the arroyo. A yell from a pecan clump told that one chance bullet, at least, had gone home.

Clatter, clatter, clatter rang the rattling hoofs. A broncho lost its footing and went rolling headlong, throwing the rider. The men behind leaped their horses over the sprawling animal barring the way.

"Oh, great snakes!" gasped Mohave Dave. "Oh, great gophers! If a guy could get at the skunks—"

A bullet crashed into his shoulder, and he roared in the saddle. But he gripped the reins hard and rode on. To fall was death. Death lurked on every side in the shadowy arroyo.

Twelve men had ridden up the steep ravine; five men rode out of it, and they were all wounded. As they came out into the broader gulch at the bottom of the ravine, Mohave Dave gave a haggard look round. Seven of the Bar-2 bunch were left in the arroyo, and every man who had got away was hurt.

The Bar-2 foreman ground his teeth. His right arm was drenched with the blood that streamed down from the wound in his shoulder. With his left hand he dragged in his broncho.

But the other punchers did not stop. They rode on wildly, heading down the gulch for the open plain. And Mohave, after a moment's pause, cursed luridly, and followed them.

The game was up, and nothing remained but to ride for life. He rode after his bunch, panting with rage. Five men, wounded, reeling in their saddles, rode out of the buttes into the

starlit prairie; but in the rocky arroyo there were seven men who would never ride again.

The Kid Gets to Business!

THE stars were paling in the sky; there was a hint of dawn in the East. The Rio Kid, lying on his blanket beside the grey mustang, watched the shadowed prairie towards the dark mass of the buttes with a clouded brow. Some of his men were sleeping, others watched and listened. Faint in the distance, but un-

tured to ride into the winding recesses of the buttes, where death lurked in every ravine and behind every boulder. The sheriff of Plug Hat intended to venture when day came, but not without feeling every inch of the way.

As the glimmering of dawn strengthened in the eastern sky, there came a beating of wild and hurried hoofs on the prairie. The Kid threw his blanket aside and rose, bending his head to listen more intently. Colorado Bill drew to his side, gun in hand.

"They're coming from the buttes, sheriff," he said.

"Sure!" asserted the Kid.

"I guess it's Mohave's bunch on the run."

made the last sickness for nine or ten of the guys. Yep!"

"I guess I've heard of that man, too," grinned Colorado. "It was the firebug, they call the Rio Kid, sheriff. He sure did lead the Rangers a low dance in the Mal Pais, and it was talked of in all the cow camps after."

The Kid started a little. It was an episode from his own wild past that he had referred to. He bit his lip, and changed the topic quickly.

"Here come the punchers, and they all look like they was hurt," he said. "I guess they've had a heluva time in them buttes!"

"I'll tell the world!" agreed Colorado.



The Bar-2 bunch dismounted and the Kid and his posse bound up their many wounds.

mistakable, the Plug Hat posse had heard the firing in the hills, and knew that the punchers were at close grips with the rustlers. But the firing had died away into silence, and what had chanced they did not know, though they could guess. For it was only too clear that the head-strong punchers had ridden into the ambush from which the boy sheriff's sagacity had saved his own men.

It had been bitter enough to the Kid to hear the sound of distant shooting coming down the wind, and to lie idle. But there was nothing he could do to help—nothing that his men could do. If the punchers were fighting, the fight would be over long before he could reach the buttes and join in. But he doubted whether they were fighting. He was assured that they were being shot from cover, and that the same fate awaited his own men if they rode into the trackless hills in the dark. The temptation to mount and ride was strong; but the Kid threw it aside. It was futile to throw away more lives. It was not a wild charge, like that of an angry bull at a matador, that would defeat the rustlers. It was a trail that called for all the Kid's caution and sagacity. Few sheriffs ven-

"I surely guess so," said the Kid. "I'd sure be powerful glad if it was Cactus Carter and the rustlers. But it ain't. It's them boneheads, and I guess they found that they bit off more'n they could chew in one piece."

The thunder of hoofs came nearer and nearer, back along the cattle trail that had led the bunch into the hills. Dim figures of horsemen loomed up in the twilight of dawn. The Kid counted them as they drew nearer, and his brow was sombre.

"Five galoots," he said. "There's Mohave and Peters and three more. I guess they've left seven guys behind."

"It sure has been a wipe out for the Bar-2," said Colorado grimly. "Say, sheriff, if we'd rode on with them—" He hesitated.

The Kid grunted.

"Aw, forget it!" he growled. "We'd have rode into the same ambush. And I guess we'd be lying about with holes through us, like the guys Mohave has left behind him. I'll tell a man it ain't easy work trailing a crowd of rustlers in the buttes. I've knowed of a single man that dodged a whole outfit in the buttes down San Juan way once, and never was got, though he

The Plug Hat posse were all on their feet when Mohave and his surviving men rode up and halted. They sagged in their saddles, and turned ghastly faces to the Kid's men.

Mohave cursed huskily.

"They've wiped us out!" he gritted, between his teeth. "Seven men down, an' left every guy here with lead in him, sheriff." He glared at the Kid. "I'm telling you them rustlers was ambushed in an arroyo in the buttes, and they opened on us from cover, and never give us a chance. I got a kick left in me, if you'll ride back with me, and bring your outfit."

"Dog-gone you, and ride into the same fix!" exclaimed the Kid. "How deep in the buttes is that pesky arroyo."

"Jest about a mile."

"You was lucky to get a man away alive, if you've been a mile into the buttes in the dark," said the Kid. "I guess I'm going to do that mile to slow music when I get going. These Plug Hat guys ain't going to ride under the rifles of a crowd of rustlers perched in the rocks."

Mohave cursed again. Wounded as he was, his outfit almost wiped out by

his own headstrong recklessness, he was eager to ride back into the buttes and seek the outlaws again. His fury and desire for vengeance had banished what little prudence there might have been in him.

"You ain't taking a hand?" he bawled.

"Not till broad light, and then, I guess, we're going to feel our way arter them bull-dozers like we was walking on thin ice," assured the Kid. "There ain't going to be another wipe-out in the programme, feller."

"Dog-gone you, then!" roared Mohave. "I guess there's men that will be glad to ride. I've heard that Jim Hall and his Rangers are down to Blue Grass. I'm riding to call in the Rangers."

The Kid's face changed.

Less than any other guy in Texas did he want Jim Hall, the Ranger captain, on the scene. For Mule-Kick Hall knew the Rio Kid by sight, knew his face as well as the back of his own hand. And the Kid knew what would happen if Hall got a sight of Texas Brown, sheriff of Plug Hat. Hitherto, no man in Sassafras County had suspected the Kid's identity; but once the Ranger captain saw him, the game was up.

"Hold on, feller!" said the Kid, breathing hard, but speaking quietly. "I guess we don't want the Rangers to put a spoon in this soup. I guess this outfit can handle the rustlers without help from the Rangers."

"Dog-gone you, I'm riding to Blue Grass!" snarled the Bar-2 foreman. "Seven of the boys is wiped out, and they got the cows. I guess the Rangers will jump to their cayuses when they get the news. Me for Blue Grass!"

And, without another word, the Bar-2 foreman put spurs to his broncho, and dashed away at a mad gallop across the prairie.

The Kid shrugged his shoulders.

"After all, it's a long ride to Blue Grass," said the Kid. "I guess this hyer circus may be over afore the Rangers horn in."

"Say, sheriff, the Rangers are good men, and they'd be useful in rounding up Cactus' crowd," hinted Mesquite.

"This hyer posse can round up Cactus Carter," answered the Kid.

"If I can't put paid to that bush-whacker, I'm sure going to resign being sheriff. Forget it."

The Bar-2 dismounted, and some of the posse bound up their wounds. Three of them were hard hit, and when their hurts had been attended to they rode on to the ranch. But Buck Peters had got off with a flesh wound, and he elected to stay with the Kid's party. The outcome of Mohave's reckless adventure had taught the cowman respect for the sheriff's judgment.

It was not till the sun was well above the horizon that the sheriff gave the word to mount.

Then the Plug Hat posse rode on at a trot toward the buttes.

The Kid rode beside Buck, and drew from him a detailed account of the ambush and its location. The Kid listened very thoughtfully.

"You sure the cows was driven up that arroyo?" he asked.

"There was sign," answered Buck. "I guess some of them was drove up to get us follering, anyhow. But there wasn't cows there when we got there. I figure they was drove out again."

"They'd have left sign," said the Kid. "But seems you didn't pick up any other sign."

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"You've said it. But then, Mohave was in a durned hurry to get at them guys," said Buck ruefully. "I guess there was other signs if we'd looked long enough."

The Kid nodded thoughtfully, and they rode on in silence. They entered the gulch that led up into the buttes from the prairie.

But they did not enter it as the Bar-2 bunch had done. The Kid strung out his men, and they walked their horses, scanning the rocks and bushes, searching for sign of an enemy at every step, watchful as cats as they advanced into the hills.

It was a mile of rough going to reach the arroyo, but the Bar-2 bunch had covered the distance in a matter of minutes. The Plug Hat outfit spent two long hours over the same ground.

The Kid had no doubt that the rustlers were on the watch, and he was prepared for a surprise every foot of the way. The sheriff of Plug Hat did not aim to meet the same fate as Mohave Dave and his bunch.

Many times, as the posse slowly worked their way onward, the Kid clambered to a high rock to survey the ground, or sent a bullet whizzing into a tangled bush that might have concealed an enemy.

It was slow and wearisome work under a hot sun that made the rocks hot to touch; but the defeat of the Bar-2 bunch had been an object-lesson, and, impatient as the Plug Hat men were, they carried out the sheriff's orders to the very letter.

They reached, at last, the end of the gulch—an open, almost circular space, like a basin in the midst of the hills, from which a dozen or more gulches and arroyos and rifts opened.

Buck Peters pointed out the narrow arroyo, into which Mohave had led his men the previous night. The Kid surveyed it keenly.

There was plenty of sign of the cattle that had passed that way the previous day. Hard and dry as the rocks were, a herd of five hundred cows had left a heap of sign.

The sign of the herd passed up into the narrow arroyo, where the cows must have been driven almost in single file—not more than two abreast at the most.

The Kid stared into the arroyo, with puzzled eyes.

Evidently the stolen herd had been driven up that narrow, steep ravine. Yet Buck had told him that, some distance up it ended in a sheer wall of rock that was a waterfall in the rainy season.

Up and down and round about the Kid hunted for other signs. But there was no other sign to be picked up.

The cattle had gone up the ravine, and they had not been driven out again. In the wide radius that the Kid searched there was not the track of a single hoof.

"Say, this sure gets my goat!" said the Kid, after a long silence. "You, Buck, there ain't nary doubt that the cows was driven up that arroyo. The sign leads there, and nowhere else. And they never came out again, unless they walked in the pesky air, without a hoof touchin' the ground."

"I allow it looks like it, sheriff!" answered the Bar-2 puncher. "But there ain't nowhere in that arroyo to hide a dozen cows, let alone five hundred. And they sure never went out at the other end, unless they got wings."

The Kid grunted,

"I guess there's suthin' you didn't see in the dark," he said. "I surely reckon there's a way out of that ravine somewhere, and it leads to where Cactus Carter has hidden the cows."

He stared up the arroyo again.

Narrow, tortuous, steep, it lay silent in the burning sunshine, to all appearance lifeless and deserted. But the Kid was well aware that appearances were deceptive.

He had no doubt that if the Plug Hat outfit rode up the arroyo, as the Bar-2 men had done, the same fate would befall them. Farther up the arroyo, he had no doubt, the cow thieves were watching and waiting. They knew that pursuers were in the buttes, and they were not likely to be off their guard.

"That's the way the cows went, and the rustlers with them, sheriff!" said Colorado Bill, at last. "We got to get after the guys."

The Kid nodded.

"We sure got to get after them, feller!" he assented.

The sheriff gave his orders quietly. The horses were tethered in a bunch, and left in the lower gulch with one man on guard. The rest of the Plug Hat outfit followed the Kid.

The Kid dropped on hands and knees as he entered the ravine, crawling in the cover of rocks and scrubs, with all the caution he had learned in Indian warfare. He was well assured that, farther up, some of the rustlers at least were on the watch, looking for pursuit—and the Kid did not aim to stop a bullet. In the rugged arroyo, piled wildly with boulders of all shapes and sizes, there was ample cover for a cautious trailer, and the Kid was as patient as an Apache or a Comanche. He was content to win his way up the ravine inch by inch, crawling from rock to rock, from scrub to scrub, crouching in cover, waiting whole minutes to listen, cautious as a panther. Behind him, his men followed his example, though there were impatient mutterings and oaths from some of them. Not a sound, not a sign of stirring life, greeted them; and to most of the outfit it seemed that the arroyo was deserted; that the rustlers were gone, and that this slow and weary work was a waste of time. Yuma Dan rose heedlessly to his feet to look about him.

Crack!

From a point high up the arroyo came the sudden crack of a rifle. Yuma Dan spun over and rolled on the earth. He lay groaning with a bullet in his shoulder.

"Thunder!" ejaculated Colorado Bill.

The Kid gave a snort.

"Keep in cover, you 'uns!" he snapped. "You aiming to stop lead with your bone heads? Keep in cover, dog-gone you!"

A yell from the rustlers followed the shot. The Plug Hat outfit knew the voice of Cactus Carter.

"I guess we're ready for you, Mister Sheriff Texas Brown! Are you there, you durned coyote?"

"I guess I'm here, Cactus, and I'm coming a-shooting!" called back the Kid from behind a boulder.

A bullet crashed on the rock the next moment. The reports of six or seven rifles followed. But the Plug Hat outfit were keeping carefully to cover now. Yuma Dan crawled away, groaning. The rest of the outfit crept on, inch by inch, foot by foot, warned now beyond doubt that the rustlers were watching

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UNDER FIRE!

(Continued from page 6.)

The End of the Trail!

THE Rio Kid had disappeared from the sight of his followers. The Kid was an old hand at this game. He crept among the boulders and patches of scrub, silent as a snake, watchful as a panther. To show so much as a finger was to invite a bullet, but the Kid did not show so much as a finger-nail. The Kid won on his way, foot by foot, gliding and crawling stealthily from rock to rock. He knew that he was drawing near to the rustlers, and his caution redoubled. And he smiled grimly as he heard a sound of muttering voices among the rocks near at hand.

"I guess we'd wipe out that crowd as easy as the Bar-2 boys if it wasn't for that dog-goned sheriff!" It was the voice of Sandy Tutt. "Say, Cactus, I'm sure getting rattled."

A curse from Cactus Carter followed. "I guess we want to beat it out of this, Cactus!" muttered the voice of Yellow Dick. "That dog-goned sheriff—"

Cactus spat out another oath. "Aw, can it!" he growled. "We can beat it when we want, and by a way they'll never follow. But I guess I want to get that sheriff! I been banking upon him trailing us in the buttes to give him his ticket for soup, and I ain't losing this chance."

The Kid listened quietly. He was not more than a dozen feet from the three desperadoes, who were muttering behind a great boulder on the steep side of the arroyo. The sheriff of Plug

Hat was closer than the rustlers dreamed.

Silently the Kid crawled round the great rock that hid the three. He glimpsed a Stetson hat, and fired, and there was a startled yell from Yellow Dick as the hat spun from his head. "Thunder! They're on us!"

There was a sound of running feet and scrambling among the rocks. The Kid had drawn back instantly into cover after pulling trigger; but the smoke of his rifle told the rustlers that an enemy was within a few feet of them. The three rough-necks scrambled hurriedly away. In their haste, one of them forgot caution and rose into the view of the Plug Hat outfit lower down the ravine. Colorado Bill's rifle rang out, and Yellow Dick spun over like a rabbit and dropped.

Cactus Carter and Sandy Tutt vanished among the rocks higher up the arroyo. There was a sound of cursing and hurried scrambling. The rustlers were "rattled" now, and evidently in retreat.

The Kid crept on. Two or three bullets whizzed, flattening on the rocks close by him. Then the firing ceased, and the sound of scrambling footsteps and cursing voices died away.

Slowly and cautiously the Plug Hat outfit worked their way up the arroyo. But no shot greeted them; no enemy was to be seen. They reached the head of the ravine at last, but the rustlers had vanished. Of the gang that had lain in ambush in the arroyo, only one remained—Yellow Dick, lying where he had fallen, with Colorado's bullet in his brain.

The Kid gritted his teeth.

How the rustlers had vanished from the ravine was a mystery—but it was a mystery that the sheriff of Plug Hat was going to solve.

THE END.

(*"THE HIDDEN CANYON!" is the title of next week's fine Western yarn.*)

King o' the Speedways!

(Continued from page 9.)

Jack got a glimpse of the crack driver's distorted features and his waving hand; then Sackville's car hit a bump and leaped bodily towards them.

Jack pulled out, felt the tail of his car begin to skid, and straightened up. From the corner of his eye he saw Sackville's machine slowly broadside to the course. He had lost control!

Round it went, sliding in mad half-circles towards the inside of the track, until the car plunged sideways over the bank into a water-filled ditch.

Jack took the rest of the race steadily, but those hours of mad chasing at the pace which Sackville had set had given the machine an unassailable lead. They finished with the black-and-white winner's flag waving madly above their number.

Jack didn't see Sackville until some time after the race. The speedman had lost his monocle, and he was still combing mud out of his hair, but was not injured.

"It was rank bad driving!" Sackville hooted as they met. "It was a choice between hitting you or pilin' myself up—so I crashed."

"Yes," said Jack; and he nodded coolly ere he added: "Squirts are all right, especially little ones, so long as you handle 'em the right way."

He turned; and the speedman stared after him with wide-open eyes and 'dropped jaw. He was still staring when Jack had disappeared from sight—but he knew what Jack meant!

THE END.

(*Don't miss next week's roaring motor-racing yarn, entitled: "SOME KID, SKID KID!"*)

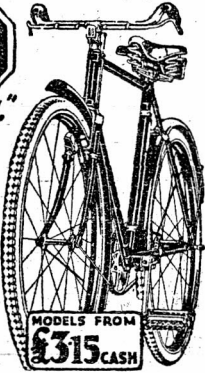
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