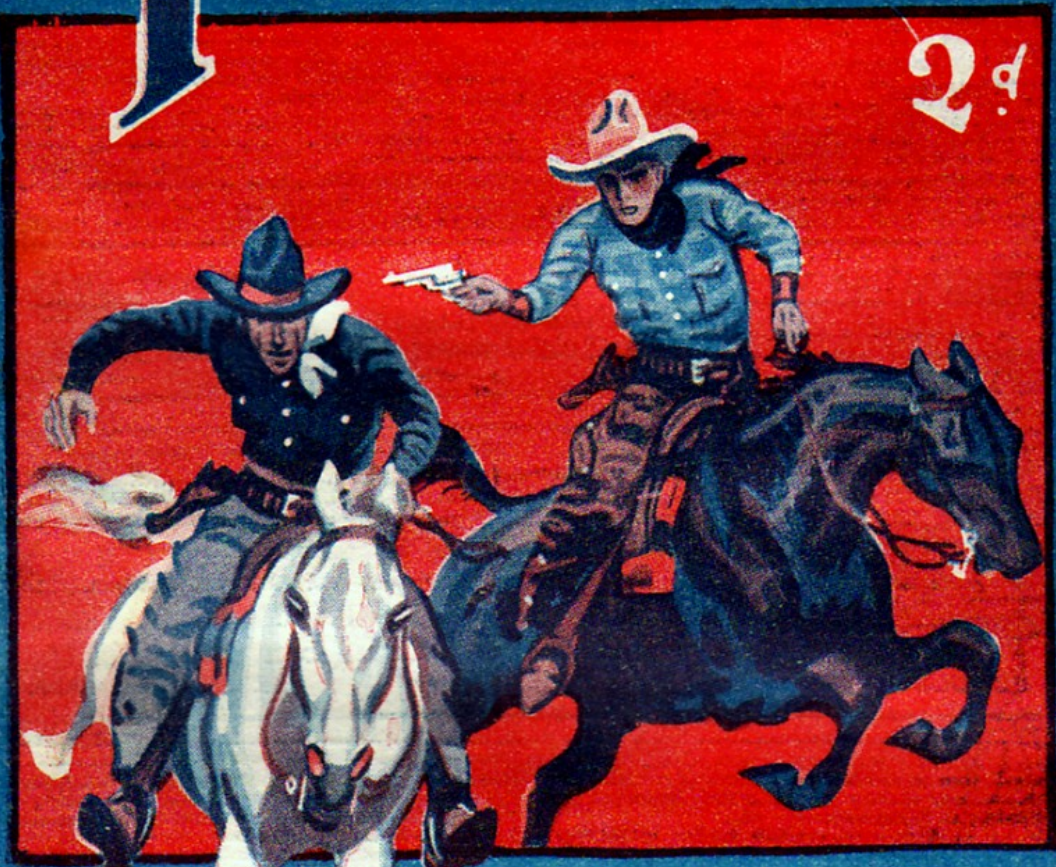


X SPECIAL PAGE of COMIC PICTURES *inside!* X

The POPULAR

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

2¢



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

TROUBLE IN THE COW-COUNTRY.

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

THE RIO KID!

By RALPH REDWAY



ANOTHER ROARING LONG COMPLETE TALE OF WESTERN ADVENTURE.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
A Mystery of the Prairie!

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

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

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

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

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

This Week:
The Mysterious Trail!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Kid nodded and grinned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Held on Suspicion!

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

Buck Wilson scowled. "You pesky cow-thief, I'm asking you a question," he said.

"Where's the cows you've lifted from Tommy Tucker's range?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Put your rope on the critter, Pete."

"Sure!"

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

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

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

"You git ahead, Posy Pete."

"Sure."

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

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

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

The foreman glanced at him grimly.

"Yep!" he said briefly.

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

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

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

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

The Kid whistled.

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

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

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

"Looking for the rustlers," grunted Buck.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tommy's gone up."

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

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

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

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

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

"I guess this galoot will keep."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE THIRD CHAPTER What the Kid Knew!

GALLOP!
Gallop!
From the shadowed prairie came a beat of hoofs.

The Rio Kid had finished his supper.

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

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

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

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

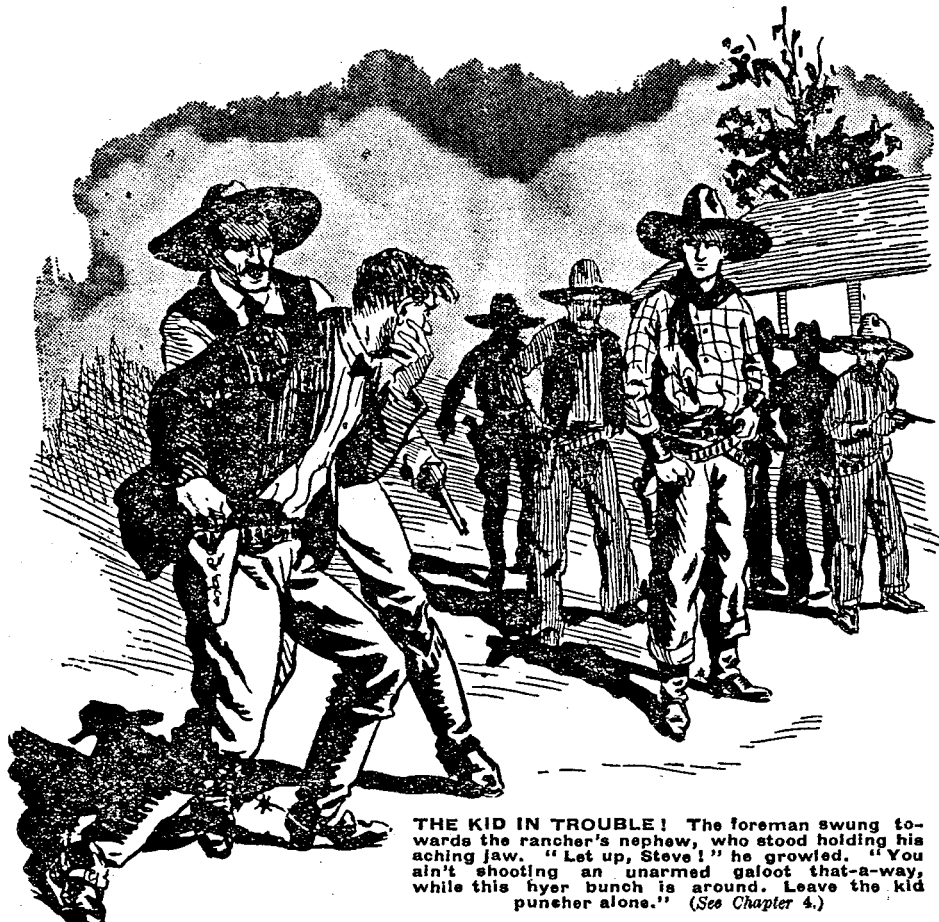
More than once, the Kid learned, traps had been laid to catch the rustlers at work—bunches of cattle left in temptingly lonely spots, secretly watched from a distance. But by some uncanny means, the cattle-lifters always seemed to know when a trap was afoot, and they never fell into the snare. That had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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What?" ejaculated Buck.

The effect of his words on the group of cow-punchers was startling to the Kid.

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

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

The Kid stared round at them.

"What's this rookus?" he asked. "I sure haven't said anything to get your goats, have I, galoots?"

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

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

"There sure is."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Buck grew more attentive.

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

"I sure did."

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

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

Buck made no answer.

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

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

A horseman was approaching the ranch at full gallop.

The Kid looked at the oncoming rider.

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

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

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

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

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid blankly.

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

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

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Man with a Limp!

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

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

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

"Evening, boys," said Steve Carson.

"Any news?"

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

"Shot up! The rustlers again!"

"Sure!"

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

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

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

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

The young man started.

"What does he know, then?"

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

The Kid coloured with discomfort.

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

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

The Kid rose to his feet.

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

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

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

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

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

Steve Carson did not heed.

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

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

A dead silence followed.

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

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

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

He was watching Steve Carson like a cat.

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

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

Steve Carson burst into an angry laugh.

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

(Continued on page 28.)

"THE RIO KID!"

(Continued from page 6.)

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

The revolver flashed out of the holster as he was speaking.

A second more, and the bullet would have crasht into the handsome, sunburnt face of the Rio Kid, and the long adventurous trail of the boy puncher of the Double Bar would have come to a sudden end.

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

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

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

A dozen six-guns flashed in the light from the bunkhouse.

"Hands up, you!" roared Buck Wilson.

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

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

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

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

THE END.

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

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"PLAYING THE GAME!"

(Continued from page 27.)

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

"Goal!"

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

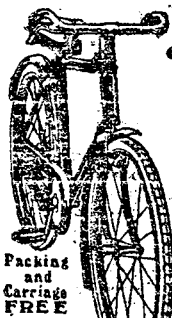
At half-time seven goals were up to the credit of the Shell, and the fags were in a rather pumped state. But "No surrender!" was Wally's motto. Right to a finish the breathless fags played out the game, hoping wildly to score one goal and break their duck. But that consolation was denied them. Seven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

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

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THE END.

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THE KID'S LONE HAND!

The Kid's not hitting the trail for Texas until he's rounded up the darina rustlers of the Rio Bajo, and that's a job fraught with much peril and high spirited adventure!

The RUSTLERS of the RIO BAJO!



By

RALPH REDWAY

Here's a roaring tale of the Wild West, introducing the Rio Kid, boy outlaw.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Prisoner of the Ranch!

A ROUGH shake awakened the Rio Kid, and he opened his eyes and sat up in the bunk, in the bunk-house at the Carson ranch.

The morning sun was streaming in at doors and windows. Outside, there was a trampling of horses, and a buzz of voices. Five or six punchers were at the trestle table in the bunk-house finishing their breakfast before they saddled up for the day's work.

The Rio Kid had slept as soundly as he had ever slept in the old bunk-house at the Double-Bar ranch, in the days when he had been a puncher and had never dreamed of becoming an outlaw. But he awakened at the rough shake, and sat up and looked with a cheery smile at Buck Wilson, the foreman of the ranch.

"I reckon you're wanted, Carfax," said the foreman.

"I guess I'm here," said the Kid, rolling out of the bunk. "Morning, you galoots." He bestowed a cheery nod on the punchers at the table. "You've called me for a feed?"

"I guess you can feed, if you want," said Buck Wilson. "But the Boss is ready to see you."

The Kid smiled.

"I'm sure too polite to keep the boss

waiting, teller," he said. "The feed can wait. Beat it to the boss."

The punchers looked at the Kid and nodded in a friendly way as he left the bunk-house with the foreman. The Rio Kid was, more or less, a prisoner at the Carson ranch, but it did not seem to disturb him any. And though the outfit had taken care that the Kid did not escape during the night, they had no hostile feelings towards the handsome boy puncher from Texas. True, in that lonely ranching country in New Mexico, they had never heard of the Rio Kid, or of his reputation along the Rio Grande. And the Kid, who believed, or, at least hoped, that his days of outlawry were over, had kept a still tongue. To the Carson outfit he was what he looked, a cow-puncher.

The Kid followed the foreman across from the bunk-house to the ranch-house. The low-slung holsters at his belt hung empty; his guns were in the keeping of the foreman of the ranch. The Kid disliked being without his guns, but he took the situation cheerfully. Buck Wilson led the way through the big doorway into the patio of the ranch-house—an old building, dating from the days when New Mexico was part of Old Mexico, before those wide, rich lands had been added to the neighbouring United States.

The doby buildings surrounded a central courtyard, in the Spanish-American style, and round the patio ran a wooden gallery, shaded from the sun. The Kid crossed the patio, blooming with sub-tropical flowers and shrubs, his spurs ringing on the stone path, at the heels of the ranch foreman. Under the slanting roof of the gallery, on the opposite side, sat the boss of the ranch—Colonel Carson.

The rancher was smoking his after-breakfast cigar, and his keen eyes looked from a tanned face, searchingly, at the Kid as he came up. The Kid looked at him with equal interest. He had heard often enough of Colonel Carson, owner of the biggest ranch in New Mexico, master of almost countless flocks and herds. In that wide, wild country, where the law was not so strong as a six-gun in a determined hand, Gilbert Carson was "big medicine"—wielding the power almost of life and death; master of a numerous outfit, devoted to him, ready to carry out his lightest order, but reputed a just though severe man. Under his thick, grey brows, his keen eyes watched the Kid; and the boy puncher unimpressed and most assuredly undaunted, swept off his Stetson hat in cheery salute.

"Morning, boss!" said the Rio Kid easily.

Gilbert Carson looked at him, long and hard, and did not return the salute. He turned to Buck Wilson.

"Is this the man, Buck?"

"This hyer is the galoot, boss!" answered the foreman.

"He looks a mere boy."

The Kid grinned. If he was young in years, and looked it, he was old in experience, cool as ice, and hard as

nails. But on his looks, no man would ever have guessed that the boy puncher was the outlaw of the Rio Grande, wanted by half the sheriffs in Texas.

"I guess he's tougher'n he looks, boss," said Buck. "He was quick as lightning when young Steve pulled on him last night. We all reckoned he was a gone coon, but he handed out a sockdolager that fairly lifted Steve, and got his gun-away-slick."

The colonel frowned. "Why did my nephew draw on him?" he asked.

"He reckoned he was sure one of the rustlers that shot up Tommy Tucker on his range yesterday, and drove his cows," said Buck. "We roped him in on 'spicion, like I've told you, but Steve Carson reckoned it was a cinch, and allowed he would send him where he had sent Tommy."

"Steve should not have drawn a gun on an unarmed man," said the colonel, biting his lip. "But let that pass now! You give your name as Carfax?" he asked, addressing the Kid.

"Yep." "Is that your real name?" "It's the call-by I use, boss, and it's sure as good as any other," answered the Kid cheerily.

"I've asked you a question," said the rancher, knitting his brows. "I want a plain answer."

"I guess you've got all the answer you're getting, feller," said the Kid coolly. "This hyer ain't a court of law, I reckon."

"Courts of law don't go for much in this section," said Colonel Carson. "If we rope in a rustler, we don't worry any about courts of law. We string him up to a branch, and let it go at that."

"Muy bien!" assented the Kid. "But I sure ain't a rustler, boss, and I sure hate to be called one."

"What were you doing on my land when my foreman roped you in yesterday?"

"Hitting the trail," answered the Kid. "I reckon I was bound for Texas, and if you-uns are tired of my company, I'm sure ready to beat it. But if you've got room for a good man, I'm open to join your bunch for a spell. I'd sure like to help trail down them rustlers."

"You were found on the cattle-trail, where my cows had been driven," said the rancher. "One of my outfit was shot yesterday by the rustlers who drove his cows. You're under suspicion."

"I guess I'm ready to ride, if my company ain't admired," said the Kid carelessly. "I was hitting the trail for Bunch Grass when I came on that cattle-trail, and I was sure interested in it. It got my goat to see a cow-trail that ptered out in the prairie, and left no sign for a galoot to follow."

"That's happened a good many times on this ranch," said Carson. "The trail of stolen steers always peters out in the same way when it gets near the hills. It's a thing we've never been able to get to the bottom of. I reckon if you're in cahoots with the rustlers you could explain it."

"But I sure ain't," grinned the Kid. THE POPULAR.—No. 506.

"They've laid a few things against me at times, but I never was a rustler of cows. But I guess you ain't taking my word about that, when your man has been shot up, and you're mighty suspicious of any stranger who comes moseying in on the range. Give me my guns and my cayuse, and let me ride."

"That's all you've got to say?" asked the rancher.

"Yep." "You've worked on a ranch back in Texas?"

"Sure." "Give me the name of any rancher who will speak a word for you."

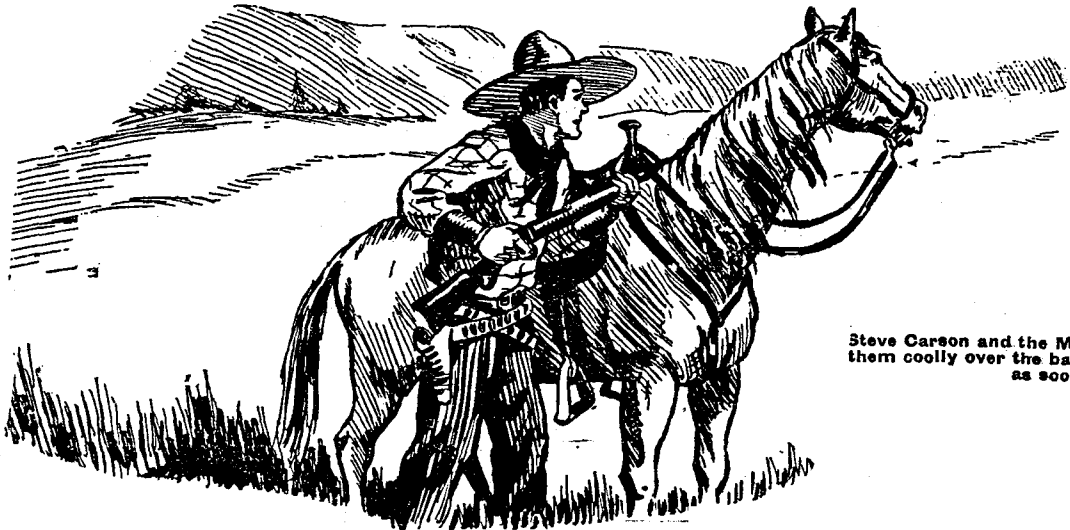
"I guess I ain't worrying my old boss any," said the Kid, with a laugh. "We didn't part on the best of terms, feller."

The rancher rose to his feet. "You'll be held on suspicion," he said coldly. "If you're white it's your ill-luck. But we ain't taking chances when one of my outfit has been shot up and the killer is loose on the ranges—if you ain't him. You're a prisoner, Carfax—if that's your name!"

"Say, feller," ejaculated the Kid. "You don't happen to be the Governor of half-a-dozen States, I suppose? What

retained a powerful odour of kerosene. The Kid did not mind that; but it got his goat to be shut up, a prisoner, at the behest of the New Mexico rancher. There was a window to the shack, with a shutter that was barred outside, but through many wide cracks in the shutter the Kid could see his surroundings. He could see the long horse-corral, in which, among many other animals, his own mustang was confined; he could see the cookhouse, where the ranch cook, perspiring in shirt-sleeves, cooked for the outfit, and the bunkhouse, where punchers continually came and went. Twice or thrice a cheery puncher would pass the shuttered window and call in a cheery word to the prisoner, from sheer kindly feeling for a galoot down on his luck—a word that the Kid would answer with equal cheeriness.

He was a reasonable pilgrim, was the Rio Kid, and on cool reflection he did not blame the rancher for taking no chances with him. The whole ranch was excited and enraged by the shooting of Tommy Tucker, and on all sides bunches of men had ridden out, with rifles and revolvers, to hunt for traces of the rustlers. Horseman after horseman came and went; the clatter of hoof-



Steve Carson and the Meas-
them coolly over the back
as soon:

sort of right have you got to hold a galoot prisoner on your ranch?"

The rancher shrugged his shoulders. "I guess I'm not worrying about that any," he replied. "Until the man who killed Tommy Tucker is roped in I guess I'm taking no chances. My outfit will ride herd over you till I know more about you. Put him in a safe place, Buck."

"Sure!" said the foreman. The rancher made a gesture of dismissal. For a moment the Kid hesitated, his eyes glinting at the high-handed lord of the Carson ranch. Had the walnut-butted guns still been swinging in the Kid's holsters there would have been a sudden surprise for the rancher. But the Kid was not the man to kick against what could not be helped, and he turned and followed Puck Wilson, whistling as he went the merry tune of a Mexican fandango.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Friend or Foe?

DURING that day the Rio Kid had plenty of time for meditation. He was barred in a corrugated iron shack, that was usually used for the storage of kerosene cans, and

rang incessantly past the kerosene shack. The Kid thought it out, and did not blame the rancher. None the less, his imprisonment irked him, and he was resolved that it should not last long. Gladly the Kid would have joined the Carson bunch in trailing the rustlers—he hated rustling as he hated a rattler—but he did not expect the bunch to take on a stranger at face value. For all they knew he might be a spy of the rustler gang, as Colonel Carson only too plainly suspected. Keeping him safe on suspicion was only boss-sense, in the circumstances, as the Kid cheerily admitted; but he did not mean to be kept safe, all the same. Long before the hot New Mexican day drew to a close the Kid had had more than enough of the kerosene shack.

Looking from the split shutter, he caught sight, more than once, of the rancher's nephew, Steve Carson. The Kid watched that handsomely-dressed young man very curiously. From the punchers' talk he had learned how Steve had had his left leg crushed in a stampede a few months before, leaving him with a limp. Looking at him, the Kid had to remember the tracks of the man with a limp that he had picked up on the trail of the stolen cattle. That

the rancher's nephew could be in cahoots with the gang of rustlers who were stealing cows from the ranch was too wild a suspicion to have entered the Kid's mind, but for Steve Carson's action in attempting to shoot him down unarmed. To shoot down an unarmed galoot on bare suspicion was not the act of a white man, the Kid reckoned, and he figured that Steve had a yellow streak in him. And the Kid opined that the chances were that Steve Carson had drawn on him, not in vengeance for the shooting-up of Tommy Tucker; but to keep the Kid's mouth shut in the

mined assault from within, but the clang of the corrugated iron would have alarmed the whole ranch and brought a crowd to the spot. As the long hours of the day wore by the Kid realised that he was cinched, and began to wonder how long it would be before he breathed free air again.

The ranch cook brought him ample food, and gave him a cheery grin and word along with it. But a puncher stood by the door with drawn gun to see that the prisoner did not kick.

"Oh, shucks!" murmured the Kid, as he saw the sun descending over the

If he had a knife— But he might as well have wished for his walnut-butted six-guns, and his mustang between his knees, and his feet in the stirrups. And then—miraculously, as it seemed—there came in the darkness a scraping sound at the window, a gleam of shining steel, and a knife, pushed through the crack from outside, dropped to the floor of the kerosene shack. And the Kid, in wonder, picked it up.

"Search me!" he murmured. It was a heavy, broad-bladed bowie-knife—exactly the weapon that the Kid wanted to cut his way out of his prison.

He gripped the handle with deep satisfaction. But he stared at the glimmering blade in the darkness of the shack, wondering.

What unknown friend had slipped that knife through the window, knowing, as well as the Kid did, that with such a weapon the prisoner could cut his way to freedom? All the outfit that he had met had been friendly enough—even Buck Wilson. They approved of the boss holding him a prisoner on suspicion, but they did not really doubt him or believe that he was in cahoots with the rustlers. One of them, more friendly than the rest, must have taken pity on his plight, and resolved to give him a

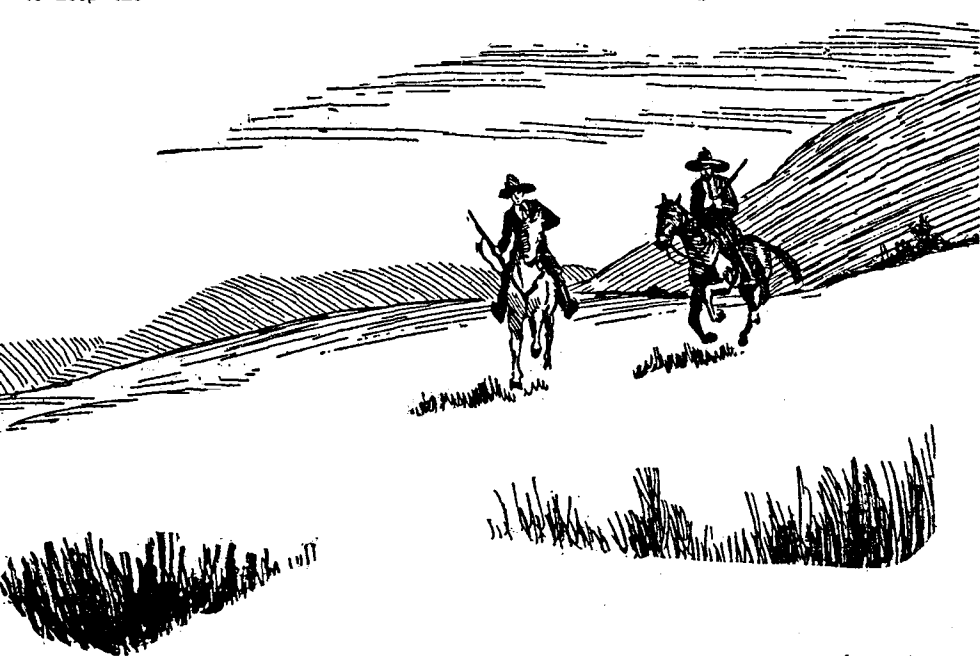
chance to vamoose the ranch. Whoever his unknown friend was the Kid blessed him. One of the bunch, at least, had hoss-sense enough to feel sure that he was no rustler, the Kid figured. But he was not surprised at the galoot acting secretly, for the rancher's orders had been strict, and it would have gone hard with any man on the Carson ranch found disregarding them.

"I reckon that hombre, whoever he is, is a galoot with solid hoss-sense," the Kid reflected, "and I'll sure prove it up to the whole bunch that I'm no rustler, when I get clear of this pesky shebang! I sure ain't hitting the trail for Texas till I've taken a hand agin them dog-goned rustlers, and I sure reckon that if I find them to home, Steve Carson won't be a whole lot far away." He gripped the knife, and stepped to the window. "Now I guess it's root, hog, or die!"

Quietly, but with a firm hand, the Kid cut at the pinewood shutter. The blade was strong and heavy, edged like a razor, and in the Kid's deft hand it sliced away the hard wood fast. A wide gash in the split shutter grew wider and wider, huge splinters falling at the Kid's feet as he worked patiently, till at last he could pass his hand through the opening, his arm following, and force the bars outside up from the iron sockets.

One bar he lifted and drew in through the opening, laying it gently on the earth. Then the other bar followed; and the Kid pushed the hinged shutter a few inches open, and stared out into the deep gloom.

At a distance, the windows of the bunkhouse shone; and from the open



de directly towards the Kid, who watched from the rancho, his rifle in his hand, ready to lift and shoot it. (See Chapter 4.)

surest way. The Kid pondered over the matter, and he had a hunch that Steve Carson was a "coyote" from the word go, for all his good looks, and his relationship to the richest rancher in New Mexico. And the Kid, at his window, noted several times that Steve glanced towards the kerosene shack with a black and bitter brow. Colonel Carson was holding the boy puncher on suspicion, but if the Kid's figuring was O.K. the rancher could have learned more by questioning his own nephew. No wonder the rustlers always knew when a trap was being laid for them if the rancher's nephew was in league with the gang.

The old rancher had sternly blamed his nephew for pulling a gun on the unarmed Kid, yet there was no doubt in the Kid's mind that Steve had influenced the colonel's opinion. Could Steve Carson have had his own way, the Kid would have been taken from the shack and strung up on the nearest tree without waiting for any proof. The Kid knew that as he caught Steve's eyes turned glinting on his prison, and saw the young man fingering his black, bruised chin, where the Kid's fist had struck like a lump of iron.

The Kid was quite determined not to remain where he was, in spite of all the ranchers and all the outfits in New Mexico. But when he gave his attention to getting out of the shack he found that he was up against a tough proposition. The door was barred, the window shuttered and barred. The walls might not have resisted a deter-

ranch, the long day drawing to a close. "I reckon I was plumb loco to horn into this hyer rookus. Dog-gone my boots, why couldn't I quit that pesky cattle trail and hit the horizon for Texas, as I was aiming to do? Shucks!"

Yet the Kid did not really regret that he had lingered on the Carson ranchlands. The mysterious trail on the prairie haunted his thoughts, and the puzzle of it got his goat. Even now, if he escaped from the kerosene shack, he knew that he would not ride for Texas, leaving that mystery behind him unsolved. The secret of the trail that was lost in the prairie was a secret that the Kid figured on discovering, if he could.

Night fell on the ranch. There was a blaze of light from the bunkhouse, where horsemen still came and went. Dusty, tired riders came in from the shadowed plains and dropped from their horses at the bunkhouse, or rode on to the 'doby rancho to report to the boss. The hunt was up for the rustlers of the Rio Bajo country; but the Kid could see easily enough that there had been no success. The cattle-lifters had vanished into the sierra without leaving a trail, and the outfit were baffled and enraged. The kerosene shack was at a little distance from the other buildings, and the Kid, after darkness tell, knew that if he could once get outside he could make his get-away in the shadows with ease. If he had had a knife he could have cut his way through the wooden bars that held the split shutter to the window. But his knife had been taken, and though he tried his luck with his hands, he could not burst the bars or wrench the shutter apart.

doorway of the chuck-house came the glow of the cook's stove. But close by the kerosene shack all was darkness, and no one was at hand. All the outfit knew that the prisoner was safely barred in and did not need watching—unless he had help from outside. And only the unknown man who had slipped the bowie-knife in the shack knew that he had had help.

The Kid pushed the shutter wider. Softly he lifted himself through the little window, and dropped to the earth outside the shack. Then he closed the shutter again. Only close at hand, in the gloom, could it have been seen that the wooden bars were missing from their place. And then—warned by an instinct that was quicker than thought—the Rio Kid threw himself face down on the earth close by the wall of the shack.

Bang! The flash and the roar of the revolver were followed by a shout from the bunk-house. A bullet crashed into the wall a couple of feet above the Kid.

Round the corner of the shack a shadow loomed—the shadow of a man who had waited and watched for the Kid. And in that bitter moment the boy puncher knew what had happened—that the knife had been dropped into the shack by the hand, not of a friend, but of an enemy—an enemy who lay in wait to shoot him down in the act of escaping.

The Rio Kid's face was white with rage as understanding flashed into his mind. Bang! came the second shot, missing him only by inches as he rolled over in the darkness; the shadowy figure was running towards him now, firing as he came, and limping as he ran. But the darkness and the Kid's cat-like swiftness, saved him; and shot after shot flew wide and wild as the boy puncher fled into the night.

It had been a close call for the Kid, and his running footsteps did not slacken until the uproar from the Carson ranch had died away in the distance.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Turning the Tables!

THE Rio Kid grinned as Buck Wilson drew rein in the shadow of the great cottonwood. High over the prairie rose the lone cottonwood, a hundred feet high, its great mass of branches a landmark for many a mile across the wide grasslands of the Carson ranch.

Hidden in thick foliage, the Kid lay along a high bough, and for a great distance he had watched the horseman who rode on the trail he had left on the plain.

Had there been more than one the Kid would have dropped from the tree and vanished into the prairie. The Kid knew well how to move, when he liked, without leaving enough trail for an Apache to follow. But the foreman of the Carson ranch was riding alone; and the Kid did not choose to beat it. Under the blazing sun of the New Mexico noontide Buck Wilson rode on to the tall cottonwood, and gladly pulled his broncho under the welcome shade.

With amused eyes the Kid watched him from above, through narrow openings in the foliage. The foreman of the Carson ranch was a hard man, and he carried a rifle at his saddle and a revolver at his belt; and he was hunting the Rio Kid, as many others of the Carson outfit were hunting him that morning; yet the Kid was glad to see him.

Buck Wilson stared down at the trail of the Kid's boots that wound round the great trunk of the cottonwood, and passed onward. He fanned himself with his Stetson hat, and grunted. He had ridden many a long mile that hot morning before he had struck the Kid's trail in the prairie.

The trail of a man afoot in a country where no man stirred except in the saddle was enough to tell the foreman that he was on the track of the puncher who had escaped from the kerosene

shack the night before. And he had followed it as far as the big cottonwood. He remained for a few minutes in the grateful shade of the wide-spreading branches, and then rode on round the great trunk, following the deep track of the boots—a track so deep that Buck might have suspected that it had been left intentionally, had he dreamed that the fugitive was not bent on escaping.

But a dozen yards beyond the cottonwood the track died out suddenly. Buck stared down at the earth, and dismounted, to examine it for sign. The trail ended in high grass, and he knew that the fugitive had gone no farther; and his plainsman's eye told him, after a brief examination, that the puncher had trodden back to the great tree in his own tracks. And the Carson foreman, with his gun in his hand now, tramped back to the cottonwood, his horse following him. And as he tramped under the thick branches something struck him suddenly on the crown of his Stetson hat, crushing in the hat and hammering with fearful force upon his head, and Buck went to the earth like a log.

It was only for two minutes that the foreman of the Carson ranch lay stunned in the grass under the spreading cottonwood. Then his eyes opened dizzily, and his hand flew to his belt.

"Forget it, feller!" came a voice with the soft Texan drawl.

And Buck Wilson dragged himself to a sitting posture, and stared blankly into the muzzle of his own gun, gripped in the hand of the Rio Kid.

The Kid smiled at him pleasantly over the gun.

"I reckon you needn't worry any about putting your hands up, feller," he drawled. "I guess I've borrowed your hardware, and you've sure come out at the little end of the horn. You want to sit still like a good little man, or else I guess this dog-goned six-gun will pop, and the boss of Carson ranch will have a vacancy for a new foreman!"

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POPULAR.

OCTOBER 6th.

Buck Wilson stared at him, his bronzed bearded face growing purple with rage. But he made no hostile movement. The six-gun was only four feet away from his face, and the Kid's finger was on the trigger. And though the Kid was smiling, the glint in his eyes told that he was in deadly earnest. Buck's eyes wandered to his horse—tethered a dozen yards away, the rifle still in its case at the saddle. He was disarmed, and the Kid held his gun, and the game was in the boy puncher's hands.

"You durned, gol-darned rustling coyote!" muttered the Carson foreman, his voice thick with rage.

"Forget it," grinned the Kid. "I reckon you roped in my hoss and my guns, feller; but this ain't a country for a galoot to hoof it without a cayuse, nohow; and I'm sure borrowing yours till I get my own back. Savvy?"

The foreman clenched his hands. The Kid made a warning motion with the leveled six-gun.

"I should sure hate to spill your vinegar, feller," he said. "But if you don't sit like a good little man, you gets yours, so sudden you won't know what hit you. You get me?"

"You've got the drop!" growled Buck hoarsely. "You'll go up to a branch for this, you durned rustler!"

"I keep on telling you I'm to rustler," said the Kid; "but I was sure tired of the kerosene shack! I ain't blaming the ranch boss for holding me on suspicion; but I had a hunch to nit the open prairie. And I reckon you was hunting me."

"I sure was, and I'll get you yet!" said Buck grimly. "We savvy heap plenty now that you're a rustler, you dog-goned cow-thief. Some galoot put a knife into the shack to help you—we found the shutter hacked to splinters. We've been wise to it for a long time that the rustlers have got a spy in the Carson outfit; and it was that durned lobo wolf that helped you get clear."

"I reckon that's how you'd figure it out," assented the Kid. "But that ain't the how of it, by long chalks. It was the rancher's nephew that put the knife into the shack; and he was waiting with a six-gun to pot-shoot me as I vamoosed, only I was too quick for the dog-goned gink. I reckon he hated me telling the bunch that a galoot with a limp had a hand in running off the cows on Tommy Tucker's range!"

The foreman started and stared at him.

"It was Steve Carson spotted you vamoosing and opened fire on you," he said. "He allowed that he was jest taking a pasear along by the kerosene shack and saw you drop from the winder."

The Kid laughed.

"I guess he was there a whole piece, watching round the corner of the shack till I dropped out," he said. "He sure wanted to stop me from chewing the rag about a galoot with a limp. The dog-goned heck had it all out and dried; but I beat him to it, and I sure will make him sit up and howl before I hit the trail out of New Mexico. It's Colonel Carson's nephew that's helping the rustlers run off the cows—and that's a straight cinch!"

The foreman shook his head slowly. "You ain't figuring that's so?" grinned the Kid.

"Nope!"

"I guess I'll prove it up, give me time," said the Kid cheerily. "You 'uns allow that I'm a rustler, and I guess I'm going to put you wise. I guess I'm going to make that gol-darned coyote sorry for pot-shooting at a galoot,

too!" He chuckled. "You reckoned you had a soft thing when you hit my trail out on the llano, knowing I hadn't a gun. Why, you galoot, you'd never have hit my trail if I hadn't wanted you to hit it!"

The foreman stared. "I sure sighted you a long way off," the Kid chuckled; "and then I laid that trail for you to pick up, where I knew you couldn't miss it if you tried. I guess I was glad when I saw you riding it to this hyer tree. I kinder wanted a hoss and guns, and that's why I wanted you to follow on. You savvy?"

Buck Wilson gritted his teeth hard. "Why, I'd cut a lump of wood all ready with the knife that Steve Carson dropped into the shack last night," grinned the Kid. "That was what hit you on the cabeza, feller, and I reckon it surprised you some. You walked into it like a good little man, you sure did."

"I'll get you yet!" muttered the foreman huskily. "I'll see you strung up to a branch afore the sun's gone down many times on this hyer ranch!"

"Forget it!" said the Kid. "I reckon I wouldn't have worried you any if you'd left me my cayuse and my guns. But I sure ain't trailing that gang of rustlers without a gat in my grip."

"Trailing the rustlers!" "That's my game!" said the Kid, with a nod. "Why, you loosed gink, if I was a rustler, do you reckon you'd be let walk back to the ranch? You'd get yours mighty sudden from your own gun. But I should sure hate to spill your juice, liking you as I do. You've got to hoof it five miles back to the ranch."

The Kid laughed and walked across to the horse. Lightly he swung himself into the foreman's saddle.

Buck Wilson made a fierce stride towards him. The Kid lifted the six-gun and grinned over it.

"Beat it, hombre," he said laconically. "Beat it for the ranch before you get hurt!"

The foreman glared at him in helpless rage, but the six-gun enforced obedience. Slowly, savagely Buck Wilson turned away and started on the long and weary tramp back to the ranch, leaving his horse and guns in the hands of the Rio Kid.

The Kid watched him, with an amused grin, till the grass hid him at last from sight; then he wheeled the horse and rode away towards the hills.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Shot for Shot!

CRACK! The flash of a rifle even in the glare of the New Mexican sunshine caught the Rio Kid's eye before he heard the report. The bullet hummed by like a mosquito as the Kid dropped from his horse and slipped Buck's rifle from the leather sheath that held it. Looking across the back of the halted broncho, the Kid watched the tiny curl of smoke that flickered against the brown of the hills in the west.

"Search me!" he muttered. The Kid was riding for the hills—the foothills of the Rio Bajo range. That a crowd of the Carson men would be out hunting for him, sure now that he was one of the rustling gang, the Kid was aware. But he had ridden long miles since his meeting with Buck Wilson at the tall cotton-wood, and he had not expected to find foes farther to the west.

The shot had come from a draw that led into the low hills. Standing behind his horse, the Kid watched. He was ready for trouble if the unknown marksman wanted to push it further. From the hollow of the draw a horseman emerged into sight, followed by another.

"Shucks!" ejaculated the Kid. He knew the leading rider, a hand-

(Continued on page 28.)



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"The Rustlers of the Rio Bajo!"

(Continued from page 17.)

some figure in well-fitting riding-clothes. It was Steve Carson, the rancher's nephew. But the man who followed him was not one of the Carson outfit. The velvet jacket, the high sombrero, the gaudy sash, told that he was a Mexican, and his face, as the Kid saw it in the westerling sunlight, was dark and bearded and grim. The Kid smiled grimly. If ever he had seen a galoot who had "rustled" and "cow-thief" written all over his swarthy face, it was the Mexican who was riding with Steve Carson.

"Oh shucks!" grinned the Kid. "I reckon that yaller coyote was seeing some of his rustler friends in the sierra, and that dog-goned Greaser is one of the gang. And they've spotted me, and the pesky coyote reckons he's got me by the short hairs, two to one."

Steve Carson and the Mexican rode directly towards the Rio Kid, galloping over the rolling prairie. The Kid watched them coolly, over the back of the Broncho, his rifle in his hand ready to lift as soon as he wanted it. He was a little puzzled at the direct attack; for the two riders were galloping into easy range, and as they were in rapid motion, and the Kid was standing still, all the chances were in his favour when it came to burning powder.

But suddenly he burst into a laugh as he guessed. He had escaped unharmed from the ranch the night before; he was in a country where every hand would be against him, and Steve Carson was not wise to it, that he was now armed. The two horsemen figured that they were riding down an unarmed man.

The Kid chuckled. He was willing to leave them in their error till they came nearer; and he held Buck's rifle out of sight behind the broncho, waiting.

It was at fifty yards that the two horsemen slackened pace a little and handled their rifles. At that easy distance it was quick work to riddle the Kid and his broncho with bullets if he had been, as they reckoned, without a gun. But the Kid was watching every motion of his enemies, and at the first sign of shooting his rifle swept up over the back of the broncho and he pulled trigger.

The Mexican had his rifle at his shoulder when the Kid's shot came, but he never pressed the trigger. He rolled backwards over his horse's tail and crashed heavily into the thick grass, and the startled horse threw up its heels and dashed away across the plain.

The rifle swung in line with Steve Carson, who was taking aim. The change that came over the face of the rancher's nephew was almost ludicrous in its surprise. The rifle remained motionless in his hands and he stared at the Kid blankly and at the muzzle that was bearing on him. Then, without firing, he drove his spurs into his horse's flanks and dashed away towards the hills, bending low in the saddle to evade the shot he expected.

"Search me!" chuckled the Kid. He did not pull trigger on the fleeing man. In a couple of minutes Steve Carson had vanished again into the draw from which the horsemen had emerged, and was gone from the Kid's sight.

The Kid watched him go, and then walked across to the spot where the Mexican had fallen, his rifle ready for use if it was needed. But it was not

needed; the swarthy rustler lay still where he had fallen. The Kid gave him one grim look and returned to his broncho.

Crack! From the distant draw came the ringing report of a rifle. Under cover in the hollow the rancher's nephew was firing. But the distance was too great for effective shooting; and the Kid only grinned as the bullet winged by a dozen feet from him.

"Shiffricks!" murmured the Kid. "Any man in the Carson bunch would know that Greaser for a rustler at sight; and I reckon if they saw the rancher's neevy in his company they'd be wise to it who was the rustler's spy at the ranch. I guess he wouldn't have showed up with that Greaser if he hadn't been plumb sure of getting me. But I reckon he won't get this puncher in a dog-goned hurry!"

Crack, crack! came the ringing of the distant rifle. Headless of the futile fire from the man hidden in the draw, the Kid mounted his broncho and rode away, sweeping southward to strike the hills at a point distant from the draw. The Kid was in the hills when the sun sank behind the sierra, in the west, safe from pursuit by the keenest trader in the Carson bunch. Under cover of the night it would have been easy for the Kid to ride on and strike the trail for Texas, far from the Carson ranch. But the Kid did not ride on. The Kid was not hitting the trail for Texas until he had come to a show-down with the rustlers of the Rio Bajo.

THE END.

(How does the Rio Kid, just in his self-set adventurous task, strike the rustlers, during western days, entitled "THE RIO BAJA RAIDERS"?)

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OUR ROARING WESTERN YARN, STARRING THE RIO KID!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Trailed!

THE Rio Kid lay in the sassafras on the top of the high mesa, and watched, with the patience of an Apache watching for his enemy. The Kid was not, perhaps, very patient by nature, but he could be as patient as a Redskin when he was on the warpath. And the Kid was on the warpath now. For a full hour he had lain on the summit of the mesa, in the blaze of the hot sun of New Mexico, hardly stirring to flick away the buzzing mosquitoes. From that high point, rising over the low hills of the Sierra Baja range, he could see far across the surrounding country—hill and canyon, deep, shadowy gulch, and rocky draw, to the rolling prairie that stretched away illimitable to the east—the wide grasslands of the Carson ranch. And the Kid's eyes were fixed upon a deep, hollow draw, shadowed by rocks and pines, where the low hills rose from the plain.

At the foot of the mesa, by a creek that was one of the trickling head-waters of the Rio Bajo, his broncho was staked out, in rich grass. Food, and water, and shade in plenty for the horse, while the Kid baked and sweated in the blazing sun on the top of the high mesa. But the hardy Kid seemed indifferent to discomfort. From the flat-topped rock he could watch the distant draw, and that was what the Kid wanted.

And his long vigil was rewarded at last.

From the shadows of the draw a horseman pulled out into view, riding slowly up into the hills—slowly, for the way was rocky and difficult. The Kid saw him first as a moving spot in the distance; but the figure drew nearer and clearer with every passing minute. Even while he was too far for his features to be discerned, the Kid was sure of him—he knew the well-built figure, the handsome riding-clothes, of Steve Carson, the nephew of Colonel Carson, of the Carson ranch. And as the horseman drew nearer, winding his way into the intricacies of the Sierra Baja, the Kid made out the handsome, reckless features of the rancher's nephew, and knew his man beyond doubt. And the Kid grinned quietly as he lay in cover and watched.

Click! Click!

The sound of the horse's hoofs came to his ears, echoing from the hard rocks. Steve Carson turned into a deep arroyo, so narrow that the walls of rock on either side seemed almost to meet, and in places arched over the rider's head. Through the arroyo ran a trickling stream, and the horseman was riding up the ravine in the shallow water. And the Rio Kid slipped, at last, quietly down from the mesa. He did not untether his horse. The Kid, like all cowpunchers, hated going afoot; he never went twenty yards out of the saddle if he could help it. But he knew that a single sound behind him would alarm the man he was tracking, and it was necessary for the Kid to keep in cover, and, mounted, he would have been seen by a backward glance of the lone rider. So the Kid left the broncho where he was, lying in the thick grass by the creek, and followed his man on foot. The toilsome way up the arroyo was slow, and the Kid knew that he could keep pace easily enough with the man from the ranch. And the Kid had a hunch that the trail would not be a long one.



There are all kinds of Western characters—gunmen, roughnecks, outlaws, and cowboys. But there's ONLY ONE KIND OF RIO KID—and this is he!

Carson was out of sight in the steep arroyo, but the thudding and splashing of the horse came back to the Kid's ears. And every few minutes he had a glimpse of the rider, pushing slowly on his upward way. Twice he saw Steve Carson turn his head—not suspiciously, for the man did not dream that he was being trailed, but from the habit of caution. But the Kid was an old hand at this game, and there was no sign of him for the horseman to see when he glanced over his shoulder.

The rider pulled out of the arroyo at last, and drew his horse to a halt by a clump of trees at the opening of the canyon. And the Kid, winding his way on in cover of rock, and pine, and straggling bush, silent as a panther stalking his prey, dropped behind a boulder within a dozen feet of him, unseen, unsuspected.

"The durned, dog-goned gink!" the Kid muttered under his breath as he watched the halted horseman from cover. "I guess I savvy a whole heap what you're waiting there for, and what kinda galoot you're waiting for. I reckon if the Carson bunch could see you now they'd be put wise mighty sudden."

The horseman, at a halt on the rough ground at the head of the arroyo, was waiting with evident impatience. He had given no signal, so far as the Kid could discern or hear, but his manner showed plainly enough that he expected to be met. If the rustlers were camped in the hills it was likely that the spot was within view of some look-out. It was certain that watch would be kept by the cattle-thieves, with all the Rio Bajo country up in the hunt for them.

There was a sound of clinking hoofs, and a rider came from the shadowy pines of the canyon and joined Steve Carson. The Kid, from his cover, looked at him curiously and keenly.

He was a powerfully-built man, with a rugged, tanned, bearded face, dressed like a puncher, but evidently not a ranchman. He wore two guns in his belt, as well as a bowie-knife, and a rifle was in a sheath at his saddle. A tougher specimen of the "border ruffian" the Kid had never seen in the wildest cow town of Texas or Montana. A scar, from an old bullet wound, ran across the man's tanned right cheek.

THE POPULAR—No. 507.

like a gash, from his mouth to his ear, giving that side of his face a grisly expression.

"You here, Steve?"

"I've been waiting for you, Judson," snapped the young man.

"I reckon I moseyed down as soon as you was seen," answered the scarred man. "What's on? I sent down Juan with a message for you. Didn't you meet up with him in the draw, as usual?"

"Yep."

Carson dismounted from his horse and stood, leaning one arm on the saddle while he talked to the rustler. The limp of his left leg was very perceptible when the rancher's nephew moved on foot. Judson seemed to notice it, for he remarked:

"Your laig ain't any better, Steve."

"Nope. Never mind that; it will mend," grunted Steve. "I came up here to give you the office, Jud. Juan's gone up."

"Sho!" ejaculated the scarred man.

"He was shot by a puncher from Texas—a kid puncher, who calls himself Carfax."

The Rio Kid grinned behind the boulder. Steve Carson had no suspicion that the kid puncher who called himself Carfax was within hearing of his voice.

"Who's Carfax?" asked Jud.

"Search me!" growled Steve. "Buck Wilson found him nosing on the trail of Tommy Tucker's bunch of cows that were driven off the day before yesterday. He ran him into the ranch on suspicion of savvyng something about the rustling, and my uncle ordered him to be held. He's too fresh for this country. He spotted the tracks of a man with a limp on the cattle-trail, and told the outfit."

Jud whistled.

"Sho! They don't suspect that you are—"

"Of course not!" interrupted Carson irritably. "I reckon they ain't likely to figure that the boss' nephew has a hand in the rustling of the Carson herds. But that puncher is sure wise to it, and I ain't safe at the ranch with him around."

"Don't you pack a gun?" grinned Jud.

"I drew on him, and he beat me to it," growled Steve. "He was shut up in the kerosene shack, and I dropped a knife in the window to help him out, and when he vamoosed I was lying ready to wing him. I reckoned it was a cinch, but he got clear. When I was with Juan in the draw we sighted him on a horse on the prairie, and rode him down. But he's got guns from somewhere; he shot up Juan and I reckoned I hit the horizon mighty quick. I figured that he might come after me, and I waited for him in the draw, but he never showed up."

Again the Rio Kid chuckled silently. The Kid had made a wide circle to get to the rear of the draw, where the rancher's nephew waited for him, rifle in hand.

"I reckon he's taking a hand in the game," went on Steve. "I guess he's a meddlesome galoot, ready to horn into any rookus that don't concern him any. You want to watch out for him, Jud, and give him his as soon as you sight him. They figure at the ranch that he's one of the rustlers."

"Sho!" ejaculated Jud again.

"There won't be any questions asked if he's found laid out!" said Steve. "I reckon he's in these hills, lying low to keep clear of the Carson bunch."

"I guess a stranger rooting in these

hills ain't likely to be long-lived," grinned Jud. "More likely he's pulled out and vamoosed."

Steve shook his head impatiently.

"If he was hitting the trail for Texas he'd have gone east," he answered. "But when I saw him he was on this side of the ranch—west. He's got a hunch for taking a hand in this game, I tell you, Jud."

"I'll sure tell the boys to watch out," said Jud carelessly. "If he's nosing around in the hills he won't hit our camp easy; and if he does he'll go up so quick he won't never savvy what struck him."

Steve grunted. After his own experience with Kid Carfax he did not figure that dealing with the boy puncher would be so easy as the rustler reckoned. He changed the subject abruptly.

"You cleared the last herd?" he asked.

"Sure! Every gol-durned cow was driven down to the construction camps on the other side of the sierra," answered Jud. "So long as the railroad's building—and I guess that will be years yet—they'll take off our hands all the beef we can get—cheap!" He chuckled. "I reckon it's time for another drive. I told Juan to speak to you about it."

"Juan won't never speak again," grunted Steve. "You want to rope in Posy Pete's herd. He's got Tommy Tucker's old range since Tommy was shot up. It's the farthest from the ranch, and the safest to work. He's got two hundred cows on that range, along the fork of the Rio Bajo. But look here, Jud, no killing, if it can be helped. I reckon it made me sure sick of the game when Tommy Tucker was shot up."

"It was you that pulled on him," growled Jud. "I don't stand for shooting up cowmen. It makes the game too pesky dangerous. All the ranch will be howling for blood over that."

Steve muttered an oath.

"He had to go up when he came on us suddenly and reckernized me," he snarled. "Do you reckon I could let him get back to the ranch and let on to Colonel Carson that his nephew was in cahoots with a gang of rustlers? But I sure hated to draw on him." The young man shook himself impatiently. "I reckon it made me sick that I ever took a hand in this rustling game."

The Kid could see the sardonic grin on the rugged face of the rustler.

"It's easy money," said Jud. "You've roped in some thousands of dollars to your share, Steve, though I guess it's all gone on poker and euchre among the tin-horn gamblers at Bunch Grass."

"That's my funeral," snarled Steve. "When I couldn't touch my uncle for any more I had to raise the dust somehow. Never mind that. When will you be rustling Posy Pete's herd? Make it after dark; it sure ain't safe to move in the daylight, even so far from the ranch, since there's been killing. I tell you the whole outfit is raging."

"To-night, then," said Jud. "You'll be there?"

"I reckon not," snapped Steve. "After what that gol-darned Texas galoot has been saying at the ranch I sure want to be off the scene next time cows are rustled. I reckon I'm staying in to-night, like a good boy, with plenty of witnesses that I was home."

The rustler chuckled.

"That's sure wise," he said. "I reckon you want to watch out, Steve."

After a few more words Steve Carson remounted his horse and rode away, clinking and clattering, down the

narrow arroyo, to return to the plains and the ranch. Judson turned his horse and dashed away into the rocky canyon at a gallop. From his cover the Rio Kid stared after him grimly. The rustler vanished from sight, and the clatter of hoofs died away in a few moments.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Hut on the Range!

THE stockman's hut stood lonely, far from any other habitation, close by the fork of the Rio Bajo. It was built of sawn planks and posts, with a shuttered window and a door that swung loose on leather hinges. It looked lonely and deserted in the setting sun as the Rio Kid rode within sight of it and watched it keenly across the glistening, waving grass of the range.

The Kid rode slowly towards the stockman's hut.

The hut was ten miles from the ranch-house, and was one of the loneliest stations on the ranch. The puncher in charge of the herd on the range was accustomed to bring with him rations for a week and camp in the hut at night. At the end of the week he would be relieved by the next man on duty. It was a lonely life, and when the rustlers were at work it was a dangerous one. But it was a matter of course to the cow-punchers. The Rio Kid had done range riding, in the old days on the Double-Bar in Texas, and he knew the work of a ranch from beginning to end. The Kid knew that Posy Pete would be alone in the stockman's hut, with no other within miles of him. What worried him now was whether the range-rider was at the hut or out on the range with the feeding cows. It was unlikely that he would be back at the hut before dark, still, the Kid was not taking chances. At the Carson ranch they had marked down the Kid as a rustler himself; he had been made a prisoner on suspicion, and his escape, he had no doubt, had convinced Colonel Carson, that the suspicion was well founded, and there was no doubt that Steve did all he could to further that view. Since the shooting up of Tommy Tucker on the same range a few days before, the new man in charge was not likely to be slow with his gun, and if Posy Pete was in the hut and sighted the Kid coming, the boy puncher was more than likely to be met by a whizzing bullet.

So the Kid was very wary as he approached the hut, his keen eyes watching it for a sign of an occupant.

There was no sign; but that might only mean that the puncher was watching him from within and waiting for him to come within easy range.

At a hundred yards the Kid dismounted from his broncho and walked on towards the hut, watchful as a cat. At fifty yards the Kid staked out the broncho and advanced on hands and knees, almost hidden by the high grass.

Still there was no movement, no shot, and the Kid came to the edge of the clearing round the hut and watched from the grass for a good ten minutes before he advanced farther.

The silence was deep, and he was fairly well satisfied that the hut was untenanted. But he was still watchful and wary when he quitted all cover at last and ran swiftly towards the hut.

"Shucks!" ejaculated the Kid.

The hut was empty, as he had expected. The puncher was out on the range with his herd. The Kid threw open the door and looked in, gun in hand, but the room was empty.

One glance round was enough for the Kid. Then he walked back to his broncho, untethered him, and led him to the hut, and led him inside. Nothing was to be in view to alarm Posy Pete when he came in from the range.

The stove was cold, but the Kid, though he was more than ready for food, did not think of lighting it. He waited in the hut, watching from a split in the shutter, across the plains, now shadowed as the sun set lower behind the Sierra Baja.

It was an hour later that a tanned cow-puncher came riding into sight towards the stockman's hut.

The Kid smiled as he watched him.

Posy Pete, tired by a day on the open range, rode slowly towards the lonely hut, thinking chiefly of supper

and his bunk. A few days ago a puncher had been killed by rustlers on that lonely range. But chances like that came all in the day's work; the work of the ranch went on just the same. Posy Pete was watchful over his herd, but as he rode back to the hut he thought of supper and bed. He dismounted at the door, turned his horse into the little fenced corral adjoining the hut, threw the creaking door open, and tramped heavily in. And from the gloomy interior there was a gleam of a levelled barrel, and a soft voice said pleasantly, in the leisurely Texas drawl: "Hands up!"

Posy Pete gave a convulsive start, and his hand, by instinct, shot towards his belt. But he did not touch a gun. A levelled revolver was looking him in the face at a distance of six feet, and Posy Pete knew too much to draw.

He put his hands quietly above his head and stared at the handsome, sunburnt face that glimmered out of the shadows.

"You durned rustler!" he muttered. The Kid laughed softly.

"Drop your hardware, feller," he said, "and don't you try to lift a gun, or you get yours so sudden that you'll never know how you got over the range."

"It's your say-so!" answered Posy Pete, and he lifted the gun from his belt and dropped it to the floor and kicked it across to the Rio Kid.

"You're sure a good little man," said the Kid approvingly. "I should hate to spill your juice over the floor, feller."

"Oh, can it!" snapped Posy Pete. "If you're arter the cows you've got me dead to rights. You'll go up to a branch for it."

"But I ain't arter the cows," grinned the Kid. "I keep on telling you that I ain't no rustler, same as I told them at the ranch."

"Then what are you doing here?" demanded Posy Pete. "That's Buck Wilson's hoss you've got in the corner, you durned hoss-thief!"

"Buck Wilson sure roped in my



IN THE CATTLE STAMPEDE! A shadowy figure loomed beside the Kid as he rode with the stampede—a hoarse voice called him: "You, Jud?" "I guess not!" answered the Kid coolly as he clubbed his quirt and swept down the heavy butt. The horseman gave a yell and rolled from his mount. (See Chapter 3.)

mustang and my guns," said the Kid. "I met up with him on the prairie and borrowed his'n. This ain't a country for a galoot to take a little pascar without a gun or without a cayuse. I'm ready to trade back with Buck Wilson when he wants."

Posy Pete eyed him suspiciously. "What are you doing here if you ain't arter the cows?" he asked. "You met me with a gat in your grip."

"I reckon you'd have blowed my roof off, and no questions asked, if I hadn't," chuckled the Kid. "If I was a rustler, you gol-durned moss-head, what's to stop me from handing out yours and driving your herd?" The Kid thrust the revolver back into the holster at his belt. "I'm here to help you beat them rustlers, Pete."

"Oh, shucks!" said Pete.

"Honest Injun!" grinned the Kid. "I've got wise to it that they're arter your cows this hyer night, and I'm sure going to take a hand in the game. Ever heard of a galoot named Judson, with a big scar on his face?"

"Every cow-man in New Mexico has heard of Scar-Face Judson, the durndest fire-bug between this and the Rio Colorado!" growled Pete.

"He's the galoot that's arter the herd. I'm going to watch out with you to stop him."

"Oh, shucks!"

"You ain't taking that in?"

"Not any."

"I guess I'll prove it up," said the Kid. "You're a white man, Posy Pete, and I sure like you, though you're a durned moss-head, like the rest of your bunch. But I'll prove it up."

"And how?" jeered Pete.

"This-away, feller."

The Kid picked up the stockman's pistol, and, holding it by the barrel, handed it to Posy Pete. His own gun was in his holster. Posy Pete grasped the Colt by the butt and stared over it at the smiling face of the Rio Kid. Deliberately the Kid had placed the game in his hands. He had placed himself at the cow-puncher's mercy.

"Waal, carry me home to die!" ejaculated Posy Pete, staring blankly at the Kid.

Slowly he dropped the gun into his belt.

"I reckon I more'n half believed that you was white," he said. "I guess you've proved it up, feller. Look here, is it the straight goods about a raid on my herd this night?"

"Sure!"

"And you're standing by me if they come?"

"I sure am!"

"You're a white man," said Posy Pete.

"I reckon we've got time for a leetle supper before the galoots show up," said the Kid.

And he crammed pine chips into the stove and lighted it, turning his back cheerfully on the puncher as he did so with a complete confidence that made Posy Pete dismiss any lingering suspicion that might have been in his mind.

The stove was soon roaring, and sending up a stream of smoke from the iron pipe in the roof towards the glittering stars of New Mexico. Posy Pete lighted a kerosene lamp and turned the Kid's broncho into the corral. And then the two punchers, with cheery confidence established, sat down on either side of the stove to supper, while the darkness deepened and deepened on the lonely prairie round the stockman's hut.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Stampede!

STARS twinkled in the sky, but the night was dark. From the shadowed grass came the low, deep murmur of the herd. By a bunch of cedars, close by the resting herd, the Kid and Posy Pete stood, holding their bridles. The Kid was speaking in a low voice.

"I guess I'm talking hoss-sense, feller. I've given you the office that Scar-Face Judson and his gang will be working your herd to-night. I guess I'll stand by you to the last shot. I sure hate a rustler. But if you had as much sense as a hoss-fly you'd ride to the ranch end bring up some of the outfit."

Posy Pete shook his head.

"Forget it!" he answered. "I'm on this range and looking after this bunch of cows. I guess I believe you're white, Kid Carfax, but up at the ranch they figure that you're one of the cattle-thieves. I reckon the boss would give me the marble eye if I rode up and told him I'd left you alone with the herd on your word."

"I reckon I'd ride to the ranch myself, only the dog-goned moss-heads would shoot me up at sight," grunted the Kid. "Anyhow, we're two, and if they drive the cows we can trail them if we can't beat them to it. I'm sure anxious to find out how they drive the cows without leaving a trail."

Posy Pete eyed him curiously in the gloom of the cedars.

He trusted the Kid. The Kid had fairly forced the puncher to trust him. But the puncher still had his doubts. The Kid meant well, he believed that. But he was not sure that the Kid had it right. If the rustlers did not come—and Pete did not feel at all sure that they were coming—he was losing his night's sleep in the stockman's hut—and losing it for nothing. And a cowboy who had ridden range all day did not want to lose his night's rest for nothing. And Posy Pete did not quite understand, either, why the Kid, who had been treated as a rustler himself at the Carson ranch, was taking a hand in the game against the rustlers to save Colonel Carson's herds. The night was calm and still, the cattle rested peacefully in the grass, from a little distance came a soft murmur of the waters of the Rio Bajo. For two hours the punchers had been watching the herd, and there had been no sign of the rustlers.

But the Kid started suddenly, and

bent his head to listen, and laid a hand on Posy Pete's arm.

"I reckon they're on hand," he whispered.

In the midnight stillness Posy Pete listened intently. He shook his head.

"I guess I ain't wise to it if they are," he said.

"Listen, you moss-head!" grunted the Kid.

And in a few minutes more Posy Pete could hear the faint sounds—from the darkened prairie, that had already reached the keener ears of the Rio Kid. Horsemen were riding in the night.

"Might be some of the outfit," muttered Pete. "I guess the boss is keeping the boys riding hard these days. He's sure mad at Tommy Tucker being shot up by the rustlers."

"Outfit nothing!" snapped the Kid. "It's Scar-Face Judson and his gang, or I'll sure eat my Stetson."

They listened. From a distance the glow of the stove from the stockman's hut could be seen, glowing out by slits and crannies in the timber walls. The horsemen were riding nowhere near the hut, and the Kid drew his companion's attention to the fact.

"If they was some of the Carson outfit they'd sure hit the hut to call on you there," he said. "If they're rustlers they'll miss the hut as wide as they can, figuring that you're in it, sleeping with a gun handy. Don't your pesky ears tell you that them riders ain't passing anywhere near that hut?"

"Sure!" assented Pete, after a pause.

He drew his repeating-rifle from the leather sheath at his saddle. He was convinced now, and he was ready for shooting. The Kid had a six-gun in his hand, and his eyes were glinting and searching through the darkness. The thudding of hoofs was nearer and clearer, but it stopped, and from the sleeping herd came murmuring sounds of disturbance. The resting cows were waking and grunting. Sharply through the silence came the crack of a cowboy's quirt. The punchers at the cedar clump heard muffled voices calling to one another. It was only too plain that the rustlers were at work round the herd, and that the cows were getting into motion. Here and there, in the dim starlight, shadowy figures showed, the figures of horsemen, who were starting up the herd.

There were several of them—several seen at once, and probably more hidden in the shadows. But it did not even cross Posy Pete's mind to lie doggo and keep safe from heavy odds. He was there to guard the cows, and he was ready to do his duty—more than ready, for he was keen to draw trigger on the cattle-thieves who had shot up one of the outfit.

"You standing by on this, Carfax?" he muttered.

"Ain't I said so?"

"Stand to it, then!" said the puncher. He clambered on his horse, and, guiding the animal with his knees, his rifle in his hands, rode out from the shadow of the cedar clump.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

The roar of the rifle awoke a thousand echoes on the prairie. There was a startled bellowing from the cattle and a shouting of alarmed voices. A voice the Kid thought he knew—the voice of Scar-Face Judson—yelled from the darkness.

"Look out! That durned puncher ain't at the hut!"

Bang! Bang! Bang! came the ring of the rustler's revolver, following his words.

It was wild shooting, in the darkness under the dim stars. But if the shooting was not effective on the intended targets it was effective in alarming the herd and stampeding them. A single shot, sometimes, will startle a herd of cows into a stampede. No beasts are quicker to take fright. Trampling and bellowing, horning wildly, the two hundred cows on the Rio Bajo pasture left their resting-place, careering wildly through the night. In the midst of the trampling, tossing herd, and on its skirts, rode the rustlers, cracking their whips like shots, only aiming to keep the herd together and head the stampede in the direction they desired. Cows on all sides left the main herd and escaped in the gloom, but the greater part kept in the bunch, and that bunch was herded towards the hills by the rustlers with cracking whips.

No cowboy, or score of cowboys, could have stopped the stampede, once it had started.

The utmost the herder could have done would have been to ride with the bunch and keep it together, riding with it till it tired, and then hoping to herd it back to its pasture.

But in this case the riders were urging on the stampede with cracking whip and cracking revolver. Only they sought to head it towards the hills, and that was easily in their power. The cows cared nothing which way they rushed, so long as they were allowed to rush free. It was heading them off and stopping them that would have been impossible.

Crack! Crack! Crack! rang quirt and revolver, the sharp reports hardly distinguishable from one another.

The Rio Kid was riding with the stampede, but he was not firing. In the gloom no man could have told friend from foe, and he did not want to drop Posy Pete in mistake for a rustler. Stopping the stampede was impossible, singing out one dark shadow from another in the night was impossible; but the Kid could ride with the herd, and keep up with it, and take his chance of dealing with the rustlers later. Posy Pete was firing, and some of the rustlers loosing off shots, and when a bullet whistled by an inch from the Kid's hat he did not know whether it came from friend or foe.

But the firing died suddenly. Posy Pete, baffled by the darkness, rode with the rushing herd, as the Kid was doing, only seeking to keep up with it. And it was no child's play riding with a stampeding herd in the darkness. A rider once down in that sea of tossing hoofs and horns was a dead man—all that was left of him would be an unrecognisable mass in the trampled grass; and a single false step, the catching of a horse's hoof in a gopher hole might mean a fall and sudden destruction. The rustlers and the punchers were taking the same risks, and they had their hands full enough.

A shadowy figure loomed up beside the Kid as he rode. A hoarse voice called to him:

"You, Jud?"

"I guess not," answered the Kid coolly as he clubbed his quirt and swept down the heavy metal butt, and the horseman rolled from his horse with a yell. And the Kid rode on, with one fewer foe to deal with when the time came.



THE GOOD SAMARITAN! Holding the wounded man on his horse, the Rio Kid pushed forward through the deepening dusk towards the ranch. All the ranchers were his foes—but that did not stop the Kid. That wounded man had to be got home! (See Chapter 4.)

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Shot Up!

SCAR-FACE JUDSON swore through his set teeth as he rode with the tossing horns round him, cracking his quirt. It was no part of his plan to stampede the herd. He had hoped to drive the cows from their pasture by stealth, under cover of night, while Posy Pete slept in his bunk in the stockman's hut, or rolled up in his blanket under the stars. In a stampede many head of cattle were certain to be lost to the raiders, and it was a question whether the excited herd could be slowed down in time to suit the rustler. But it could not be helped now. The firing had stampeded the herd and they were going fast. Judson rode with them, cracking his quirt, keeping back, so far as he could, cows that sought to rush out of the main drove, as all his men were doing. He stared through the darkness about him in the midst of a sea of tossing horns and rolling, wild eyes, calling to his men, and watchful for Posy Pete. He knew that the puncher would not be quitting his cows. But one shadowy figure of a horseman was exactly like another; when a man rode by his side he could not have told whether it was Posy Pete or one of his own gang. He swore savagely as he rode.

A horseman came thundering by him, and Jud stared at the rider, unable to pick him out in the dark. But a voice called to him:

"Say, you!"

Posy Pete's finger was on the trigger, but he called before he fired. He did not want to drop his comrade by mistake.

"Keep riding!" called back Judson.

The hoarse shout might have come from one of his own men.

Posy Pete throw up his rifle and fired. He knew that that gruff voice was not that of Carfax.

Scar-Face Judson spat out an oath as the bullet tore a strip of skin from his cheek. Heedless of the pain, and of the blood that streamed down his face, the rustler whirled his horse towards the puncher and rode at him, firing as he came. Bang! Bang! bang! rang his heavy Colt, and Posy Pete fired blindly, dropped his rifle, and clung

wildly to his horse as the lead went home. Twice wounded, the cow-puncher was carried on by his rushing horse and vanished from the sight of the rustler, who sent a savage laugh after him as he wiped the blood from his cheek.

"You've got yours, I reckon!" snarled Judson. "And he roared, above the uproar of the stampede: "That puncher's down! All's clear! Slow down the herd as soon as you can, you galoots!"

The shout reached the ears of the Rio Kid, riding in darkness amid tossing horns and the shadowy figures of horsemen.

"Oh, shucks!" snapped the Kid. "They've got Posy Pete——"

In the gloom, a horse came galloping by, with a rider clinging to its neck. The wounded man was crumpled up on the horse's back. But with all that was left of his strength Posy Pete was holding on, knowing full well that if he fell he would be trampled to death without hope. It was only a glimpse of him that the Kid had in the shadows, but he figured that it was Posy Pete, and he dashed in pursuit. In a couple of minutes he was beside the unguided horse, and had caught the loose reins.

"That you, Pete?" snapped the Kid. It might have been a wounded rustler, and the Kid's heavy quirt was ready to dash him from the saddle at a hostile movement. But the deep groan from the wounded rider told him that he had nothing to fear from him, whether he was friend or foe.

The Kid rode closer beside the shadowy figure. He guided the horse away from the press of cattle. A faint voice came from the crumpled rider.

"You Kid Carfax?"

"Yep!"

"They've given me mine!" A groan followed the words. "It was Scar-Face Judson. I saw him in the flash of the gun."

He groaned again, and lurched in the saddle, and would have fallen but for the boy puncher's strong arm that caught him in time and held him.

"Oh, shucks!" growled the Kid.

He had ridden clear of the stamped-herd now, guiding the puncher's horse to safety. Past him in the darkness swept the press of maddened

cattle, bellowing, past him and beyond home. It was with bitter chagrin that the Kid let them go, and did not follow. He had aimed to keep with the herd and with the rustlers, and trail them to the secret place in the hills. But he could not abandon the man who was sinking under his wounds. The roar of the stampede died away in the black distance as the Kid dismounted and lifted the groaning puncher from his saddle.

Posy Pete lay in the thick grass as the light fingers of the Kid groped over him. The Kid could do nothing but staunch the flow of blood and bind up the wounds.

"I reckon you're worth a whole lot of dead galoots yet, feller," said the Kid cheerfully. "It's sure pizen to me to let them rustlers go, but I reckon I aim to get you to the ranch pronto. I guess I'll be able to pick up the trail of that stampede in the daylight, anyhow. You figure that you can hold on if I stick you in the saddle?"

"Yep!" The Kid swung the wounded man to his horse. Posy Pete was hard hit, and if he was to live he had to get to the ranch without delay. Darkness and silence had already swallowed up the stampeding herd and the rustlers who were riding with it. The Rio Kid turned in the opposite direction—eastward towards the distant ranch.

With a steady hand to his companion the Kid rode. Posy Pete's head had sunk on his chest and he was only half conscious. But for the Kid's hand he would have fallen from the saddle. But the Kid held him, and rode, heading for the ranch. At the ranch all were his foes, and what his reception would be like there the Kid could not tell; but he gave it little thought, he was thinking only of the wounded man lurching helplessly in his saddle. It was in the rosy flush of the sunrise that the Rio Kid came in sight of the Carson ranch and headed for the bunk-house.

THE END.

(What kind of reception will the Rio Kid get when he arrives at the ranch with his wounded companion? Next week's long Western yarn will tell you. Don't miss: "THE SECRET OF THE LOST TRAIL!")

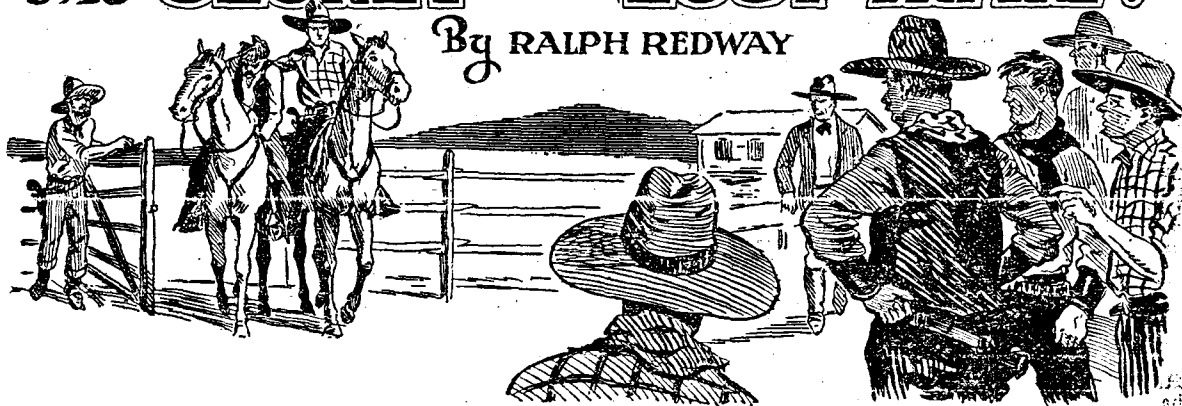
THE POPULAR.—No. 507.

THE CATTLE THAT VANISHED!

Right to the very edge of the prairie the trail of the stolen cattle leads the Rio Kid—then that trail suddenly ends. The rustled cows cannot vanish into thin air—but, where have they been driven? That's a big problem for the Kid!

The SECRET OF THE LOST TRAIL!

By RALPH REDWAY



THRILLING AND DRAMATIC LONG COMPLETE YARN OF THE WILD WEST, STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER. From Foes to Friends!

GREAT snakes!" Buck Wilson, foreman of the Carson Ranch, stood before the open door of the bunkhouse, shaded his eyes with his hand, and stared.

It was early morning, but the sun was already shining brightly on the wide grasslands. Men were yawning and turning out in the bunkhouse. From the cookhouse came the red glow of the ranch cook's stove, and an appetising smell. Buck Wilson, as he stepped out in the rosy dawn, had been thinking chiefly of breakfast. But he forgot all about bacon and flapjacks and steaming coffee as he sighted the two riders advancing towards the ranch on the trail from the west.

"Great snakes!" he repeated blankly. "It's that young cuss Carfax trailing back; but who's he got with him?"

Five or six punchers joined the foreman, and stood staring at the approaching riders. The Rio Kid was easily recognisable at the distance, but his companion sat his horse like a sack, his head drooping, his face unseen. Evidently it was a sorely-wounded man that the Kid was guiding to the bunkhouse of the Carson Ranch.

"Gee!" exclaimed one of the punchers. "That's Posy Pete! If that young firebug from Texas has shot him up—"

"I guess he wouldn't be bringing him back here if he'd shot him up," said Buck Wilson dryly.

"You've said it," agreed the puncher. "You hustle along to the rancho and call Colonel Carson," said the foreman.

"You needn't call young Steve—he's death on that Texas puncher, and we sure don't want any gun-play till we know how we stand. If he's picked up Pete hurt, and toted him home, we sure ain't going to worry him any. You call the colonel, Jake Sanders."

"Sure." The puncher hurried off to the adobe ranch-house. By that time all the Carson outfit who had been in the bunkhouse had gathered round the foreman to watch the Kid as he came. Even cooky came to the doorway of the cookhouse in his shirt-sleeves, with a saucer in his hand, to stare at him. The Kid was the centre of all eyes as he rode up at a walking pace, supporting the

wounded cowpuncher who sat feebly on the back of his led horse. Laramie Bill darted forward to open a gate for the Kid, and the boy puncher gave him a cheery nod as he rode through.

"Mornin', feller!" greeted the Kid. "Mornin'!" grinned Bill. "You come back hyer lookin' for a rope and a branch, Carfax?"

"Forget it!" said the Kid; and he rode on to the bunkhouse with Posy Pete.

His progress was slow, and before he reached the group of punchers Colonel Carson came striding down from the rancho. The rancher was on the spot to meet the Kid as the latter drew rein. Buck Wilson on one side, Jake Sanders on the other, caught hold of Posy Pete, who sank into their arms and was lowered gently to the ground and carried into the bunkhouse. The Kid sat in his saddle, eyeing the crowd of punchers, evidently at his ease, and cool as ice, though he knew that guns might leap from their holsters at any moment.

"What does this mean, puncher?" demanded Colonel Carson harshly. "Keep your hands from your guns, I warn you."

"I guess I ain't come a-shooting, feller," answered the kid cheerily. "I've humped in to tote home that puncher, and I reckon if you've got a doc on this ranch, the sooner he gives Posy Pete a look-in, the better. The galoot's got two bullet-holes in him, and he's sure lost a lot of juice."

"He's been shot up?" said Laramie Bill.

"Guessed it in once," said the Kid amiably. "You're sure bright lads in this hyer outfit."

"What we want to know is, who shot him up?" rapped out the rancher.

"I guess he'll tell you when he feels like it," answered the Kid coolly. "You don't want to fire off orders at me, rancher. I guess I ain't a man in your outfit, and I never did stand for being bulldozed. I've toted your galoot home, and I guess it's me for the trail."

"Halt!" snapped the colonel.

"Forget it!" jeered the Kid.

And he wheeled his horse.

"Hold on," said the colonel more gently. "If you came here to bring Pete home, Carfax, you'll go as safe as you came, rustler as you are. But don't ask for trouble, with a dozen guns ready to riddle you with lead."

The Kid laughed, but he turned his horse back.

"I guess my guns would be talking some about the same time," he said cheerily. "But I ain't here hunting for trouble. I keep on telling you that I ain't no rustler, and I guess Posy Pete will tell you the same if you ask him to put you wise."

"That's Buck Wilson's broncho you're riding, and Buck Wilson's guns you've got."

"Sure! I guess I'm ready to trade back if Buck will hand over my cayuse and my shooting-irons. You ain't forgot that you roped them in when you had me a prisoner here, feller?"

Buck Wilson came out of the bunkhouse. His rugged face was very grave.

"Pete allows that that Texas galoot is a white man, boss," he said. "He helped him agin the rustlers at the fork of the Bajo last night, and brought him off when he was shot up by Scar-Face Judson. Pete reckons he would have been rubbed out but for that fresh young cuss."

"The rustlers again!" exclaimed the colonel, knitting his brows.

"Pete allows they've got away with his herd from the Rio Bajo pasture," said the foreman. "That cuss Carfax stood by him like a little man, Pete says."

Colonel Carson's grim face relaxed. He raised his Stetson hat in salute to the Kid.

"If I've been deceived, I ask your pardon, Carfax!" he said courteously.

"The look of things was against you when you were brought here, and you can't blame us for being wary of strangers. Give him his horse and his guns, Buck."

"Sure!" said Buck. "I allowed that I'd fill him full of holes at sight for holding me up on the prairie and roping in my cayuse; but arter what he's done for Pete I guess I'm his friend."

"That's hoss-sense," said the Kid, slipping from the saddle of the broncho. "I'll sure be glad to have my own cayuse again."

Buck Wilson brought the mustang from the corral, and from the bunkhouse he fetched the Kid's guns—the walnut-butted guns that the Kid was glad to handle again. He gave them to him with a friendly grin. Colonel Carson had gone into the bunkhouse to speak to the wounded puncher. He came out in

a few minutes, and his look showed that his doubts of the Kid were quite gone. The Kid stood stroking the glossy neck of his mustang when the rancher came up to him.

"You've proved up that you're a white man, Carfax," said the colonel. "The other day you asked me if I had room in my outfit for a good man. There's room for you if you haven't changed your mind."

The Kid eyed him with a rather curious expression.

"Thanks, boss, but I reckon not," he answered. "It's me for Texas when I'm through with the Rio Bajo rustlers. I guess I'm not quitting that trail till I've cinched Scar-Face Judson and his gang. I reckon there ain't room for me in your outfit when it's shooting at sight between me and your nephew Steve Carson."

The colonel frowned.

"Steve believes you to be a rustler," he said. "He will give you the glad hand when he knows that you are to be trusted."

The Rio Kid did not answer that. His feelings towards Steve Carson, who had thrice attempted to shoot him up, were not friendly. And he did not much like the high-handed autocrat of the Carson Ranch, who had ordered him to be kept a prisoner on suspicion. But he respected the grim old rancher, and he could not find it in his heart to tell him what he knew—that Steve was in league with the rustling gang, that the colonel's own nephew was the spy at the ranch who put the rustlers wise to any move that was made against them, and conveyed information to them to facilitate their raids on the herds. When the gang was rounded up—as the Kid was determined they should be—the proud old rancher must learn that one of his own blood was a spy and a traitor; but it was not for the Kid to tell him. Not, indeed, that the colonel would have believed him had he told. The strongest proof would have been required to make Colonel Carson believe that his nephew was a partner of cow-thieves, that he had helped to rob the ranch where he lived, to raise the money to pay gambling debts at Bunch Grass.

"I will speak to my nephew, and explain to him!" said the rancher. "He will give you the glad hand."

The Kid shook his head.

"I reckon I've changed my mind, boss," he answered. "It's me for Texas when I'm through with the rustlers."

"As you like!" said the rancher stiffly. The lord of thousands of rich acres in New Mexico, master of countless herds, was not accustomed to having a request or an offer refused.

"All same, I reckon I've a hunch to ride with your outfit, if you're sending your men after the rustlers," said the Kid. "I've sure always been reckoned a good hand at a trail, if you'uns want a good man. I reckon I'm taking the trail, anyhow."

"The outfit will be glad of your help, Mr. Carfax," said the colonel. "We're going to make a clean sweep of the rustlers, if I have to stop all work on the ranch till they're rounded up."

"It's a cinch!" said the Kid cheerily. Colonel Carson walked back to the ranch; and the Rio Kid joined the outfit at breakfast. On all sides he was given a cheery greeting. Once distrust was banished, the punchers were friendly enough to the young cow-man from Texas. The Kid's sunburnt, handsome face was beaming as he ate with the punchers. They were a rough-and-ready, hard-bitten crowd, long-limbed, tanned, reckless, good-humoured; such a bunch as the Kid had ridden with in the old days at the

Double-Bar before trouble fell on him and clouded his young life. It was like wine to the Rio Kid, to be one of such a cheery bunch again.

And while he ate and talked with the punchers, the Kid wondered whether he had better not, after all, change his mind again, and accept the rancher's offer, and stay on the Carson ranch for keeps. In his own country of Texas, where he longed to be, the hands of the sheriffs were stretched out for him; he could not ride the old familiar banks of the Rio Frio without a gun ready to his hand; all along the Rio Grande he was a hunted man. Here, in the wild ranch-lands of New Mexico, they had never heard of the Rio Kid; here he would be trusted; here were many friends for the making. The dark days of outlawry, cast behind for ever, would be forgotten at last.

But he shook his head.

The bitter face of Steve Carson rose before his mind's eye. He could not hang up his hat at a ranch where the boss' nephew was his bitter foe, and seeking his life. And if Steve's connection with the rustler gang was proved up, and he went to his just punishment, what were the colonel's feelings likely to be towards the Texan who had been the means of it? The Kid shook his head. Either way the Carson ranch was no place for him—the wide plains and the open trail were the home of the Rio Kid.

But for the moment, at least, the Kid dismissed such thoughts; and he smiled cheerily over a can of steaming coffee. And when the punchers prepared to ride, the Kid saddled up the black-muzzled mustang to ride with them, and he whistled a cheery tune. Many a trouble lay behind him—many a trouble lay before him—but trouble and the Rio Kid were old acquaintances, and his heart was light as he saddled up to ride with the Carson bunch.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Blind Trail!

"HYER'S the trail!"

Buck Wilson drew rein, and a dozen riders behind him halted. Ten miles from the rancho, the outfit struck the trail of the cattle that had stampeded the night before, driven off by the Judson gang. Wide and trampled lay the trail, and here and there single tracks led off from it, showing where a cow had wandered from the herd; here and there two or three tracks, where frightened cows had scattered. But the main herd had evidently kept together under the driving of the rustlers. In the shining sunlight of the morning it was easy to see that at least a hundred cows had been driven off in a bunch; and the trail was one that any cow-puncher could have followed blindfold.

"I sure reckon we shan't have to ask our way!" the Rio Kid remarked. But Buck did not look hopeful.

"It's a sure cinch, if it lasts like this," he said. "But them rustlers have a trick of blanketing the trail, like I've told you; and afore we get near the hills, I reckon this hyer trail will peter out."

"Cording to Carfax, the herd was stampeded," said Laramie Bill. "The rustlers mayn't have been able to slow them down."

"I guess we'll soon see!" answered the ranch foreman. "Ride on."

The bunch rode in the thick, wide trail left by the herd. So far, it was easy work, and they rode at a gallop. Here and there, they passed the bones of some hapless animal that had fallen in the crowding, and had been trampled

on—already picked clean by coyotes and buzzards. The trail ran north-west; and in the west rose the low slopes of the Sierra Baja—rocky, precipitous, seldom trodden, almost trackless. It was easy to guess that the rustlers had driven the cattle into some rocky recess of the hills; but unless a trail was left, a search in those barren wastes would be useless. And Buck Wilson did not believe that a trail would be left.

Somehow—no man knew how—the tracks of the cattle lifted from the Carson ranch were blanketed. It had happened a score of times—once it had happened within the Kid's knowledge, and the mystery of the trail that ended in the midst of the open plain had fairly got his goat. As he rode on with the Carson bunch, the Kid wondered whether this trail was to peter out, without leaving a further sign, as so many had done before.

To a plainsman's eye, it was easy to read where the herd had slowed down, controlled at last by the whips and voices of the rustlers, as they grew fatigued with their wild rush. The hills were still a couple of miles distant when Buck Wilson and his men could read that the cows had been ambling on at a loping walk, under control. No longer could they read sign of hurried, thudding hoofs—it was now the trail of an ordinary cattle-drive. At long last, the rustlers had mastered the stampede, as the herd grew weary, and it had been herded on its way at a moderate pace.

And then—suddenly—the trail ended.

All the bunch had been expecting it, the Rio Kid had been expecting it, from what he had seen before of the work of the Judson gang; and yet it came as a surprise, so strange was it.

Up to a certain point, the trampled trail, though not so deep as at first, was clearly marked: plain traces were hundreds of hoofs had trod. Beyond that point—nothing! Nothing but waving grass to north, to east—and on the west, thinner grass on harder soil that rose in waves and ridges to the low hills. The tracks did not turn back to the south. They did not lead on to the north or west or east. They ceased.

"Shucks!" said the Kid.

Buck Wilson swore savagely.

"I reckoned it would be the same game agin!" he said. "How them coyotes blanket the trail of a herd of steers beats me to a frazzle. But they've done us agin."

The Kid slid from the back of his mustang.

He examined the trail, as he had examined a similar mysterious trail a few days before, when he had picked up, among the cow tracks, the track of a man who limped—the track of Steve Carson.

Now there were no foot-tracks to be seen: only the trail of the cows and the rustlers' horses. And the trail ended.

The whole bunch dismounted to pick up sign. They picked up none, and they gathered in a group, expressing their disappointment in picturesque language. But the Kid was still busy. From what he had already learned of the rustlers, he knew that their camp was in the hills, the Sierra Baja that barred the horizon on the west. It was to the hills that the stolen herd had been driven. But what line had they taken—at what point had they struck the hills?

It was futile to ride on into the hills in the hope of picking up sign. Such a search might have lasted for weeks on end with no result.

The Kid scanned the trail, sorely

puzzled and irritated. The Kid knew the trailer's art to a finish; he hated to be beaten, and never yet had he been beaten at picking up sign on the open llana. But it seemed that the rustlers of the Rio Bajo were to beat him.

He came back at last to the group of waiting punchers. Two or three of them had mounted and ridden off, to round up cows that had wandered from the stolen herd, and that could be found and driven in by searching the grasslands. The others were watching the Kid rather sarcastically. They liked the Kid, and his frank and cheery ways, and they were all his friends; but they did not opine that a kid puncher from Texas could pick up any sign to which they were blind. The rustlers had beaten them, as they had beaten them a score of times before, and that was all there was to it.

"They're sure smart Alocs, that crowd!" the Kid remarked, as he joined the punchers. "They've got us beat."

"You, too!" grinned Laramie Bill. "I reckoned you was coming back to tell us which way to ride, kid."

"They don't know everything in Texas, arter all!" remarked Jake Sanders, and there was a chuckle from the bunch.

The Kid laughed good-humouredly. "I guess we don't come over from Texas to learn things about trailing in New Mexico," he said. "But I don't claim to know more than any galoot present."

"You ain't picked up any more tracks of a galoot with a limp?" asked Buck Wilson sarcastically.

The Kid looked at him. "Nope!" he answered. "I wasn't looking for them, neither; I guess that galoot with a limp wasn't in the show last night. But I've figured it out that the cattle went to the hills—"

"I guess we know that," said Buck. "They'd hide in the hills nat'ral. But where? The Sierra Baja is fifty miles long, and anything from five to ten across. Like to go over it on your hands and knees lookin' for sign?"

"And they went in single file," said the Kid.

There was a general exclamation. "Oh, carry me home to die!" roared Laramie Bill. "You allow them cows went in single file, like a war-party of Injuns in the old days."

"Sure!"

"Who ever heard of driving cows in single file?" yelled Jake Sanders. "I guess if you'd heard of it you'd have got wise to this afore," said the Kid coolly. "Them cows went in single file, I keep on telling you. When the rustlers got them in hand they sorted them out and lined them up, and drove them away in a single file one after another."

"And how do you figure that out?" asked Buck Wilson, eyeing the boy puncher curiously, while the rest of the bunch roared.

"I reckon it's hoss-sense," said the Kid. "They've blanketed the trail; and no man on earth could blanket the trail of a herd of cows running promiscuous. But I reckon if the cows went one after another in single file, they could blanket the trail. I tell you, every dog-goned cow in that bunch was walked off single-roped, I guess, and made to walk steady, and that's how they was able to blind the trail behind them."

Buck gave a low whistle. "Stirr'n' up the grass where they'd trod, and so on?" he asked. "Injun tricks?"

"That, or some other stunt I ain't

cottoned on to yet," said the Kid. "Some other stunt, I reckon. I've followed a trail in Texas that an Apache had stirred up behind him, and I reckon I could do the same here. It's some other game, and a durned deep game, I'm telling you. That's how they've been able to work this ranch for three years on end and never get pushed to a show-down. I've got a sorter idee at the back of my head, too, but it don't seem to figger out. But I'll get on to it, I tell you sure."

"If we wait till you do, I reckon the boss will want to know what has become of this bunch," grinned Laramie Bill.

"I ain't asking you to hang on, am I?" said the Kid. "Mount and ride, and leave me to it. I guess I'm getting my teeth into this, and I ain't letting go till I've bit to the bone."

The punchers looked at Buck Wilson. The foreman of the Carson Ranch wrinkled his brows in thought. "Hang on a piece!" he said.

Careless whether they stayed or went, the Rio Kid returned to the trail and resumed his examination of it and of the trackless prairie on either side of the trampled trail.

The bunch stayed. Some of them moved about looking for sign, though with little hope. The rest waited for Buck Wilson to give the order to ride. But the foreman did not give the order. He leaned on his saddle and watched the Kid in silence. Twenty times at least during the past two or three years bunches of cattle had been driven off the Carson ranges, and every time a blind trail had been left and pursuit had been beaten. How it was done no man on the ranch knew—unless it was Steve Carson, who was not likely to tell. But the Kid had, as he said, his teeth in it now, and he was going to worry it through. From the point



The range rustlers thought they were safe from detection—but that's where they made the biggest mistake of their lives. For the Rio Kid is on the trail after them, and when the Kid starts a trail he never lets up till he's made a capture!

where the blind trail ended the Kid moved towards the hills, never at rest, stooping, rising, running, stooping again, staring across the grass under the shade of his hand, unconscious now of the watching punchers, only concentrated on the work of penetrating the mystery of the blind trail.

And suddenly the Kid straightened up, and waved his hand and whooped.

"Gee-whiz!" With a rush the punchers swept down on him. Buck Wilson was the first to reach the Kid.

"What you got?" he panted. "The goods!" answered the Rio Kid.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Tracked Down!

THE Kid's eyes were dancing. Seldom had the boy puncher felt so elated as he felt now. Sheer patience and hard thought had beaten the problem he had been up against, and he had the clue in his hands. He was sure now that he had penetrated the mystery that had baffled the Carson outfit for years on end.

But the punchers gazed at him blankly after a swift glance round. The grassy ground told them nothing at this spot, a hundred yards from the trampled trail of the stampede.

"You got the goods?" repeated Buck.

"Sure!"

"Spill it!" grunted Laramie Bill. The Kid smiled.

"Look!" he said.

In the soft grassy earth, close by where the Kid stood, was an indentation. It was not a deep track, but it was a track; and once the attention of the punchers was directed to it they knew what it was well enough. The forefoot of a cow had trodden there; every man in the bunch knew that, and they stared curiously at it. For there was no other track of a cow anywhere near, and that single track of a single hoof was strange and uncanny.

"Shucks!" muttered Laramie Bill. "I guess this gets me heat! I want to know how a cow trod there on one foot?"

"I guess I'll put you wise, then," grinned the Kid. "The cow trod there with one foot, old-timer, because the other three were on something that kept that pesky cow from leaving tracks."

"How the thunder—"

"Look at it," said the Kid. "Here we are the length of half a dozen ropes from the trail, to the west of it—making for the hills. That cow wasn't carried so far on a man's shoulders, was it? That cow walked without leaving a track. That was because it walked on something spread over the grass to stop the tracks. But leetle accidents will happen when a gang are driving a herd in single file with a hundred head to handle. I guess they was mighty careful and spry not to leave more sign than this. Jest here that cow put one foot off'n the thing, whatever it was, jest for one step. But that was enough to leave this sign."

"Gee!" said Buck Wilson. He drew a deep breath.

"But what you reckon they put down for a long file of a hundred cows to walk over, Kid?" he asked.

"Search me!" said the Kid. "I guess it wasn't their blankets. I've known a couple of Injuns to blind a trail by puttin' down their blankets an' walkin' on them, one after another, and pickin' them up, and so on; but they couldn't work a raffle like that with a hundred head of cows. It would take them too long. But it was somethin' of the sort; p'raps a roll of blanket stuff—p'raps a hundred blankets joined end on end."

"Oh, sho!"

"I figured it out that that was sure the way they worked the raffle," said the Kid. "And I sura reckoned that if a file of cows was walking one after another along a thing like that, one of

them would step aside sooner or later, spry as the drivers might be, and leave sign. And I guess that that's what's happened hyer."

Buck Wilson rubbed his bearded chin thoughtfully. It was a new idea to him, and his mind was slow to take it in. Yet it was the only way of explaining that single track of a hoof.

"If you've got it, Kid," he said, at last, "we'll sure pick up some more sign like this if we look."

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

"Spread out and look for sign, you-

had hope now, and the certainty that the secret of the trail was known. It was a matter of time and patience; and through the long, hot afternoon the bunch worked patiently.

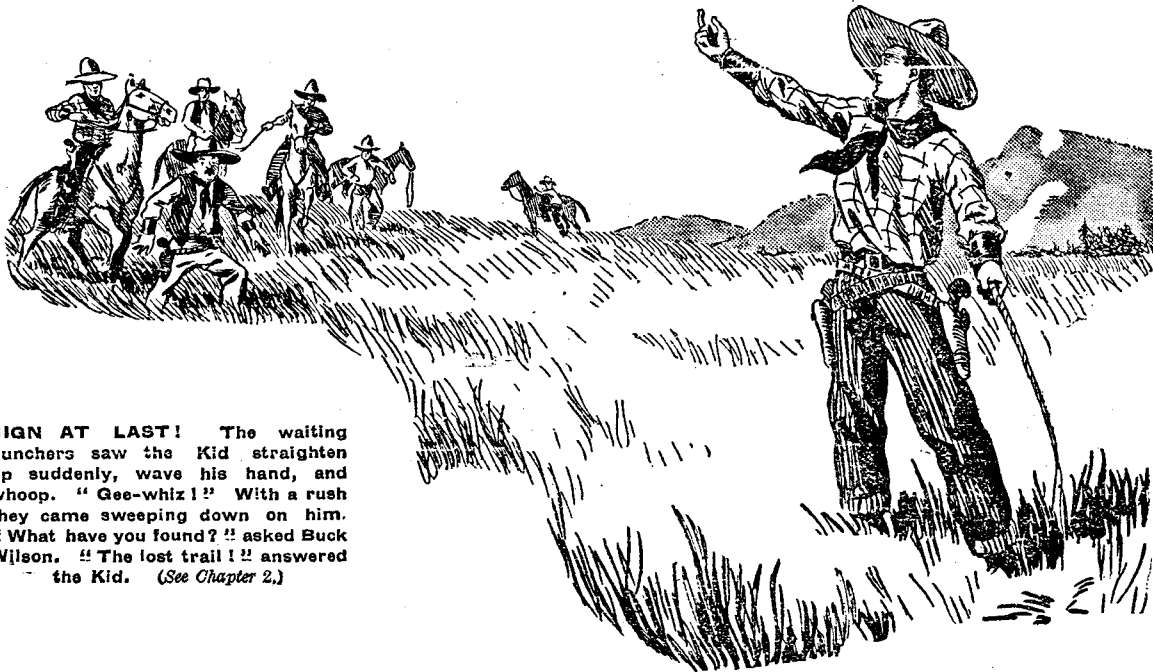
The sun was sinking over the Sierra Baja, a long day of hard trailing was drawing to its close, when the Rio Kid picked up a half-smoked cigarette from the grass. The grass was thin at this point, growing sparser on the stony soil that rose in ridges towards the foothills. The Kid held up his find, and grinned.

see for what they walked across on," answered the Kid cheerfully.

"Oh, shucks!" grunted Jake.

The Kid laughed, and proceeded to search the rocky, sloping sides of the draw. The bunch watched him impatiently; most of them grimly disappointed, under the impression that they had followed, after all, a false trail.

But the Rio Kid knew that he had not followed a false trail, and he was patient. The cows had crossed the narrow barranca, and they had not jumped it. There had been, the Kid



SIGN AT LAST! The waiting punchers saw the Kid straighten up suddenly, wave his hand, and whoop. "Gee-whiz!" With a rush they came sweeping down on him. "What have you found?" asked Buck Wilson. "The lost trail!" answered the Kid. (See Chapter 2.)

uns," said Buck. "The boss will be joining us some time, and I reckon I'd be glad to have some news for him that we're on the trail of the cows."

The punchers spread out in a wide circle, every man keen and eager. Now that the Kid had given the clue they knew what to look for. No man would have been likely to heed or observe a single track in the grassy ground, far from the trail. But now that the Kid had put his finger on the secret, they knew what to search for.

Under the blazing sun, heedless of fatigue, the search went on; and it was an hour later that Laramie Bill, at a point much nearer the hills, lifted his hand, and shouted. There was a rush to the spot, and Laramie pointed to a track—once more the hoof of a cow.

"I guess that cinches it!" said Buck Wilson. "We ain't goin' to believe that a one-legged cow was cavortin' around hyer. The critter had the other feet on a blanket, or suthin'."

"Jest that!" said the Kid.

"It's a cinch!" said Jake Sanders. "That Texas kid has put us wise, and I reckon we're on the trail at last."

"We sure are!" said Buck.

The punchers were nearer to the openings of the hills now. With eager eyes they searched, and once more a sign was picked up. The direction now was back towards the south, proving that the rustlers had not made a bee-line for the hills when they started to blanket the trail of the stolen cows.

At what point they had struck the hills still remained to be discovered, and the bunch knew that they had a long and weary task before them. But they

Ten minutes later the bunch entered a stony draw that led into the hills. Here the ground was hard and rocky.

The Kid scanned it.

"I reckon they let up on blanketing the trail hyer," he remarked. "These durned rocks wouldn't leave any sign. But I reckon for sure that we've struck the place where they drove the cows into the hills, you-uns."

"We sure have!" said Laramie Bill.

The bunch followed the draw. The hard rock bore no sign, but it was clear that if the stolen herd had been driven into the draw they had been driven through it and beyond.

But at the upper end of the draw they were stopped by a barranca—a deep fissure three feet wide in the narrowest place, that ran from side to side across the way.

"Oh, shucks!" exclaimed Laramie Bill. "That lets us out!"

"They never got cows to jump that!" said another of the punchers, shaking his head. "That's a cinch!"

"They wouldn't have come this way, with that durned barranca to stop the cows!" said Jake Sanders.

The Kid grinned.

"I guess they came this way, jest because that durned barranca was there," he answered. "I guess" they figure that any moss-head who got on the trail would let up when he got to that hole in the ground, reckoning that cows never jumped it, for sure."

"Then how did they get the cows across, durn your hide?" demanded Jake warmly. "Mean to say that a cow could be got to jump it?"

"Nope! I reckon I'm going to look-

opined, some sort of a bridge, and he was searching for a sign of it.

He leaped across the barranca, and a few minutes later disappeared behind a thick screen of stunted pines and trailing juniper that grew against a wall of rock.

Then his shout was heard.

"This-a-way, you-uns!"

"What's he got now?" grunted Jake.

Buck Wilson hurried after the Kid, and the bunch followed. They joined him behind the screen of pines and creepers. He was standing in an opening of the rocky wall—a narrow cave that ran back for a dozen feet, widening farther on in the cliff.

"I guess we've got the goods!" grinned the Kid.

"Gee-whiz!"

On the stony earth lay a wooden gangway, with side-rails, built of pinewood, and roped together. Evidently it was the bridge that had been used across the barranca. But that was not all.

Farther on in the cave were four great rolls of blankets. The Kid had jerked loose the end of one, revealing a number of wide, thick blankets sewn end to end, like a roll of carpet.

"Gee!" said Buck Wilson, with a deep breath. "Gee! This sure cinches it, fellers!"

"It sure does!" said Jake. "I guess I take off my hat to you, Texas!"

The Kid laughed.

"I reckon they left their fixings here, ready for next time," he remarked. "It was sure a pesky deep game. They unrolled them blankets and walked the

(Continued on page 27.)

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THE SECRET OF THE LOST TRAIL!

(Continued from page 15.)

cows along them from where we lost the trail right to that draw. It was sure a spry galoot that worked out a stunt like that; and I guess he got away with it all right, as you 'uns tell me that they've been working the Carson ranges for three years on end, and no galoot ever got on their track all that time."

"I guess the boss will be jumpin' for joy when he lights on this," said Buck Wilson. "We've got them rustlers now. It was a lucky day for this bunch when you moseyed on to the Carson range, Kid Carfax. Git on with it; I reckon we ain't fur behind them scallywags now."

Leaving the cave and the barranca behind, the bunch pursued their way into the hills. In the sinking sunlight shadows were lengthening, and every man in the bunch was fatigued. But they did not think of fatigue now. The secret of the lost trail was discovered at last, and they were on the track of Scar-Face Judson and his gang. And it was soon evident that once in the pathless hills, the rustlers had been less careful in the matter of leaving sign. There were no tracks on the rocky soil; but the Kid picked up a burnt match and a cigarette-end, and Laramie Bill found a half-smoked cigar; and at a creek in a deep canyon there were ample signs where the cows had stopped to drink.

At that point the rustlers had not doubted that they were far beyond the possibility of trailing. From the creek the bunch pressed on up the canyon, every man keeping his gun at hand now, for it was more than likely that they were drawing near to the spot where the stolen cows had been halted at the headquarters of the rustlers.

And suddenly, as they rode round a

bend of the winding canyon, a Stetson hat bobbed into view, and a man who was leaning idly against a rock reached for the rifle that stood beside him and gripped it.

"Hands up!" roared the Kid. His six-gun bore full on the startled rustler, his eyes blazed over the levelled barrel.

For a second the man gripped the rifle; then he let it drop at his feet, and lifted his hands above his head.

"Keep 'em up!" said the Kid grimly, as he rode closer. "And if you let out a howl, hombre, it will be the last yaup you give on this side of Jordan!"

"I guess it's your say-so!" said the rustler, shrugging his shoulders. "I ain't asking for mine."

"You've got a riata, Jake Sanders; rope up this galoot and fix him so that he can't yelp!" said the Kid.

"You bet!" grinned Jake. "I guess I know that galoot; I've sure seen him down at Bunch Grass, spreading dollars he never earned. You're in Scar-Face Judson's gang, Tennessee."

"You've got me!" answered the rustler. "I sure want to know how you hit the trail hyer. Jud allowed that no galoot ever would hit the trail to this canyon. I reckon some scallywag has squealed."

"Nobody has squealed," grinned Jake. "This kid from Texas has sure picked up the trail, Tennessee, that beat us all to a frazzle. Put your paws hyer, you pizen cow-thief!" With his riata the cowpuncher bound the rustler's hands behind his back, and then roped up his legs. "I guess we'll leave you safe when we ride on to wipe out the gang. How fur on are they now?"

"Search me!" answered Tennessee. Buck Wilson jammed the muzzle of a

six-gun under Tennessee's ear. His eyes gleamed over it.

"How fur on are the gang?" he asked grimly. "You've got jest one minute to squeal, you darned cow-thief."

"I guess you don't want to burn powder on me, foller," answered Tennessee coolly. "The camp's a quarter of a mile on if you foller the canyon—and I guess you'll catch them napping."

"You're the only man on watch?"

"Sure!"

"How many at the camp?"

"More'n a dozen."

"Stick a gag in his mouth," said Buck. "We'll ride on; and if we find another man on the watch, you put a bullet through this galoot's head before you come on and jine up, Jake."

"Sure!"

"Hyer, hang on!" gasped Tennessee. "There's sure another galoot on guard, now I remember; you'll find him at a bunch of pines half-way to the camp. I sure disremembered for a minute."

"I guess you've remembered in time to save your life, you skunk!" said the ranch foreman. "Stick a chunk of rope in his jaws! I guess we'll get the other man quiet if we can—"

"Leave him to me," said the Kid. "You 'uns wait here a piece." He slipped from his horse and disappeared up the winding canyon.

It was a quarter of an hour later that the Rio Kid came back, in the thickening shadows of the falling night. There was a grin on his face as he rejoined the bunch.

"You got him, Kid?" asked Buck. "I reckon he never knew what hit him," answered the Kid coolly. "The way's clear now. Ride!"

And the bunch pressed on up the rocky canyon, every man with a gun in his hand, for the camp of the rustlers.

(How will this gallant band of punchers fare against the desperate range rustlers? See next week's topping long complete Western yarn, entitled: "ROUNDING UP THE RUSTLERS!" by Ralph Redway. It's packed full of breathless adventure!)



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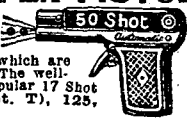
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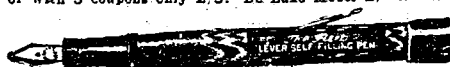
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THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Camp of the Rustlers!

"CORRALLED!" murmured the Rio Kid.

A silver crescent of moon was rising over the Sierra Baja of New Mexico. It gleamed through clustering pines into a wide, deep canyon in the heart of the hills.

The canyon split the hills east and west, and on the southern side was a deep embayment—a vast hollow in the wall of cliff. Shut in on three sides by circling walls of cliffs, topped by nodding pines, the space covered an extent of a dozen acres. Where it was open to the canyon a deep and wide stream flowed, one of the head-waters of the Rio Bajo, rippling and murmuring on its way down to the plains. The Rio Kid, looking across the glimmering stream that was turned to silver by the rising moon, could see huts of pinewood, fenced corrals, and more cows than he could count. And the Kid grinned as he looked.

He was looking at the headquarters of Judson's gang, the rustlers of the Rio Bajo. He was looking, also, at the herd of cows that had been rustled from the Carson Ranch. Step by step, sign by sign, the Rio Kid had trailed the rustlers to their den, through the trackless wilds of the untrodden hills, and now he had reached his goal, or almost reached it. By barren rock and stony ways he had come; but across the stream where the rustlers had their camp was one of the fertile spots that were to be found in the recesses of the arid sierra. Watered by the stream, rich grass grew, dotted with clumps of cedars and pecans, with here and there a great ceiba spreading its mighty branches. Well had Scar-Face Judson chosen the spot for his camp, hidden in the very heart of the trackless hills, approached by a trail known only to the rustlers' gang—until the Rio Kid had found it. Two hundred head of cows were feeding in that pasture of the sierra—cows that had been driven from the Carson ranges by a hidden trail. Among the huts the Kid could see figures moving.

Keeping in cover by the bank of the stream, the Kid watched the camp for long minutes. The spot was well chosen for defence, as well as for pasture and concealment. Attack could only come across the stream that barred in the

rustlers' camp, and it had to come in the open, under fire from the rustlers' rifles. To rush that camp was, the Kid knew, a tough proposition, even for a strong force. But if attack on the camp was difficult, escape for the rustlers was impossible, so long as the northern bank of the stream was held by their enemies. The Kid was right when he pronounced that the ranch raiders were "corralled."

The Rio Kid, carefully in cover, crept back the way he had come. Beyond a jutting cliff, where the winding canyon made a bend, waited Buck Wilson and ten punchers of the Carson Ranch. They were waiting, out of sight of the rustlers' camp, till the Kid came back to report.

"I guess it's O.K., fellers," said the Kid cheerily. "The camp's jest ahead, and I guess the scallywags is to home. We've got them cinched—cows and all. But I reckon if they'd seen us coming they could have picked us off like so many prairie rabbits."

"They ain't seen us coming," said Buck.

"They sure ain't!" agreed the Kid. "We got the man on watch down below, and I sure gave that galoot in the pines a sockdolager from my butt that will keep him asleep till morning. If there'd been a shot fired I reckon they'd have made some vacancies in this bunch. Now we've got them dead to rights—but you'll sure want a bigger crowd than this to handle them, Buck."

"We're a dozen," grunted Laramie Bill. "We sure can handle a crowd of cow-thieves, Kid."

"I guess they're more'n a dozen, and they've got good cover," said the Kid. "You wait till you see how they're fixed, feller."

"We ain't trailed them a whole day to let up at the finish!" said Buck Wilson. "We're sure going to wipe out that gang, Kid, now we've got on to their hiding-place."

"Wipe out nothing!" said the Kid. "I tell you you want a bigger bunch than this, and you'll have to send back to the ranch for every man they can spare. But you can sure keep them from making a break till you've got the men to handle them, and that's good enough."

And the Kid, in a few words, explained the position of the raiders' camp. Buck listened and nodded.

"We've got them cinched," he said. "We can keep them penned in their camp till we get all the help we want. Stake the hesses here, you-uns, and come on. Keep in cover—Judson and his gang will shoot to kill when they see hide or hair of us. This means a long stretch in the pen for all the gang that ain't strung up. Watch out!"

Leaving the tethered horses, the Carson bunch trod forward on foot, round the bend of the winding canyon.

Along the bank of the stream were trees and rocks that afforded plenty of cover.

Buck Wilson grinned with satisfaction as he noted the position of the camp.

Attack needed all the force that the ranchers could draw upon; but to keep the rustlers penned in their camp, to prevent them from making a break to escape, was easy for the dozen punchers who had trailed them down.

Buck muttered orders, and the bunch spread out along the bank of the stream, rifle in hand, keeping in cover of rock and boulder and bush. There was no sign or sound of alarm from Judson's gang. Two men had been on the watch; one far down in the lower canyon, the other in a bunch of pines only a few hundred yards away. Both of them were silent—one bound and gagged, the other stunned by the Rio Kid's butt. Had the alarm been given, there were a dozen points where the advance up the canyon could have been stopped by a handful of riflemen. But no alarm had been given—the Rio Kid had taken care of that. And now it was too late—the punchers had passed the last danger-point, and their position was as good as that of the rustlers—in cover of rock and bush, with the wide stream flowing between the two hostile parties.

"We've got the scallywags!" grinned Buck. "We've got Judson's gang where we want 'em. Kid, I reckon your mustang is the fastest cayuse in the bunch—"

"He sure is!" assented the Kid. "Ride back to the ranch hell for leather and give the news to Colonel Carson. Tell him how we're fixed, and put him wise. I reckon he won't lose time in bringing up every man that can be spared from the ranges. Hit the trail, feller, pronto."

"Bang!

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The report of a rifle awoke a thousand echoes in the canyon, thundering back from rock and pine.

A bullet whizzed within a foot of Buck's Stetson hat as he dodged closer into cover.

"I reckon they seen us!" he remarked coolly.

The Kid peered from behind the rock. The rustlers were in alarm at last. The Kid caught a glimpse of a powerful man with a thick beard and a deep scar on his cheek. It was Scar-Face Judson, the chief of the rustlers of the Rio Bajo. Among the huts back at the rocky wall men were running and shouting. Shot after shot followed the first report.

Crack, crack, crack! rang along the stream. The bunch were firing on the camp now across the water. Bullets searched into the huts and whizzed by running, dodging figures.

"I guess the circus is jest beginning," said Buck. "We've got them dead to rights if they try to cross the creek—jest as they've got us if we rush them. Tell the colonel that we can hold them for a month of Sundays, Kid, and that if he wants to corral Judson's gang to the last cow-thief, he's only got to bring up twenty punchers."

"You bet!" said the Kid. He returned to the spot where the horses were picketed, mounted the black-muzzled mustang, and rode away down the hills. Behind him, as he rode, he could hear the thunderous echoes of incessant rifle-fire. But the sounds died away in silence at last far behind, and the Kid rode under the moonlight in silence, save for the clatter of the mustang's hoofs on the rocky earth.

THE SECOND CHAPTER. Saddle Up!

COLONEL CARSON stood in the doorway of the rancho, staring out across the dim plains that glimmered in the crescent of moon. The rancher's face was anxious, as he listened to the sound of galloping far out on the plains, that told of the coming of a single horseman. Since that day, the foreman of the ranch and his men had been out on the hunt for the rustlers, with the Rio Kid in the bunch. Two or three punchers had come in, driving cows that had been rounded up on the prairie, lost from the herd the rustlers had driven the night before. They brought the news that Buck Wilson and the bunch had gone into the hills, and since then there had been no news. The rancher's anxiety was keen. Hunting for the rustlers in the hills, without a trail, was like hunting for a needle on a haystack, and there was danger of ambush, and of pot-shooting from cover. It was a relief to the rancher to hear a horseman galloping back to the ranch, and he hoped that it meant news of the bunch, but he was not at all sure that it would be good news.

Gallop, gallop!

From afar, in the silence of the night, came the echoing thud of rapid hoofs. Outside the bunkhouse, of which the windows shone with light, a dozen punchers stood in a group, watching for the rider to appear from the shadows of the prairie.

Gallop, gallop!

But the rider was still far away, as yet, hidden in the dimness of the moonlight and the waving grass.

There was a step beside the colonel, and Steve Carson joined him. The rancher's nephew was smoking a cigarette. There was a lurking grin on his face, which died away as the rancher turned to him.

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"I guess it's news, Steve," said the colonel. "I reckon that will be a man that Buck's sent back with news."

"News that they can't find a trail, I guess," said Steve.

The rancher gnawed his grey moustache.

"More likely than not, I reckon," he admitted. "Twenty times or more that gang have run off cows from the ranges, and every time they've blanketed their trail, somehow, and we've had to give it up. But Santa Fe Sam brought in word that Buck had gone into the hills with the bunch. That looks as if he may have picked up some sign."

Steve shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess not!" he said. "The rustlers have never left sign before, and they ain't likely to begin now. Unless you figure that that kid puncher from Texas knows more than the whole bunch about trailing!" he added, with a sneer. "I guess it's a sure cinch that that Texas galoot is a rustler himself."

"He's proved that he's no rustler, Steve," said the rancher sharply. "I guess you want to forget your trouble with him. He's as good a man as any in the bunch."

Steve Carson set his teeth hard, and made no rejoinder. He was not likely to forget his enmity to the Rio Kid. He suspected—more than suspected—that the Kid knew he was in league with the rustlers. The colonel gave him a sharp glance.

"You're prejudiced against that puncher, Steve. He picked up sign of a man with a limp on the trail of the stolen cows, and told the outfit. He'd never seen you, and never knew you had a limp. You can't reckon that he figured you were in cahoots with the rustlers—you, my nephew, and a Carson! You acted as if he accused you."

"I reckon that was in his mind," growled Steve.

"Nothing of the kind—though he might sure have fancied so, when you pulled on him," snapped the colonel. "You sure ain't the only rider in New Mexico that's had his leg hurt in a stampede, Steve, and Kid Carfax had never seen you when he told the outfit what he had picked up on the trail."

There was a shout from the bunkhouse.

"That's the Kid coming, boss!"

The colonel stared out into the moonlight, at the dim figure of a horseman that was now in view in the moonlight. He recognised the Rio Kid. Steve recognised him, also, and his hand dropped on the gun in his belt.

Colonel Carson grasped his arm.

"Drop that, Steve! You draw on that puncher, and you'll have to deal with me!"

Steve relinquished his gun.

"I reckon I'll meet up with him some other time," he said sullenly. "It's shooting between us two, I guess, but he will keep."

With a clatter of hoofs, the Rio Kid dashed up. He drew in his foaming mustang before the rancho, and leaped from the saddle. There was a rush of the punchers across from the bunkhouse to hear the news he brought. The Kid swept off his Stetson to the colonel, taking no heed of the sullen-faced Steve lounging at his side. But he had an eye on the rancher's nephew all the same, and had Steve risked his uncle's wrath, and pulled a gun, the Kid would not have been taken by surprise. But Steve Carson stood sullenly with his hands in his pockets, staring at the boy puncher from Texas, with a sneer on his lips.

"What's the news, Carfax?" called out the colonel eagerly.

"I guess it's good, boss."

"Where's Buck and the bunch?"

"In the sierra," answered the Kid.

"I guess they ain't picked up nary trail of the rustlers," said Santa Fe Sam.

The Kid laughed.

"That's where you miss your guess, feller," he answered. "Judson's gang have been trailed home, and Buck's got them cinched in a canyon in the hills—the whole gang of the ornery coyotes, and a big bunch of stolen cows along with them."

The colonel uttered an exclamation. It was echoed by his nephew, who started forward, his face white, his eyes burning, as he fixed them on the Kid. "You lie!" shouted Steve Carson hoarsely. "You lie, you durned cow-thief from Texas. The bunch never picked up Judson's trail."

The Kid eyed him coolly.

"The news sure seems to have made you mighty sick, feller," he remarked.

"And, I tell you, it's the goods—we've got them, whether you like it or not, Steve Carson. And, I reckon, if you give a Texas cowpuncher the lie, you galoot, you got to back it up with a gun."

The Kid's gun was out as he was speaking, his eyes blazing over it at the rancher's nephew. In another second, Steve would have drawn his Colt. But Colonel Carson strode between.

"Stop!" he thundered. "Steve, put up your gun! You, Carfax—"

"I guess I aint hunting trouble, boss," said the Kid cheerily, as he slid the six-gun back into the holster, still with a wary eye on the rancher's nephew, however. "But I sure never did take that sort of talk from any two-legged galoot alive."

"I reckon you're loco, Steve!" exclaimed the colonel angrily. "You pull that gun again, or shoot off your mouth like that, and you're done with this ranch for keeps."

The young man muttered sullenly under his breath. Colonel Carson turned to the Kid again.

"You've got it straight?" he asked.

"Sure!" smiled the Kid. "The bunch found out how them rustlers blanketed their trail, and followed them into the hills, and they've got the ornery coyotes corralled. Buck allows that he can hold them in their camp till the cows come home, and if you can hustle along with twenty men to help, you can sure make a clean sweep of the gang that's been rustling your ranges for three years on end."

The rancher's eyes gleamed.

"That's sure good news," he said. "Which of the bunch was it picked up the lost trail that's never been picked up before?"

The Kid grinned.

"Put it down to little me," he answered. "I sure guess it was a galoot about my heft. But that ain't what's the matter with Hanner. I reckon we want to mount and ride, boss, and we shall hit the bunch in the hills by dawn."

"Sure! I'll give orders at once. Santa Fe Sam, call the boys together—rope in every man that can handle a gun."

"You bet, boss!"

The Rio Kid sat outside the bunkhouse, to stretch his legs, and get what rest he could before the bunch started. The cook brought him food and a can of steaming coffee. Men were saddling and bridling horses, looking to their guns; every man at the ranch was wildly excited and eager. From all quarters men were called in to join in the ride; and in a very short time twenty horse-

men paraded before the rancho. A man brought the colonel's horse; and another was held for Steve Carson. But the rancher's nephew had gone into the house, and the colonel looked round for him in vain.

"Steve!" he shouted. The young man appeared in the doorway, sullen and scowling. The Kid, over his steaming coffee at the bunk-house, looked across at him as he came out to the group of horsemen. The Kid surely did not want Steve Carson to ride with the party. He knew, if no one else knew, that Steve was hand-in-glove with Scar-Face Judson and his gang, and the Kid did not want a traitor in the ranks. But it was useless to tell the rancher what he knew—Gilbert Carson never would or could have believed it. Neither was the Kid keen to tell him, knowing what a blow such news would be to the proud old rancher.

"Steve! You're riding with us?" exclaimed the colonel, bending his grey brows severely on his nephew.

"I reckon I've no hunch to ride with that fresh young cuss from Texas!" answered Steve sulkily.

"Are you going to hang back, when we've got the rustlers cinched at last?" exclaimed Colonel Carson. "Buck's sent us word that every man's wanted to handle them. Are you going to lie doggo while other men are facing the music?"

Steve Carson flushed red under the looks of the cowpunchers. But he still hesitated. His motive was not one that he could explain to his uncle, though the Kid understood it well enough. He was in league with the rustlers; the news that their secret camp in the sierra Baja had been discovered had come like a thunderbolt to him. To ride against the cow-thieves with whom he was in league was not what the rancher's nephew wanted.

"I guess we're ready, boss," said Santa Fe Sam. "Mount your cayuse, Steve!" said Colonel Carson harshly. "Do you want the outfit to reckon that a Carson has got cold feet?"

"I'm ready." Steve Carson mounted. The Rio Kid laid down the coffee-can, and walked across to his mustang. Led by the Kid, the bunch galloped away from the Carson ranch; and under the glimmer of the moonlight the thundering hoofs awoke the echoes of the prairie.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The End of the Trail!

THERE was a gleam of dawn in the east when the Carson outfit reached the hills and rode into the rocky draw. The Rio Kid was riding ahead, guiding the outfit; by his side rode the rancher. Behind them

came the outfit, strung out irregularly. The Kid figured that Steve Carson might find a chance of missing the bunch and disappearing into the plains, during the ride to the hills; he could guess the feelings of the man who was forced to ride against the gang with whom he had been in league. But if Steve thought of making such a break he did not venture under the eyes of all the punchers.

Steve Carson was still with the party when they rode into the draw, and fell into a walk as the hoofs of the horses

and saw you with Scar-Face Judson," said the Kid.

Steve's face blanched. But he gritted his teeth, and gave the Kid a glare of defiance.

"Tell my uncle that!" he sneered. "Do you figure that he'd believe you? More likely to drive a bullet through your heart for telling him!"

"I ain't got no hunch to tell the colonel," said the Kid quietly. "I guess he's a proud man, and a white man; and it would hurt him sore to know that one of his own blood was a spy.



THE WHITE FLAG! Judson held up the flag of truce, and in cover behind the rocks, the Kid, and Buck Wilson pushed their guns forward, ready for treachery if it came. "I guess you've got us beat, rancher!" said the leader of the rustlers. (See Chapter 4.)

rang and echoed on hard rocks and loose stones. The Kid glanced round once or twice, and met the bitter eyes of the rancher's nephew.

From the draw they rode into the wild hills, trackless, barren, desolate in the rising light of day. But trackless as the way seemed, the Rio Kid was at no loss. Without a halt or a moment's hesitation, he led on, and the outfit followed.

It was not till they were in the canyon a mile below the rustlers' camp that the Kid found what he wanted—a chance of speaking to the rancher's nephew unheard by the rest. Steve was riding a little apart, when the Kid pulled to his side, and spoke in a low voice.

"You want to beat it!" he muttered. "I reckon if you was to let on that your cayuse had fallen lame, you'd get away with it."

Steve gave him a savage look. "What do you mean?" he snarled. "What are you hinting at, you durned Texas cow-thief!"

The Kid's eyes glinted at the epithet; but he kept cool.

"Hintin' nothin'," he answered. "I reckon you're wise to it that I've sized you up. You're in cahoots with the rustlers."

"You lie!" hissed Steve. "I reckon I was trailing you the day you tried to shot me up on the prairie,

and a traitor and a partner to cow-thieves. I ain't spilling nothing to the colonel. But it's the straight goods, and you know it. You're in cahoots with the cattle-thieves; and you can't help them any now; and if you try to help them while I'm around, I'll sure drive a ball through your cabeza, like I would through a cougar's. Your best play is to drop out of the rookus and stand clear!"

Without waiting for a reply, the Kid moved aside, and rode to rejoin the colonel, who was pressing on up the rugged canyon ahead.

Steve Carson cast a bitter look after him; and his hand strayed to his gun. But he did not venture to draw it.

And, in spite of his hatred and bitterness, he knew that the Kid had given him good advice. His best play was to ride clear, if he could. And the Kid had told him how.

Steve pulled in his horse and dismounted. Santa Fe Sam, riding on from behind, called to him:

"What's wrong with the cayuse, Steve?"

"I guess he's gone lame," answered Steve. "One of them durned loose donicks, I reckon."

"Sho!" said Sam; and he rode on past the rancher's nephew, grinning.

The hot blood flooded Steve Carson's face. The puncher evidently figured that he was making a pretext to keep

clear of the fight that was coming. From one or two other punchers, as they passed, Steve received glances that made his cheeks burn. But he remained beside his horse, making a pretence of examining the animal's hoof, till the colonel rode back.

"What's the trouble, Steve?" "Cayuse gone lame," muttered the young man. "I guess I'll foller on, hoofing it."

"Hyer, one of you punchers give my nephew his horse!" called out the colonel.

Santa Fe Sam unwillingly wheeled and dismounted, and gave Steve his broncho. The rancher's nephew mounted it and rode on with his uncle. There was no evasion for him now, unless he openly disregarded the rancher and rode away; and that he did not care to do. Santa Fe Sam examined the horse's hoofs with a grim face, and then grinned, and mounted, and rode after the outfit up the canyon.

"I guess you was mistaken about this hyer cayuse, Steve!" he grinned. "He ain't lame, not worth a cent, he ain't!"

The rancher's nephew affected not to hear. He rode on with the outfit, and they came to the last bend of the canyon below the rustlers' camp. There they found Buck Wilson waiting for them; the clatter of hoofs had warned the foreman that they were coming.

"You've got them cornered, Buck?" called out the colonel eagerly.

"We sure have!" chuckled Buck. "Got them where we want 'em, boss. We've been burning a lot of powder, but I reckon there ain't much harm done yet on either side. Oh gum! I never was so glad to see you boys—we're enough now to wipe out all the rustlers in New Mexico."

Crack, crack, crack, crack! came ringing down the canyon. Cowmen and rustlers were still firing at one another across the stream; though as the cover on both sides was good, most of the lead was wasted. But with the new day and the reinforcements from the ranch matters were to take a more decided turn.

The colonel's party dismounted and tethered their horses, and advanced on foot round the bend of the winding

canyon. This brought them within sight of the rustlers' encampment across the stream, and they dropped into cover as they advanced. The Rio Kid gave Steve Carson a warning look.

Whether the traitor was figuring on helping his cornered confederates, the Kid could not tell. But he knew that he, at least, was certain of a shot from cover if Steve Carson had a chance to draw a bead on him unseen. And the Kid was grimly resolved that at the first sign of treachery he would shoot the traitor dead in his tracks.

Colonel Carson stood in a bunch of pecans, scanning the position of the rustlers' camp. The whole outfit were joining in the fire now, and more than thirty repeating rifles sent a stream of bullets searching into the cover of the dozen or so rustlers, who were firing back. But there was cover in plenty in the rock-walled enclosure that formed the camp, and so far, only two or three of the rustlers had been wounded. But the heavy fire that was now poured upon them warned the rustlers that they had a strong force to deal with, and Scar-Face Judson and every member of his gang knew that the game was up, however long they might hold out. And as the colonel watched, a man with a scarred face, holding a white rag tied to the muzzle of a rifle for a flag of truce, came out of cover and advanced towards the stream. And the firing died away as Scar-Face Judson came forward to "talk turkey."

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Traitor Pays!

COLONEL CARSON stepped out into the open, facing the rustler across the stream. He eyed the scarred cow-thief with a grim face. Judson held up the flag of truce, the butt of the rifle resting on a rock. In cover, close behind the colonel, was the Rio Kid, with Buck Wilson beside him, both with guns ready to handle if there was trickery.

"I guess you've got us beat, rancher," said Judson. "I guess we're ready to talk turkey. I sure want to know the name of the galoot who squealed on us and led you here. But he will keep."

"Nobody squealed on you, you scoundrel!" said the rancher coldly. "Your trail was picked up and followed here."

"I guess that don't go," said the rustler. "There ain't a galoot in New Mexico wise to our trail."

The Rio Kid stepped out of the pecans.

"Hyer's a galoot from Texas that got wise to it, Jud," he said. "Put it down to me, you cow-stealing scallywag."

The scarred man glanced at him.

"That don't go," he said. "No galoot would never have hit the trail to this camp if some yaller coyote hadn't squealed. And I reckon I'm wise to the hound that did it, too, and savvy why the colonel ain't letting on."

The Kid grinned. Scar-Face Judson suspected that Steve Carson had betrayed him, in his fixed belief that the blanketed trail never could be picked up and followed.

"That's enough chewing the rag from you, Judson," rapped out the colonel. "If you're surrendering we're here to take you. If you're fighting it out there's thirty men along this water, corraling you, and I guess we'll get you. And if we want more help we'll get a hundred men in a couple of days from the other ranches down the Rio Bajo. Your game's up."

"I'm sure wise to that," said the rustler. "I'm hyer to talk turkey. We've got two hundred of your cows, and now we're trailed down we're ready to hand them over and quit the game for good, and ride clear of the Carson ranges. Give us two hours' start to ride for Mexico and we quit."

The colonel laughed contemptuously. "Every man will go down to Bunch Grass, and then to prison," he answered. "It's five years each, at least, for every man in your gang, Judson, and the man who shot Tommy Tucker on his range will be strung up out of hand. They're the best terms you'll get. Hand over the galoot who shot Tommy Tucker and we'll let the rest live to serve their sentences. But if we have to fight it to a finish I guess there won't be a scallywag in your crowd that will see the sun rise to-morrow."

"The man that shot up Tommy Tucker ain't here," grinned Judson. "The dog-goned galoot that shot

"Why didn't you give him in charge, sir?" asked Watson.

"Because he is Mason's uncle, and we must consider the lad," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "I fancy he will think twice before resorting to any further tricks of this sort. Come, boys!"

We entered the passage again, and found Jack Mason still in the parlour. He had recovered his composure by this time, and thanked Nelson Lee quietly for coming to his rescue.

Nelson Lee gave the landlady five shillings for damages to the door—which really amounted to about tuppence. After that we all got into the motor-car and went sedately home.

There is one other little point. Mason, upon being asked about the sealed package, told Nelson Lee that it had been left behind by Mr. Strong. And the gov'nor suggested that it should be left in his charge—a suggestion which Jack eagerly consented to. He felt that it would be safer with Nelson Lee.

THE END.

(Jack Mason has been saved again, and the mysterious gold locket in a place where Grell will not be able to get it. But there's more trouble to come for the Boy from Bermuda, and all through this little trinket! See next week's topping tale of St. Frank's, entitled: "TROUBLE BREWING!")

BETRAYED BY HIS STUDY-MATE!

(Continued from page 11)

He could see that one shove would send the door flying inwards—and he shoved. As he had expected, the lock gave way in a moment. And the gov'nor strode into the room, with the rest of us piling behind.

Grell turned with a bellow of fury, which somewhat faded away when he saw who the intruders were. Jack Mason was released like a hot brick, and he staggered over to the table.

"Wot's the meanin' of this?" snarled Grell.

"You need not ask that question!" rapped out Nelson Lee. "You tricked this boy to come to you, and you were ill-using him, Mr. Grell. Mason, have you anything to say?"

"No, sir!" panted Jack.

"Has this man persecuted you at all?"

"He—he was going to take something of mine, sir," replied Jack hesitatingly. "You just came in time to prevent him."

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Thank you, sir! I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't come!"

Grell swore horribly. "He's my nephew!" he shouted, with great violence. "I'll do what I like—"

"No, Mr. Grell, you will not!" snapped Lee curtly. "Mason has told me that you were in the act of stealing some property of his. I give you just ten seconds to get out of this place!"

"Why, you—you—"

"Begad! Shall we kick him out, sir?" asked Montie eagerly.

"I'll have the law on ye—" began Grell, swearing again.

Nelson Lee made no bones about it this time. He seized the rascal by the coat-collar, ran him along the passage, and literally hurled him into the roadway. Simon Grell feared more, for he scrambled up, and tore away into the dusk for all he was worth. He disappeared round a bend in the road.

Tommy Tucker is the same pizen skunk that's put you wise to our trail, and I guess his name's—Steve Carson!"

The colonel started violently.

"You cow-stealing dog!" he shouted. "You dare—"

"Forget it!" jeered Judson. "Steve's been in our gang for more'n a year, and he's had thousands of dollars out of the game. And now he's sold us up—"

"Steve!" roared the colonel.

Steve Carson stepped out of the cover of the pecans.

His face was white as chalk, and his eyes burned from it.

"It's a lie!" he said thickly. "It's a dog-goned lie! You'll never believe that, uncle—"

"Believe it!" stormed the colonel. "I guess not! I—"

"It's the frozen truth," said Judson between his teeth. "Steve shot up Tommy Tucker because the puncher recknised him while we was driving the cows off his range. Now he's sold us up I reckon I'll see him strung up for it afore I go to the pen."

"You durned geek!" said the Kid. "Nobody's sold you up. You've been trailed hyer, you locoed moss-head, like I've told you. Ain't you got hoss-sense enough to keep you from chewing the rag this-a-way?"

"There ain't any galoot in New Mexico could have trailed us here," said Judson, "and only one man outside my bunch knew the way to this camp, and that was Steve Carson. The pizen coyote has sold us out, and I guess he's going to get his for doing it. I guess he's—"

Bang!

The rustler was still speaking when Steve Carson threw up his Colt and fired. Scar-Face Judson dropped the white flag and reeled against the rock. Bang! Bang! came two rapid shots, and both of them struck the rustler as he staggered. Steve Carson, with a face of fury, was firing as fast as he could pull the trigger before a hand could be raised to stop him. Thrice struck, the rustler staggered against the rock, but with a last effort he dragged the revolver from his belt and fired at the rancher's nephew. And Steve Carson, as he was pressing the trigger again, received the ball fairly between his eyes, and staggered back and fell.

"I guess you've got yours, you durned traitor!" panted Judson, and he fell heavily to the earth.

There was a yell of rage from the rustlers, and the firing from the camp recommenced at once. The punchers ducked into cover, but Colonel Carson stood looking down at his nephew, with a stony face, heedless of the bullets that whistled round him. He did not stir till Buck Wilson seized him by the arm and dragged him into the cover of the clump of pecans.

The rancher did not speak. He stood leaning against a tree, his face white and set. The Rio Kid glanced at him, and his glance was compassionate. He knew that the rancher knew the truth now—the truth that the Kid never would have told him. But as he looked from the pecans at the silent figure of the traitor who had paid with his life for his treachery the rancher made an effort to drive conviction from his mind.

"I guess that scallywag was lying, Buck!" he muttered.

"He sure was lying, boss!" said the foreman, with as much conviction as he could. "He sure was!"

The Rio Kid said nothing.

Before sundown the rustlers had surrendered and handed over their guns, and the outfit roped them to their horses to ride them down to Bunch Grass. Two hundred cows were rounded up and driven back to the Carson ranch. The Rio Kid rode back to the ranch with the Carson bunch, and that night he slept in the bunkhouse. But when morning came the boy puncher saddled the black-muzzled mustang to ride. On all sides he was urged to stay; there was not a man in the Carson outfit who was not his friend. But the Kid was for Texas.

A dozen punchers rode ten miles with him on his way. And when they parted, with a waving of Stetsons and a crackling of revolver-shots, the Kid waved his hand back to the friends he was leaving and rode at a gallop to the south-east for his own country.

But the Kid's sunburnt face was thoughtful as he rode.

"I guess we're heading for trouble, old hoss," he said to the grey mustang. "I reckon I'm sure an all-fired gink to

be quitting that outfit and riding for the Rio Frio, where Sheriff Watson has got a rope under his arm waiting for a galoot about my size. We're goin' to hit trouble, old hoss—we sure are!"

Then the Kid burst into a cheery laugh. His own country called him after his wanderings, and he could not turn a deaf ear to the call.

"I guess we've hit trouble before, old hoss!" he said. "We've hit it bad, and we've pulled through. It's us for Texas, and we don't give a continental red cent for all the dog-goned sheriffs between the Rio Grande and the Staked Plain!"

And the Kid rode on his way, by grassy plains and rugged hills, till New Mexico was left behind him, and his eyes danced as the mustang bore him swiftly through the wide-reaching grasslands of his own country.

THE END.

"TRAILING BACK!" is the title of the next roaring Western story, in which the Rio Kid answers the call of his own country—Texas—and in consequence falls into bad trouble again.)

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