

LIVE STORIES & ARTICLES *for*
the ADVENTURE-LOVING BOY!

The POPULAR

Week Ending
October 5th,
1929.
New Series.
No. 558.
EVERY
TUESDAY.

2^d



"IS THIS THE STATE IN WHICH YOU KEEP YOUR STUDY?"

*The Head's Surprise Visit proves
disastrous for the Rookwood Chums.*



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The New Boss of the Lazy-O!

THE little two-horse hack that ran from Pecos Bend to Packsaddle carried a single passenger. Jimmy Dace, the driver, could have told any galoot who that passenger was—or he figured that he could. He knew him as Mister Fairfax, the guy who had bought the Lazy-O Ranch at Packsaddle, and was going to take possession of his new property. And Jimmy Dace would have been as astonished as anyone to learn that the young man in the hack was more properly named Carfax, and that he had been known all through Texas as the Rio Kid.

Few, if any, would have known the Rio Kid as he lounged lazily in the rickety old hack, bumping along the trail to Packsaddle. Looking at his own face in his pocket mirror, the Kid hardly knew himself. And he reckoned that Texas sheriffs and Texas rangers would hardly get wise to him if they saw him.

The Kid had changed some. He still wore the Stetson hat, but without the band of silver nuggets that was so widely known. The silver spurs and the goatskin chaparejos were gone. The walnut-butted guns no longer swung in the low-hung holsters. The holsters were gone with the guns. Nobody, looking at "Mister Fairfax," would have guessed that he was "heeled" at all. But anyone who had known the Kid would have figured—correctly—that though his hardware was not on view it was within easy reach.

The Kid looked like a prosperous young rancher—as he was, for the time being, at least.

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were inseparable. And that was where the Kid felt the pinch hardest. He hated parting with his horse, even for a few days; he hated going afoot, and he loathed travelling on wheels. But he had marked out the game he was going to play, and he was going to play it.

Jimmy Dace, who drove the hack, was not a respectful person, as a rule, but he treated his solitary passenger, on this occasion, with marked respect. The man who had bought the Lazy-O was a man deserving of respect, for many reasons. The Lazy-O was the biggest ranch in the Packsaddle section of the Pecos country, and its long-horned herds roamed over scores of miles of rich grasslands. The Lazy-O bunch was the toughest bunch in Texas, and when they rolled into Packsaddle for a jamboree law-abiding citizens closed doors and windows and lay low till the bunch rode out again. And Jimmy Dace wondered, with deep respect, at a guy who looked little more than a boy, and who fancied that he could handle the Lazy-O bunch. Moreover, Jimmy respected wealth, and only a wealthy galoot could have bought the Lazy-O—forty thousand dollars, at the lowest figure, Jimmy reckoned, though the Lazy-O had been in the market for a long time, and, in fact, for years on end had been run by the foreman, Barney Baker, without much interference from distant proprietors. Jimmy wondered how Barney Baker would cotton to this new boss, who looked like a kid; and, privately, he opined that in buying the Lazy-O, Mister Fairfax had bought trouble.

Jimmy could have told Mister Fairfax quite a lot about his new property and its outfit, had he chosen to tell tales. He could have told him that

Barney Baker almost openly sold cattle belonging to the ranch, the proceeds of these sales going into Barney's own pocket, as every galoot in Packsaddle knew well. He could have warned him that if he worried Barney any, the Lazy-O property was more likely to interest his heirs than himself. He could have put him wise that in Packsaddle the law was chiefly the law of the man quickest on the draw, and that no sheriff within a hundred miles was likely to seek trouble with the Lazy-O bunch, if he could help it. He could, in fact, have told this handsome young rancher that in going to the Lazy-O he was most likely going to his own funeral.

But Jimmy did not tell Mister Fairfax all those things that he might have told him. It was no business of his, Jimmy reckoned, and a stranger who horned into the Packsaddle country could find things out for himself. Moreover, Jimmy was interested in figuring how long Mister Fairfax was likely to live after horning in. No insurance company would have taken on Mister Fairfax, at any price, on Jimmy Dace's estimation of his probable length of life.

But the young guy in the hack evidently did not know what a thorny trail he had started on. He seemed quite cheery and satisfied.

That certainly was the case. Except for parting with Side-Kicker, the Rio Kid was quite enjoying his new venture.

Rangers and sheriffs had been hot on the Kid's track. The boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had been hunted hard. He had been cornered in the Mal Pais, and the sheriff of Plug Hat had almost cinched him. By llano and sierra they had hunted the Rio Kid, and the Kid reckoned that it was time for him to disappear altogether. In a safe place the Kid had tucked away the fortune he had won in the Arizona gold-mines long ago. Much of it was gone, for the Kid was careless in such matters; but much remained—plenty for the boy

THE RIO KID—RANCHER!

By RALPH REDWAY

To own a ranch, and be lord and master over a gang of punchers, has always been the secret ambition of the Rio Kid, Boy Outlaw. At last comes the golden opportunity of realizing his dream, and the Kid is not slow in taking it.

outlaw's new venture. And there was something in this stunt that appealed to the Kid's sense of humour. They looked for him in the llano and the sierra, by mountain and plain they hunted him, but they were not likely to look for him bossing the biggest ranch in the Packsaddle country.

He had discarded his distinctive attire, he had parted, for a time, with Side-Kicker, he dressed like a rancher instead of a puncher, and he sported a little moustache, which made him look both older and different; and he did not figure that he was likely to be recognised. And Packsaddle was a far cry from the Rio Frio country, where he was best known. And the fact that it was a district that sheriffs disliked, out of regard for their health, recommended it to the Rio Kid. What was not healthy for sheriffs was likely to be all the healthier for the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande.

So the Kid smiled cheerily as he sat in the two-horse hack, bumping over a trail that was good for horsemen, but had never been made for wheels. He looked out on the Packsaddle country and liked it. It was a rich and well-watered country, abounding in rich grass, good feed for cattle, and little streams, rolling plains, fringed by belts of post-oak and pocan, deep coulees, where the rain gathered. The Kid figured that the Packsaddle herds would not thirst, even if all the rest of Texas was dry. And he was master of hundreds of acres of this rich country, which was a pleasant thought to the boy puncher, who had punched cows on the Double-Bar, in the Frio country, and who, like all punchers, had dreamed of having a ranch of his own some day. Now he had it, and he figured that life was going to be good.

Herds of cattle dotted the rolling prairie, through which the stage-trail ran. Several times the Kid sighted some puncher, riding his broncho knee-deep in grass, and his heart warmed to the sight. This, he told himself with a grin, was better than the Mal Pais and shooting up the rangers.

A slackening of speed, as Jimmy Dace pulled in his horses, caused the Kid to put his head out and glance at the driver.

"Say, we ain't hitting Packsaddle yet?" he asked.

"Nope."

"What are you pulling in for?"

Jimmy Dace gestured with his whip. "I guess there's two guys ahead who want to chew the rag with somebody," he answered.

The Kid glanced along the trail.

Two horsemen had pulled out from the plains, and sat in their saddles directly in the way of the hack. Punchers, they looked to the Kid, riders in chaps, with hard-bitten, reckless faces—punchers, the Kid figured, of a tough brand. They touched no weapon, but they plainly meant to stop the hack, and the Kid, scenting trouble, slid his hand down to where the walnut-

butted gun had once swung in the holster. Then he grinned, as his hand found nothing hanging by the well-fitting cord riding-breeches. And his hand slid round to the back of his belt, to make sure that the gun that was not in sight was safely there, all the same.

"A hold-up?" he asked.

"Not so's you'd notice it," answered Jimmy Dace.

"What's the game, then?" asked the Kid, puzzled.

Jimmy Dace looked down from his box at the handsome, inquiring face looking up at him from the window of the hack. An impulse of compassion stirred Jimmy's somewhat leathery heart. After all, the Kid was only a kid—a mere boy, playing rancher—and it was a shame to let him walk with his eyes shut into what was coming to him.

"Mister Fairfax, sir," said Jimmy, "them guys belong to the Lazy-O."

"My ranch?" said the Kid.

"They're in the Lazy-O outfit, and I guess they're Barney Baker's side-pardners," said Jimmy, sinking his voice to a hoarse whisper, though the hack was not yet close to the waiting horsemen. "The one with the cast in his eye is Panhandle Pete—"

"Looks tough!" commented the Kid.

"Sure! The one with the scar on his jaw is the Coyote. His name's Jensen, but he's called the Coyote."

"Looks mean," said the Kid.

"That's how," said Jimmy Dace. "Mister Fairfax, sir, they're stopping this hearse to see you, sir."

"Sort of welcome home?" drawled the Kid.

"Not on your life," said Jimmy Dace. "Sirce, I guess them guys is rough. 'Tain't my funeral, nohow, but I hate to see a tenderfoot mishandled."

The Kid smiled.

"I ain't exactly a tenderfoot, feller."

"I guess not," assented Jimmy. "I reckon you was raised among cows. You sure do look it, Mister Fairfax, sir. But—"

"They know at the ranch that I'm coming from Pecon Bend in this hack," remarked the Kid. "Two of the boys have rode out to meet me. I take that kindly."

Jimmy Dace stared at him.

"They've rode out to meet you, sure enough," he said. "Mister Fairfax, I guess they never told you a whole heap about the Lazy-O when they sold it to you."

"I guess I had all the particulars," said the Kid. "You want to say it ain't a good ranch?"

"Best in the Packsaddle country," answered Jimmy. "But did they tell you about the bunch?"

"They did not," said the Kid. "But I guess I'll pull all right with the bunch. And if I do not, feller, I guess a bunch can be fired."

Jimmy gave him a pitying look.

"You figure on firing the Lazy-O bunch?" he asked.

"Sure, if I don't like their ways."

Jimmy opened his mouth again—and closed it. He drove on slowly towards the two waiting horsemen. It was useless, he figured, to put this confident Kid wise, and he had to take what was coming to him.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Kid Means Business!

THE Rio Kid gazed with cool interest from the window of the hack. Jimmy Dace drew it to a halt at a gesture from the horseman with a cast in his eye—Panhandle Pete, as he had called him. Whatever attitude Mister Fairfax might adopt, Jimmy Dace did not aim at trouble with the men of the Lazy-O. Jimmy was by nature not a meek galoot at all; but when he walked in the presence of the Lazy-O men he walked warily.

"Arternoon, fellers!" said Jimmy, very civilly.

"You've got a passenger?" asked Panhandle Pete.

"You've said it."

"Name of Fairfax?"

"Right in once."

"Toll him to hop out."

Jimmy Dace called down to his passenger.

"Mister Fairfax, sir, you want to hop out and speak to these guys."

"Guess again," drawled the Kid. "I ain't hopping out a whole lot."

"For the love of Lucy, Mister Fairfax, sir, don't rile 'em!" murmured Jimmy Dace. "I'll tell the world you're a good little man, and I'd hate to see you quirted or shot up."

"I'd sure hate it myself, just a few," said the Kid cheerfully. "Tall them guys I'm their new boss, and I want to speak to them. They're to ride up to the window."

Jimmy made a hopeless gesture.

"Say, we're waiting to see that guy!" called out the Coyote.

"He's a-coming," called back Jimmy Dace hastily. "Give the galoot a chance, you 'uns. He bent as low as he could, to give the Kid one last warning. "Mister Fairfax, sir, hop out, and talk turkey to them guys. I guess it ain't my funeral, and I sure don't want to rile the Lazy-O bunch, but I jest got to toll you that when they say hop, a guy had better hop. Did they tell you at Pecon Bend who bought the Lazy-O last fall?"

"They did not."

"Did they tell you he was found shot up on the prairie?"

"Geol!" said the Kid. "They did not."

"I guess they was plumb anxious to find a buyer for that ranch," said Jimmy. "I reckon it's been hanging on the market a long time, Mister Fairfax, sir. I guess they didn't tell you all they could, or you sure wouldn't have horsed in to buy it. Mister Fairfax, sir, you talk turkey to them guys and get off safe."

The Kid smiled.

"Toll them guys to come up to the hack," he answered. "It's their boss orders them."

Jimmy sighed.

"You 'uns, your boss says you're to ride up to the hack and talk to him," he called out.

The two punchers stared, exchanged a glance, and then grinned. They rode up to the halted vehicle and stopped beside it, staring at the handsome, boyish face that looked out at them.

The Kid gave them an amiable smile.

"You boys belong to the Lazy-O?" he asked.

"Sure!" grunted Panhandle Pete.

"Then I'm pleased to meet up with you," said the Kid. "You want to know that I've bought the ranch—leastways, I've paid down on it, and aim to hand over the rest after I've looked it over. Comes to the same thing. I sure hope we're going to pull together fine at the Lazy-O."

"Step down from that hearse!" said Panhandle Pete curtly.

"Sho!"

"You hear me, yaup?" snapped the puncher.

"I sure ain't deaf," said the Kid pleasantly. "But you seem to have got it wrong, feller. You ain't boss—I'm boss. Chew on that a minute, and then take off your hat and say you're sorry."

Panhandle Pete stared at him.

"Gee whiz!" he said.

"Some greenhorn, I guess," remarked Coyote Jenson.

"Git down outn that hearse, you!" roared Panhandle Pete.

The Kid whistled softly.

"I've sure heard that Packsaddle is a tough country," he remarked. "Is that how a cowman talks to his boss in Packsaddle? I sure reckon that there's going to be a change on the Lazy-O."

"You hopping down?"

"Not a whole lot."

"Then I guess you'll be made," said Panhandle Pete.

The Kid looked at him steadily. His face was still cool and smiling, but there was a glint in his eyes.

"That's your say-so," he said. "You say the same, you Jenson?"

"Sure!" said the Coyote emphatically.

"That does it," said the Kid coolly. "You're both fired. You don't belong to the Lazy-O any more. Go back to the ranch and tell Mr. Baker I've fired you, and ask for your money."

"Locoo!" said Panhandle Pete. "Plumb loco!"

He dismounted from his broncho and wrenched open the door of the hack. Jimmy Dace sat tight on his box and chewed tobacco. He felt no call to intervene. He had warned the newcomer, and he left it at that. Not that intervention on Jimmy's part would have been any use.

"Now," said Panhandle Pete, his bearded, bronzed face flushed with anger. "You gitting down, Mister Fairfax, or you want to be handled?"

The Kid gave him a cheery nod. When it came to trouble he wanted room; and trouble was coming swiftly. He assented.

"If you're so particular I'll sure get down," he said.

"Pronto!" snarled Pete.

The Kid stepped out of the hack.

Both the punchers were dismounted now, and they had their quirts in their hands. The Kid realized that he had bought a surprise-package in the Lazy-O ranch. Lawyer Lucas, in Pecos Bend, had not told him what to expect in the Packsaddle country. But the Kid had no grouch about it. He figured that he was quite able to take care of himself, and he grinned as he surmised what these guys would have thought had they known that Mister Fairfax was the Rio Kid, the quickest man on the draw in all Texas. The Kid never looked for trouble, but trouble had a way of haunting his footsteps. And he had no objection to it when it came.

"Well, hyer I am, you 'uns," said the Kid cheerily. "If you want to shoot off your mouths, I guess I can give you

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a few minutes. Don't forget that you're fired from the Lazy-O."

"I guess you ain't the size of man to fire us, dog-gone you," growled Panhandle Pete. "We come hyer to put you wise. The bunch don't want you on Lazy-O. Got that?"

"I got it," assented the Kid.

"If you like to ride back to Pecos Bend while you're safe in one piece I guess I'll rustle you a horse."

"But I guess I've jest come from Pecos Bend," said the Kid, in innocent surprise. "I ain't going back any. I'm going to Packsaddle, and to-morrow I aim to take possession of the Lazy-O."

"You ain't been in Packsaddle afore, I guess."

"Nix!"

"I reckoned not. You don't savvy this country," said Panhandle Pete grimly. "I reckon you fancy that if you hit trouble at the ranch the sheriff will put things through for you."

"Ain't that the sheriff's job?" asked the Kid.

"Sure thing! But you want to find a sheriff who's anxious to get on the job in Packsaddle," answered the puncher. "You ask the sheriff at Pecos Bend to ride out to Lazy-O and see you through, and I guess he'll tell you to call again next year."

"You don't say!" remarked the Kid.

"We don't get a lot of sheriffs here," said Panhandle Pete. "Barney Baker runs the Lazy-O, and Barney's good enough for the bunch. And we ain't honing to see any boss cavorting around. You get me?"

The Kid laughed.

"I guess you'll see me cavorting around," he said. "Why, you giuk, I've paid down ten thousand dollars on that ranch—the other thirty thousand to be paid after I've seen it."

"I guess you can call it off and save the thirty thousand," said the puncher.

"And you figure that Lawyer Lucas will hand me back the ten if I call it off?" grinned the Kid.

"Not in your lifetime," chuckled the Coyote.

"Then I guess I go through with the deal," drawled the Kid. "Got any more to say, you guys?"

"You hitting it for Pecos Bend?"

"Not hy a jugful."

"Waal, if you want to be quirted before you go, I guess I'd as soon quirt you as not," said Panhandle Pete.

The Kid laughed again. He had heard that the Lazy-O outfit were a tough bunch, but this way of meeting a now boss was, he figured, the limit. It was no wonder that a property like the Lazy-O had hung long in the market.

"You aim to quirt your boss?" he asked.

"Sure—if you don't hit the horizon pronto."

"I guess I've heard they're tough in Packsaddle," said the Kid. "But I never heard the like of this. Still, if you're honing to handle that quirt, I guess you'd better get on with it."

Panhandle Pete waited for no more. He made a rush at the Kid, swinging up the heavy quirt.

With a swift backward jump the Kid eluded the slash of the quirt, and before it could be lifted again he leaped forward as swiftly.

What seemed like a solid lump of lead crashed on the jaw of the puncher. It was the Kid's fist—and all the Kid's weight was behind it.

Panhandle Pete gave a gurgling gasp and flew backwards, and crashed down on the trail with a mighty crash.

"Gee!" gasped the Coyote.

His hand flew to his gun.

Crack!

How the Colt got into the Kid's hand seemed like magic to Jimmy Dace, watching with distended eyes from his box.

But it was there, and it was there in time. And the Kid burned powder before the Coyote could lift his hand with the gun in it.

There was a hoarse yell from Coyote Jenson as the gun flew from his hand and his right arm dropped to his side. He stood staggering and staring stupidly at his arm, which hung helplessly, streaming with blood. And Jimmy Dace ejaculated, in tones of wonder and awe:

"Gee! Carry me home to die!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Kid Comes to Town!

THE Rio Kid stood smiling; the smoking Colt in his hand. Panhandle Pete still sprawled dazedly in the trail. Coyote Jenson staggered back to the hack, and stood leaning on it, his face white, his legs sagging under him, his broken arm hanging at his side helplessly.

Panhandle Pete staggered up. He felt his jaw with his hand, as if to ascertain that it was still there.

"Dog-gone my cats!" he muttered hoarsely.

"You want any more, feller?" asked the Kid amiably.

The puncher grabbed at a gun. "Don't!" said the Kid quietly.

The walnut-butted Colt was looking at the Lazy-O puncher, the Kid's finger on the trigger.

"Guess again, feller," advised the Kid. "You touch that gun and you're a dead guy. Guess again."

Slowly the puncher's hand came away from his belt. The Kid's voice was cool and drawling, his face smiling, but his eyes glinted like cold steel over the revolver. Panhandle Pete knew that he was looking death in the face.

"You—you durned, dog-goned lobo-wolf!" he muttered, his voice husky with rage.

"I guess you ain't the first guy that's woke me up for a gopher and found he'd woke up a prairie wolf," said the Kid. "Take that gun and drop it in the trail."

Panhandle Pete took the gun from his belt. He was sorely tempted to lift it and attempt a pot-shot. But something in the glinting eyes of the Kid warned him off. He knew that he would be a dead man before he could pull the trigger. The gun crashed to the ground.

"That's better," smiled the Kid.

"You jump to orders that-a-way, feller, and I guess I may keep you on at the Lazy-O, after all. I sure ain't anxious to fire any of the bunch. I guess we'll pull together as thick as fleas on a Mexican dog when we know one another better. You jest got to learn to behave and you'll find me as good a boss as a cow-man could want. You get me?"

"You figure on going on to the Lazy-O?"

"Sure!"

"I guess the bunch will be glad to see you," muttered the puncher. "I guess we'll all be powerful glad to see you, Mister Fairfax."

"That's sure good to hear," said the Kid. "You tell them at the Lazy-O that I'm coming along to-morrow, and tell Barney Baker to ride into Packsaddle this evening and see me at the hotel there. Now don't shoot off your mouth any more. You've spilled a hatful already. Get on your cayuse and ride."

Panhandle gave him a look, and gave

a longing glance at the gun lying in the trail."

"Forget it, feller!" said the Kid. "Don't I keep on telling you that you ain't woke up a gopher, but a prairie wolf, all teeth and claws. You want to let that sink into your cabaza. Put that part of yourn on his bronc and tote him away. I guess he wants tying up some."

guy that's put it over the Lazy-O bunch and got away with it."

The Kid stepped into the hack, and the driver gathered up his reins, cracked his whip, and drove on towards the distant cow-town, still in a state of wonder and surpriso.

The Kid leaned back in his seat, a thoughtful expression on his face.

It was clear, he reflected, how trouble dogged his steps. From those old days on the Double-Bar Ranch in the Frio country, when the Kid, innocent of any wrongdoing, had been driven into outlawry, trouble had followed him like his shadow. He could say, with a clear conscience, that he never hunted it; but

Baker king-pin till a new buyer came along—to be played in the same way. This was a game that could be played in a country like Packsaddle, but it could not, the Kid reckoned, be played on him. He had bought the Lazy-O, and he was going to run the Lazy-O. And though the Kid never hunted for trouble he had a certain zest in meeting it when it came. There was something in him that loved a fight.

The hack rolled on, bumping on the uneven trail, and Packsaddle came in sight at last, in the glow of the sunset.

The Kid looked with interest at the cow-town as he approached it. It was



STRAIGHT FROM THE SHOULDER! What seemed like a lump of lead crashed on the jaw of the puncher. It was the Kid's fist, and all the Kid's weight was behind it. Panhandle Pete gave a gurgling gasp, and flew backwards, and crashed down in the trail. (See Chapter 2.)

With a muttered curse, the Lazy-O puncher turned away. In grim silence he helped the wounded man into his saddle, and the two rode away together across the plain.

The Kid restored his gun to its place. He smiled as he met the wondering stare of Jimmy Dace.

"We ain't wasted a lot of time, feller," remarked the Kid, "and I'm sure glad to have met up with some of my bunch. But I reckon you'd better get on."

"Jumpin' gophers!" murmured the driver. "Mister Fairfax, sir, I guess I hand it to you. I guess you're the first

it always seemed to come. Still, there was no doubt that the Kid seemed to thrive on it.

He quite realized that he had been, to some extent, played for a sucker when they sold him the Lazy-O. He had no doubt that Lawyer Lucas at Pecos Bend was in cahoots with Barney Baker at the Lazy-O, and that they stood together to keep the Lazy-O on its present footing. No doubt that Barney made a good thing of it, running the ranch as if it were his own. No doubt that they expected him to be scared off, and to lose the big deposit he had paid on the purchase price, leaving Barney

like a hundred other cow-towns that he had seen—one irregular street, lined with shacks, shanties, 'doby houses, and frams houses, with a timber hotel and a timber saloon. The hack rolled up to the hotel, where a dozen horses were hitched to the well-gnawed rail in front of the building. The usual crowd of loafers and curious citizens had gathered to see the hack come in from Pecos Bend. Packsaddle was far from railways, and the hack from Pecos was its only regular communication with the outside world, and brought mails and newspapers, baggage, and an occasional THE POPULAR.—No. 658.

passenger, three times a week. The arrival of the stage was always a matter of interest in a cow-town, buried in the vast prairies. On this occasion the interest was greater than usual, for all Packsaddle knew that the new boss of the Lazy-O was arriving that day from Pecos Bend.

Two or three score of punchers and others were lined up in front of the timber building, watching for the hack. There was a general movement as it rolled up and Jimmy Dace brought it to a halt with a flourish. Half-a-dozen voices called out at once:

"You got him, Jimmy?"

Jimmy grinned down from his box, "Sure!" he answered.

A short, muscular puncher, bow-legged from incessant riding, straddled forward. The Kid, from the hack, noted that the crowd gave way with great care to the bow-legged man. But he did not need that to tell him that the man was a gun-man—a "killer." He knew the type—the hard, cold face, the ice-cold eyes.

"You say you got him?" asked the bow-legged man.

"I sure got him, Lariat," answered Jimmy, very civilly.

"Wasn't you met up on the trail?" demanded Lariat. "I reckoned some of the boys was meeting up with you."

That told the Kid that the bow-legged man was a Lazy-O man. He reckoned that the Lazy-O bunch took in some of the hardest characters even in the lawless Packsaddle country.

"We was sure met up with, Lariat," said Jimmy Dace. "Panhandle Pete and the Coyote."

"Waal, then, what you giving us?" demanded Lariat. "Mean to say they let the guy come on to town?"

"They sure did."

"I guess I don't got you," growled Lariat.

He turned from Jimmy as the Kid stepped from the hack.

Every eye in the crowd fastened on the Kid immediately.

The Kid wondered, for a moment, whether any galoot in Packsaddle happened to know the Rio Kid by sight, and whether the change in his looks would pass muster.

But there was no sign of recognition in any face—only keen interest, tinged with derision. The buying and selling of the Lazy-O, as the Kid learned later, was a standing joke in Packsaddle.

Every man there was keen to look at the new proprietor of the Lazy-O, keen to size him up, and see what sort of a guy he was. And they wanted to know how he had got so far as the cow-town, as it was an open secret that some of the Lazy-O bunch had aimed to meet the hack and warn him off.

The Kid glanced round casually and started for the hotel entrance. The bow-legged man planted himself promptly in the way.

"Say, you Mister Fairfax?" he asked.

"You've got me," assented the Kid.

"I reckon you're a Lazy-O man?"

"Yep!"

"One of my outfit then," said the Kid pleasantly. "Take a look at your boss, if you want, and then step lively. I guess I'm honing for some supper, feller."

The cold eyes of the gun-man watched him curiously. He did not step aside, or make any movement to do so.

"I reckon your supper can wait, Mr. Fairfax," he remarked, in icy tones. "I want to know the hang of this. Wasn't you told on the trail that Packsaddle ain't a healthy place for you?"

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"I kinder guessed it from the way them guys carried on," said the Kid. "But they was quite satisfied, when they went, that I can look after my health."

The gun-man eyed him, evidently puzzled. There was a hush in the crowd. Every man there knew the gun-man's intentions, and the Kid was not blind to them. But he smiled pleasantly.

Barney Baker, he reckoned, was handling this matter in a business-like way. If a quiting on the trail did not frighten off the new boss there was a gun-man waiting for him at Packsaddle, and it was going to be gun-play. There was no doubt that any man who bought the Lazy-O was buying trouble.

"I guess Panhandle Pete put you wise that you wasn't wanted on the Lazy-O," said Lariat, at last.

"He kinder dropped a hint that-a-way," assented the Kid. "From what I figured, it seems that the outfit ain't honing to get a new boss. But they'll sure come to like it when they know me. I'm a good little man when I ain't riled."

There was a laugh, and the gun-man's cold eyes glittered.

"I don't rightly know how you got past the guys," he said. "But—"

"I ain't keeping it a secret," said the Kid cheerily. "They sure was too fresh, and I fired them."

This Week's Tall Story!



William Gosling, porter at Greyfriars School, sternly refuses a handsome tip from Mauleverer!

"Fired them?" gasped Lariat.

"Jest that. Fired them from the bunch," said the Kid innocently. "I guess a ranch boss can fire his hands if he wants to."

"Gee whiz!"

"They was very fresh," said the Kid confidently, conscious that every ear was hanging on every word. "They sure was fresh. But after I handled Pete and let daylight through Coyote they was like lambs. I guess they know how to behave when they're told."

"You handled Pete and drilled Coyote?" stutored the gun-man blankly. "What you giving us, you ornery locoed gink?"

"Straight goods," answered the Kid. "Jimmy Dace will tell you, if you hone to know. Me, I'm for supper."

"You ain't for supper yet," said Lariat grimly. "I guess you won't want any supper, Mister Fairfax, when we're through."

"Feller, I'm hungry, after coming all the way from Pecos Bend," said the Kid. "I guess it's me for grub. Stand back!"

"Not on your lifetime," sneered Lariat.

"The Lazy-O bunch sure do want to learn manners," said the Kid pleasantly. "I figure that they've got a boss now to teach them. I don't take lip from any man in my outfit. You're fired, Lariat!"

"Fired! Me?"

"You got me. Don't let me see you on the Lazy-O when I hump along to-morrow or I shall sure have to use boot-leather on you," said the Kid.

There was a breathless hush and a rustle as men crowded back out of the line of fire. For less than that—much less than that—Lariat had shot up more than one man in Packsaddle; and every man knew, too, that he was there to pick trouble with the new boss of the ranch.

Lariat drew a deep, deep breath. "You figure that you'll use boot-leather on me?" he said at last. "You figure that you'll fire me from the bunch? Carry me home to die!"

"I've told you to stand aside, feller," the Kid pointed out. "I guess I ain't taking the trouble to walk round you. You moving?"

"Not so's you'd notice," drawled the gun-man.

"I guess you'll be moved, pronto!"

"Wade in!" grinned Lariat.

The bow-legged man stood like a rock in the Kid's path, his hands very near his low-along guns. That he aimed to draw and fire as soon as the Kid made a hostile movement every man knew, and already the Packsaddle men figured that the Lazy-O would be wanting another new boss. But they did not know the Rio Kid.

"I guess I'm giving you a chance," urged the Kid. "I've sure fired you from my outfit, but I ain't honing for trouble with you. Get out of the way, you wall-eyed, slab-sided, pie-faced coyote!"

Like a flash Lariat's hand gripped a gun. But, fast as he was, he was not fast enough. Instantly at the motion the Kid leaped on him, and before the gun could leave the holster the Kid's grasp was on the gun-man. The bow-legged puncher, swung from his feet with that sudden grasp, went crashing to the ground, and the revolver was kicked from his hand. His left hand grasped the other gun as he sprawled, and the Kid's riding-boot stamped on and hand together to the earth, to the accompaniment of a scream of pain from Lariat.

The Kid was not smiling now.

He grasped the sprawling ruffian by the neck, dragged him up with a swing of his sinewy arms, twirled him round helplessly, and planted a crashing kick on his buckskin trousers.

Lariat flew into the street and rolled over, almost under the feet of Jimmy Dace's horses.

The Kid glanced at him and walked into the timber hotel. He was, as he had said, hungry after his long drive from Pecos Bend, and wanted his supper. Outside the hotel he left a buzzing crowd, wild with excitement. Often enough there was excitement in the cow-town of Packsaddle, but never had it reached such a pitch as now. The arrival of the new boss of the Lazy-O had caused all Packsaddle to sit up and take notice.

THE END.

(The Kid is in for a lively time when he takes over the Lazy-O Ranch—but that does not worry this cheery young outlaw. He's had more worries than most men—and got over them. Don't miss reading: "THE NEW BOSS OF THE LAZY-O!" next week!)

Thrilling Yarns? **YES-THERE ARE 5**

IN THIS ISSUE!

The POPULAR

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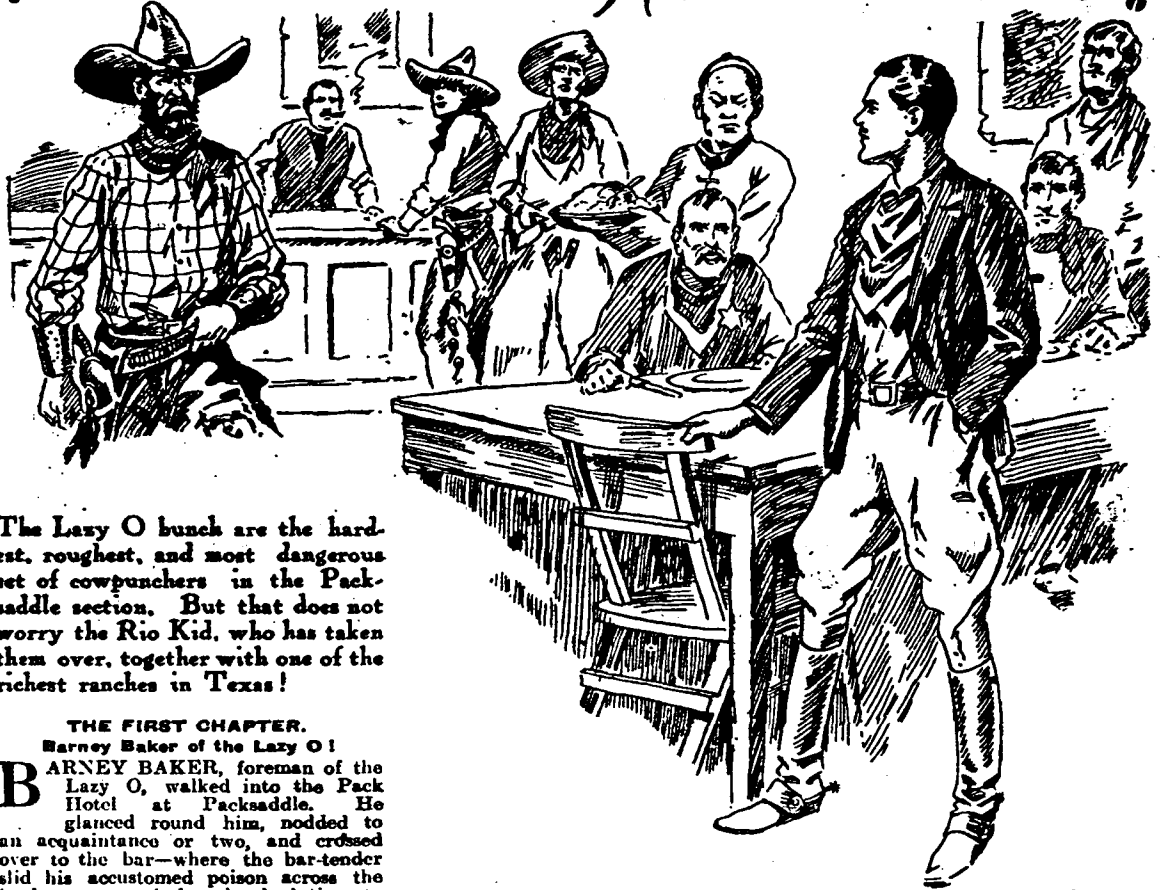
The
**NEW BOSS
OF THE
LAZY O!**



*Full of Action
Tale of the
Wild West*

WHO IS THE DEADLIEST SHOT IN TEXAS? THE RIO KID!—MEET HIM IN THE ROARING WESTERN YARN BELOW!

The NEW BOSS of the LAZY O!



The Lazy O bunch are the hardest, roughest, and most dangerous set of cowpunchers in the Packsaddle section. But that does not worry the Rio Kid, who has taken them over, together with one of the richest ranches in Texas!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Barney Baker of the Lazy O!

BARNEY BAKER, foreman of the Lazy O, walked into the Pack Hotel at Packsaddle. He glanced round him, nodded to an acquaintance or two, and crossed over to the bar—where the bar-tender slid his accustomed poison across the leaden counter before he had time to speak. But the foreman of the Lazy O did not touch the tanglefoot. There was a grim expression on his dark, harsh face, a glint in his deep-set grey eyes, an ominous tightening of his hard mouth. Barney was not a sweet-tempered man at the best of times, and his looks, at the present moment, showed that his temper was less sweet than ever. The two or three score of men in the place knew the reason for his black looks, as well as Barney himself knew it, and many of them would have grinned, but it was not healthy to grin at the foreman of the Lazy O.

Standing at the bar, leaning an elbow on it, Barney looked round, with glinting eyes under knitted brows, as if in search of offence. And most eyes dropped before his, or men looked another way. Nobody wanted to find trouble with the foreman of the toughest outfit in the valley of the Pecos.

The dust of the trail was on Barney Baker, thick on his chaps and his riding-boots. Perspiration clotted his forehead under the brim of his Stetson. He had ridden hard into town; his sweating broncho was now panting at the hitching-ropes outside the timber hotel. But though only a few minutes had elapsed since the Lazy O foreman had dropped from his saddle, he had had time to gather the latest news of

the cow-town. For Packsaddle was buzzing with the news from end to end. It was the biggest excitement that had ever struck the town. It was on every lip, and it had been fairly shouted at Barney, as the galoot most concerned. There were a good many in the Pack Hotel when he arrived, but more followed him in, wondering what the meeting would be like, between the foreman of the Lazy O, and the boy rancher who had bought the ranch and come along to Packsaddle to take possession of it.

After a grim survey of the crowd, that fell silent under his cold gaze, Barney Baker turned to the bar-keeper.

"I hear there's news in town!" he remarked, with a careless drawl in his voice, that was belied by the glint in his eyes.

"You've said it!" agreed the dispenser of varied poisons. "I guess Packsaddle is sitting up on its hind legs and waiting to hear something drop."

"Mr. Fairfax has horned in, I hear."

"He sure has."

"Where is he?"

"Gone up to his room, I guess," said the bar-keeper. "But he's coming down to grub any minute."

"He seems to have got this town rubbering!" said Barney.

"I should smile!" assented the bar-keeper. "Say, you heered that he

booted Lariat like he was a Digger Injun?"

"Yep! I guess Lariat will be coming looking for him soon," said the foreman of the Lazy O. "I saw him on the street, and he looked riled, some."

"That guy Lariat has got him nine notches on his guns," said the bar-keeper casually. "Maybe he'll be making another notch."

"No 'mebbe' about it, I guess," said Barney.

"I dunno! Your new boss looks a kid—but he's sure some kid. He beat up two Lazy O punchers who stopped him on the trail, and he sure handled Lariat like he was a Chinaman. He's some kid!"

The foreman of the Lazy O bent his heavy brows at the bar-keeper.

"My new boss?" he repeated.

"I guess I mean the guy that's bought the Lazy O, down to Pecos Bend," said the bar-keeper hastily. "I allow he won't do a whole lot of bossing with you around, Barney."

There was a murmur of voices.

"Hyer he is."

"Hyer's the guy that booted Lariat!"

Barney Baker turned from the bar again. At the back of the large room that filled the whole ground floor of the Pack Hotel, was a wooden staircase, that led to the bed-rooms above. On the stair, which was more like a ladder, and innocent of hand-rail, a handsome figure appeared. All eyes were

turned on it, keenest of all, the deep-set eyes of the foreman of the Lazy O.

What he saw was a handsome young rancher, dressed natively, almost daintily, from the tips of his well-titting riding-boots to the crown of his Stetson hat. He looked little more than a boy in years, but the Lazy O foreman knew a man when he saw one. He scanned the handsome, clear-cut sunburnt face, which was adorned by a little moustache, that did not hide the firm set of the steady lips. A "kid," as the bar-keeper had said; but "some" kid, Barney could see that. And it seemed to Barney that there was something familiar in the face—that it was a face he had seen before somewhere, though he could not place it. So far as he knew, he had never seen Mister Fairfax, or heard of him till he bought the Lazy O ranch.

But names went for little in the Packsaddle country, and Barney knew that he might have seen Mister Fairfax when he was called by some other name. Staring hard at the handsome face, he felt that it was familiar in some way. But assuredly it never entered his mind that Mister Fairfax had ever been called Kid Carfax, more widely celebrated as the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. Barney had surmised and speculated much concerning the latest buyer of the Lazy O, but in his wildest imaginings he had never dreamed that the ranch had been bought by an outlaw for whom half the sheriffs in Texas stretched out official hands. And now that he looked at his new boss, and felt that his face was familiar, he did not dream that the last time he had seen Mister Fairfax, was when the Rio Kid was riding a grey mustang at a mad gallop through the streets of White Pine, with a gun in either hand, spitting fire, and a wild mob raging round him. Barney remembered the shooting up of White Pine, but he did not recall it to mind at this moment.

Certainly it wanted a stretch of the imagination to take this handsome young rancher for an outlaw. The Kid did not even pack a gun, to all seeming. In a town where every man packed a gun, and sometimes two, the new boss of the Lazy O displayed no weapon. Yet he knew, by this time, that he had come to take possession of a ranch in the most lawless country in Texas, which had been sold over and over again, never to the profit of the buyer, and where Barney Baker ruled the roost, head of the toughest bunch between the Rio Grande and the Colorado river.

Headless, apparently unconscious of the general stare, the Kid came down the steep ladder-like steps from the upper regions, and sauntered into the crowded room. At the back was a trestle table where supper was served by a Chinaman; this constituted the dining-room of the Pack Hotel. Hotel quarters at Packsaddle were not luxurious. Half a dozen voices greeted the Kid as he came, first among them the voice of Buck Sidgers, the town marshal of Packsaddle. Buck had a hard row to hoe as marshal of the wildest cow-town on the Rio Pecos, where law-abiding citizens scudded into their shacks, and the store-keeper put up his shutters, when the word came that the Lazy O outfit were riding in. If the Lazy O had a new boss who could keep that wild bunch in order, Buck was prepared to welcome him like a brother.

"Say, Mister Fairfax, there's your

foreman yonder, by the bar!" Buck told the Rio Kid.

The Kid had already noted the dark, saturnine man who was watching him with such keen interest. There was little that escaped the Kid's eye, especially when he knew that danger dogged every step he took.

"That's good," said the Kid. "I guess I told Panhandle Pete to send him to town to meet up with me here. That's Barney Baker?"

"Sure."

The foreman of the Lazy O detached himself from the bar, and came across the room towards the Kid, with a heavy stride and jingling spurs.

And the Packsaddle crowd fell back on either side, prudently leaving plenty of room for the passage of lead.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Gun-play I

THE Rio Kid smiled gently. Every man in the place expected gun-play—except the Kid. He did not expect it—from Barney Baker.

What had happened on his way to Packsaddle, and what he had learned since he had struck the town, had put the Kid wise to the state of affairs on the Lazy O.

Six or seven times, at least, the Lazy O ranch had been sold through Lawyer Lucas at Pecos Bend, and every time something had happened to the purchaser. One man had been quirted and scared away—another tarred and feathered by a crowd of uproarious cowmen—another ridden on a rail for miles and turned loose in the prairie. One man, at least, who had bought the Lazy O, had been shot up, and found dead on the range. A tougher customer than the rest and not to be scared off, the Kid figured. Again and again the Lazy O came on the market—again and again, sooner or later, it found a buyer; but all the time, Barney Baker ruled the roost at the Lazy O, with the toughest bunch in Texas at his beck and call. But in all the outrages that had happened, Barney's hand was not to be traced. There was little law in Packsaddle, but there was, Barney respected, so far as appearances went. Every man in the town, every rider on the range, knew that Barney was at the bottom of the game that was keeping the Lazy O in his grip. But had any sheriff horned into the trouble, he would have found no vestige of proof. Barney's hand in the game was prudently kept dark.

Barney did not need to come out into the open. The bunch were his men, and he made it worth their while to back his play. There was always a chance that the law might prove too strong even for the wildest bunch in Packsaddle, and if that time came, Barney did not want to figure in a trial at the county seat. And Barney aimed, in the long run, to become something more than a ranch foreman. Every time the Lazy O came on the market, thrown there by a disgusted owner, the price came lower. Sooner or later it would come low enough for Barney himself to buy. In the meantime he ran the ranch, sold cattle on his own account, banked dollars at San Antonio, and sent away dismal reports of drought, and pest, and heavy losses to distant owners who never came near Packsaddle.

There was hardly a guy in Packsaddle who did not know Barney's game, and the buying and selling of

the Lazy O was a standing joke. Twice some suspicious proprietor had sent a new foreman to replace Barney. Each new man had departed quicker than he came, learning that the Lazy O was not a healthy place for a man whom Barney Baker disliked. But in none of the lawless proceedings did Barney take an open hand.

The Rio Kid knew it all—now. And he was not expecting trouble with Barney Baker. He knew there was going to be gun-play, and he was ready for it. But the play would not come from Barney. No man in Packsaddle was to be able to say that the foreman of the Lazy O had shot up his boss. Even Packsaddle would not have stood for that.

So, while he was quietly wary, the Kid had no expectation at all that Barney would throw down the gauntlet, while every other man in the Pack was looking for trouble to break out.

In hushed silence, Barney Baker strode across the wide room, all eyes following his movements.

He came face to face with the Kid, and the excitement was breathless. Which would be the first to draw a gun—was the question in every mind. And there was a general gasp, and a falling of faces, when it became clear that there was no gun to be drawn. The Kid had read the Lazy O foreman aright; Barney had no intention of figuring in the public eye as a desperado who shot up his boss.

"Mr. Fairfax, sir!" said Barney. "That's me," assented the Kid politely.

"I got your message from Panhandle Pete, and rode into town at once to meet you here, sir!" said Barney. "I guess you know I'm your foreman at the Lazy O."

"Sure," said the Kid, "and I'm glad to meet up with you, Mr. Baker. I guess if you'll join me at supper, we'll have a chin over the ranch—I'm coming out to see in the morning."

"You've said it, Mister Fairfax," said Barney.

There was disappointment in many faces. Gun-play was not coming on, that was clear. The crowd in the Pack lost its tense attitude. Buck Sidgers strolled away to the bar.

"Barney's taking it like a lamb this time," he remarked to the bar-keeper.

The man of bottles and glasses winked.

"I should smile!" he said. "That's how Barney took it when the man from Austin came to take over."

"The man from Austin?" repeated the marshal of Packsaddle reflectively.

"The guy who was found shot up in a coulee a few days afterwards," said the man behind the bar.

"I guess I remember."

"Barney is sure dangerous when he talks turkey. I guess if Mister Fairfax had a friend here, that guy'd warn him to take the hack back to Pecos Bend to-morrow."

The marshal nodded.

"Generally," grinned the man behind the bar, "the bunch scared 'em off. But a guy that ain't scared off, gets his all of a sudden. Barney ain't letting no boss cavort around at the Lazy O. When he lies low and talks turkey, it's time for somebody to watch out."

And the marshal nodded again.

Meanwhile, the Kid and the foreman of the Lazy O had sat down at the trestle table. Many eyes turned on them continually, but the manner of Barney Baker was that of a ranch

foreman meeting his new boss; the black look he had worn on entering the Pack had gone now. It was noted that Mister Fairfax sat with his back to the wall, in a position whence he could survey the whole room, and where no one could step behind him. Kid as he looked, the new boss of the Lazy O was evidently no slouch.

But he ate his supper with a good appetite, and talked cheerily, as if he had no care on his mind. To all appearances, the new boss of the Lazy O was feeling cheery and contented, and looking forward to taking possession of his property on the morrow. Yet any man in the cow town could have told him that he was unlikely to be seen alive after riding out to survey the Lazy O.

He talked in terms of cattle and markets and water supply to Barney Baker, and Barney came to understand quite clearly that he knew what he was talking about. The Kid had been raised among cows, and what he did not know about the ranch business was not worth knowing. Then he came to the subject of the bunch.

"They say there's surely a lively outfit at the Lazy O," he remarked pleasantly, "and from what I've seen, I reckon it's a cinch. There was two of the bunch met up with me on the trail, and I had a little trouble—they didn't seem to cotton on to the idea of a new boss. I had to handle one, and shoot up the other."

Barney gave him a look from under his bent brows.

"They came back and told me," he said. "They was sure surprised at the way you handled them, Mister Fairfax."

"And there was another of the bunch in this hyer burg, when the hack got in—a galoot they call Lariat," said the Kid. "I guess I've fired that galoot for shooting off his mouth too free, Mr. Baker, and you want to bar him off the Lazy O."

"It's for you to say, Mister Fairfax," said Barney with another stealthy look at the young rancher. "If you say that Lariat is fired, it goes."

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

"But I'm worried some, about that guy Lariat," said Barney. "I hear that you booted him—"

"I sure did."

"He ain't the guy to take it, Mister Fairfax," said Barney, shaking his head. "I guess that guy Lariat will be hunting you."

"Jest what I reckoned," said the Kid cheerily. "I shouldn't be a whole piece surprised to see him horn in any minute, gunning after me. Honest, I'll be surprised if he don't. But he's fired from the Lazy O, and he stays fired."

There was a buzz in the room, and the Kid's glance rested on the distant doorway. The wide door stood open to the street—outside, the naphtha lamps flared. In the doorway, now, stood a figure—a thick-set puncher with bow-legs in heavy chaps, with two guns slung in low-hung holsters. From a hard, ruthless face, two cold eyes searched the room, and gleamed as they lighted on the Rio Kid.

"He's come!" said Barney Baker, after a glance at the doorway. "I'm afraid this means trouble for you, Mister Fairfax."

"You reckon so?" asked the Kid. "Now, I was jest figuring that it meant trouble for that handy-legged guy yonder."

Lariat stared round the room, his

ice-cold eyes—the eyes of a killer—quelling every gaze that met his. Then he stepped in.

The Kid rose to his feet. If there was any alarm in his breast, it did not show in his face. His hands were in the pockets of his riding-breeches, and he did not withdraw them as the gun-man, with a kind of slow crouching step, came across towards him. Well the Packsaddle men knew that crouching step, that cold gleam in the gun-man's eyes. A wide lane was left for the advance, and there was deathly silence.

Lariat came to a halt at last, facing the Kid across the narrow trestle table.

Still the new boss of the Lazy O stood with his hands in his pockets, and if he had a weapon, it was not to be seen.

He smiled at the gun-man. "Say, you hunting more trouble, Lariat?" he asked amiably. "You ain't satisfied with one allowance of boot leather?"

Lariat's hands were close to the guns in the low-slung holsters. He grinned—a savage grin.

His enemy had no chance now, however quick he might be on the draw. Lariat knew that there was a gun at the back of the Kid's belt, and he was swift when it came to draw, but long before the boy rancher could disengage his hands from his pockets, and reach for his gun, the gun-man could draw and pile half a dozen shots into him. It was more sheer murder than a gun-fight that was coming, and many faces expressed grim disapproval, but no man spoke. Buck Sidgers stirred uneasily, where he leaned on the bar, but he made no motion. Gun-fighting was the rule in Packsaddle, and if a guy threw away his chances as Mister Fairfax was doing, it was his own funeral.

There was a tense silence following the Kid's words; it lasted only a few seconds but it seemed an age. Then Lariat spoke.

"Yep!" he said. "You booted me, you scallywag, and you kinder took me by surprise, and got away with it. I guess the time's come now to settle."

"You want to be booted again?" inquired the Kid. "I'll sure oblige you if you want, and without taking you by surprise any. You dog-goned, pesky gink, I guess you fancy yourself some gun-man, and you sure seem to have Packsaddle scared to a frazzle, but I'll tell you, I have handled bad men before, and if you're honing for trouble, I'm the mutton you want, with the wool on."

The gun-man grinned ferociously.

"You've sure spilled a hatful," he said. "Why, you pesky little prairie rabbit, you figure that you've come to Packsaddle to run the Lazy O? I guess that's a man-size job that won't suit you. You allow that I'm fired from the bunch—"

"You sure are fired," assented the Kid, "and you stay fired. Don't let me see you around on the Lazy O. I don't aim to keep on giving you boot leather. Next time I'll take a quirt to you."

With a sudden movement, sudden and swift, the gun-man's hands dropped on his guns and they leaped together from the holsters.

Crack!

The Kid's hands were still in his pockets. But Lariat's guns were never lifted. With the weapons in his hands, the ruffian staggered back, and fell with a crash to the floor. One second more, and the Kid would have been

riddled with bullets, but in that second the Rio Kid had fired from his pocket, and the most desperate and ruthless gun-man in the Packsaddle country went to the floor—and did not stir again.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

His Own Snare!

MORNING dawned bright and sunny on the cow-town of Packsaddle.

Mister Fairfax, alias the Rio Kid, breakfasted at the Pack Hotel, with a face as bright and cheery as the morning.

Barney Baker breakfasted with him, and the manner of the Lazy O foreman was quiet and subdued. While the Kid was eating, faces were continually put in at the doorway, to look at him. The Kid did not mind, in fact, he was rather enjoying the sensation he had made in Packsaddle.

The cow-town buzzed with the story of the gun-fight of the previous evening. Mister Fairfax, the kid rancher who had bought the Lazy O, had shot up the most desperate gun-man in a lawless town. The news that Lariat had been shot up spread like wildfire. The gun-man had been king-pin in the Lazy O bunch—even Barney Baker had feared him a little, and in Packsaddle he had been monarch of all he surveyed. Quick on the draw, utterly ruthless in the use of his skill with his guns, the "killer" had been a terror, and there was not a man in the town who did not breathe more freely when it was known that the dreaded killer was to be feared no more. Buck Sidgers had a smiling face that morning, and a cordial word for Mister Fairfax. Even men of the Lazy O were not sorry that the bully of the bunk-house had met his match. Mister Fairfax had leaped into local fame at a bound. The man who had shot up Lariat, was a man to be respected, kid as he looked.

For the fate of Lariat, Barney Baker cared not one straw, indeed, he had had a lurking fear of the cold-hearted desperado that made him feel some of the general satisfaction when he fell. But it was a blow to him. New boss after boss had come out to take possession of the Lazy O, and every time the ranch foreman had put paid to him. But he realized that this new boss was a man of quite a new calibre, and that a struggle of a very different kind was beginning. For the first time since he had run the Lazy O, Barney Baker envisaged the possibility of defeat in the game he had played so long and so successfully. In Packsaddle, Mister Fairfax had leaped into fame and popularity—even in the Lazy O bunch he had admirers now. It was no longer a matter of dealing with a stranger who did not know the ropes; but of dealing with a cool, keen galoot who was a better man than a professional killer, and who had made the whole cow-town his friends, and who had the hearty backing of the town marshal, so far as Buck could back him. That was a change, with a vengeance.

But Barney was glad, at least, of the caution that had prevented him from attempting gun-play himself with this surprising galoot. He had had no fear of him, he had avoided trouble because it was his game to keep in the background, and take no open part in fussing out the boss of the ranch. But he knew now that had he tackled Mister Fairfax, he would have gone to the cow-town cemetery even more

surely than Lariat. The guy who had shot up the gunman was not a guy with whom Barney wanted gun-play.

After breakfast, the Kid looked for a horse. He wanted a cayuse to ride out to the ranch. His own Side-Kicker was not with the Kid now, the grey mustang was rather too well known, and though the Kid had changed his own looks a good deal, there was always the danger of recognition. Later on, he figured it would be safe to bring Side-Kicker along from the place where he had left him, but for the present, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had a cautious game to play.

It was the Kid's intention, if fortune smiled on his new venture, to let the Rio Kid die to the world. He had never wanted to be an outlaw, and he longed to say farewell to the lonely trail and the shadows of the chaparral. As Mr. Fairfax, he wanted to run his ranch, and live a peaceful life, giving the walnut-butted guns a rest in their holsters. It was a happy prospect before the Kid, and in a remote region like Packsaddle, he had a good chance of carrying out his plans. Already his wild days of outlawry seemed to be falling far behind him, and the Kid was thinking of himself solely as a rancher. If it lasted, it was going to be good, though at the back of the Kid's mind there was a haunting doubt that the quiet and calm ways of peace were not for him.

When it was known in Packsaddle that Mister Fairfax was looking for a horse, there was no lack of offers. Nearly every galoot in Packsaddle had a cayuse to sell, and the Kid's boyish looks made those galoots hopeful. But in the course of an hour that morning, Mister Fairfax made it clear that he knew as much about horseflesh as he did about gun-fighting. Disappointed men shook their heads, and grinned ruefully, after they had tried to palm off every variety of a four-legged crock on Mister Fairfax. But Packsaddle could admire a man who knew horses, and the Kid's perspicacity added to the high opinion he had already gained in the cow-town. The young rancher was accommodated at last with a handsome pinto, not so good a cayuse, he reckoned, as Side-Kicker, but the best horse in Packsaddle, and that, as any Packsaddle man would have declared, was saying a whole mouthful. And when the rancher mounted the pinto, and rode away with Barney Baker, a crowd gathered to see him off, and gave him a shout—and wondered, afterwards, whether he would ever be seen alive again.

"That guy," said the bar-tender at



GUN PLAY! With a sudden movement the gun-man's hands dropped on his guns, and they leaped together from the holsters. Crack! The Kid's hands were still in his pockets. But even before Lariat could lift his guns the young boy outlaw had fired from his pockets, and the ruffian staggered back. (See Chapter 2.)

the Pack Hotel, "is sure some guy with a gun, and he knows a whole heap about horses. But he don't know the Lazy O bunch yet. I guess I'm open to offer any gentleman two to one that nobody but the buzzards will know what has happened to Mister Fairfax, now he's rode out of town."

And no gentleman present was prepared to take the odds.

The Kid, certainly, was fully aware that he was riding into red-hot trouble when he rode away with Barney Baker. But his smiling face gave no hint of it. He had bought the Lazy O, he was going to take possession of the Lazy O, and if any guy got in the way, the Kid figured that it was going to be unhealthy for that guy. He had deliberately chosen to settle down in a country where sheriffs disliked to ride; the Kid did not want to meet up with any sheriffs. That meant that the law could help him little, but the Kid was prepared to help himself.

With quiet amusement, he noted that Barney Baker was riding a white horse, though he had come to town on a black cow-pony. That white horse, was a conspicuous object afar on the brown prairie, and he was not a rapid goer. Unless he was going to leave his foreman behind, the Kid could not let his pinto out. So he held his pinto in, having no intention of leaving Barney behind. For the first couple of miles out of Packsaddle, Barney rode in a rather glum silence, while the Kid cheerily whistled the tune of a Mexican fandango. They followed a scarcely-marked track, across wide rolling plains, towards the distant ranch, which was a good ten miles from the cow-town.

"Say," remarked the Kid, after a time. "That sure is some slouch of a cayuse of yours, Barney."

"I borrowed him," said the foreman briefly. "I left my own pony with the blacksmith for a new shoe."

"Sho!" said the Kid, "and being white, I guess any galoot who might be watching for us on the llano, wouldn't be likely to make a mistake up to a thousand yards."

Barney Baker started, and his eyes flashed for a second at the new boss of the Lazy O.

"What you mean, Mister Fairfax?" he asked, after a pause.

"Just what I say," answered the Kid amiably. "Puttin' it that some pard of Lariat's might be laying for me on the prairie, knowing that I was riding out to the Lazy O this morning, I guess he wouldn't want to bag the wrong bird with a long-distance rifle-shot. They would sure cuss him some, at the Lazy O, if he let daylight through at the foreman instead of his boss. But you being fixed up with a white hoss, I guess the guy wouldn't make no such mistake, that hoss can sure be spotted from a long way."

Barney breathed hard and deep. "I guess I never reckoned on anything of the kind, Mister Fairfax," he said slowly.

"You!" said the Kid. "Of course you didn't! Ain't you my foreman, and just as spy looking after me as looking after your own hide? Wouldn't it jest jolt you a whole lot, if some pesky guy with a rifle picked me off from one of them branches of pecan or post-oak! It sure would!"

The foreman of the Lazy O muttered something indistinctly.

"What I'm figuring," explained the Kid, "is that some galoot with a grouch agin me, knowing you're riding a white hoss, ain't likely to make any mistake with a pot-shot from cover. You never

figured on it, Mr. Baker; but I allow that other guy would."

"What guy?"

"The guy that's laying for me somewhere between Packsaddle and the Lazy O, in cover, with a rifle to his shoulder," answered the Kid coolly. "I ain't looking for gun-play, after what happened to Lariat in town, but rifle-play at long range is a sorter different proposition. What you opine?"

"I guess there's nothing to it, Mister Fairfax," said Barney hastily. "The Lazy O bunch wouldn't stand for it."

"Sho!" said the Kid. "I guess they stand for a whole lot, from what I've heard about them guys who've bought the Lazy O from time to time. But if the whole bunch wouldn't stand for it, Mr. Baker, I guess there's two or three gun-men in the outfit who would. I've got a hunch that we shall not get in sight of the Lazy O without hearing a rifle talk."

Barney gritted his teeth under his beard. His scheme was as well-known to Mitter Fairfax, as if the snare had been laid in his sight.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Change of Mounts!

THE foreman checked his horse.

"If you're getting skeered, Mister Fairfax, it ain't too late to ride back to Packsaddle," he said hastily.

The Kid raised his eyebrows.

"Skeered?" he said. "I ain't skeered any, Mr. Baker. Not on your life. Why, this game is jest pie to me."

He checked the pinto, rose a little in his stirrups, and scanned the surrounding plain. Far in the distance, brown dots on the grass showed where a herd of cattle fed. But there was no sign in sight of any human being. The wide ranges of the Lazy O were solitary enough. Ahead of the two riders, far ahead, the track they followed skirted a belt of post-oaks, wipping away about six or seven hundred yards from the trees. At that distance, a very keen eye would have been needed to pick out one rider from the other, with both dressed much alike, but there was no mistaking the white horse.

"Jest pie!" repeated the Kid

cheerily. "I'll tell the world, I've hit a lot of trouble in my time, Mr. Baker, and enjoyed the whole lot of it. This hyer little difficulty with the Lazy O bunch ain't worrying me any. After they find out the kind of galoot I am, they'll settle down with me like lambs, and I'm telling you so. You figure that there ain't any Lazy O man watching for us, say, in them post-oaks ahead?"

"Sure!" said Barney.

"You answer for that?" asked the Kid. "Sure thing! Bet my life on it," said Barney confidently.

"You sure do make me feel a suspicious guy," confessed the Kid. "But if you bet your life on it, Mr. Baker, I guess it's O.K. And you ain't any objection to changing horses with me?"

Barney Baker almost tottered in his saddle.

"Changing horses!" he repeated faintly.

"Yep!"

"I—I guess—"

"You see, this is the how of it," said

(Continued on opposite page.)

TALES OF AN OLD SEA SALT!

Has the old bo'sun saved damsels in distress, and fought pirates? Well, he says he has. And this is his narrative!

The Episode of the Santa Barbara Pirates!

"EVER rescued any damsels in distress, bo'sun?" I asked. "You know the sort of thing—pirates, and all that!"

"Now you're tryin' to pull my leg, sir," said the bo'sun. "You're like a lot more—don't believe that pirates exists now-adays, eh? Well, look 'ere, I'll just tell you about an expediment what appened to me a few years back."



Know the Santa Barbara Islands? They're off the coast o' America, an' when I was on the barque Noria we passed 'em on a voyage from Callao to Frisco. By that time we was runnin' short o' water, an' as there wasn't much wind about, the skipper thinks it's a good idea to send ashore to the first island we sights to see if there's any water there.

'E sends me in the little dinghy to scout around an' look for a stream, so's I could take a party ashore afterwards and fill up the casks. Off I goes on my own, and when I reaches the island I sees it's all 'igh land, wi' no landin' place, so I rows round the point an' make for the other side o' the island.

'Twas a very rocky coast, and I keeps comin' across all sorts o' little inlets, but sees no sign o' a stream. Suddenly I rounds a point, and there, in front o' me, I sees an old four-master lying in a bay. Just as I'm about to row to 'er, a 'orrible 'ullabaloo breaks out aboard, and I sees the 'ole crew suddenly jump on the bulwarks, dive overboard and swim ashore as fast as they can.

This looks mighty suspicious to me, so I rows nearer, keepin' my eyes on the four-master. Presently I hears a shriek—a woman's shriek—and one o' the prettiest women I've ever seen in me life comes to the bulwarks and 'ollers out: "Elp! Elp!"

Fair swif she looked, too, 'oo's 'er face

was all yellow like, wi' green eyes, and she was only there a minute afore she disappears, evidently bein' pulled back by someone on deck. Well, I wasn't goin' to stand for none o' that, so I rows as quick as I can, an' I gets to the four-master. By a bit o' luck there's a rope trailin' over the side, so I gets 'old o' it and shins up it. An' when I gets a look at the main deck I nearly jumps out o' my skin!

There's the woman, a-strugglin' in the 'ands of a big brute over six foot tall. An', while I watches, 'e drags 'er to the mainmast, ties 'er up to it, an' empties a cask o' powder around 'er and the mast. Then 'e runs a trail o' powder along the deck, runs into a poop cabin for a minute and comes out again wi' a blazing torch.

"Now!" 'e says, ferocious like. "Unless you tells me where your father 'as 'idden that plan, up goes this ship an' you, too!"

"You villain!" she cries. "You'll not get nothing out o' me!"

"Then your blood be on your own 'ead!" 'e says, and 'e bends down to light the trail o' powder wi' the torch.

Well, I wasn't standing for nothing like that; sides, I'd 'ave been blowed up as well if the ship 'ad gone. So I makes a flying leap through the air, an' the next moment I was on 'im! The torch drops and fizzes out, and the two of us rolls about the deck!

Strike me, but 'e was a tartar! Still, I was fairly 'andy, wi' my fists, myself, so

we 'as a real dust-up on the deck. First I gets on top o' 'im, an' then 'e gets on top o' me, and all the time 'e's 'ollering out somethin' awful. 'E might 'ave downed me, for 'e was a bigger man, but we rolls near the mast an' I jumps to me feet and snatches a belayin' pin from the rack. 'E jumps for me, but 'e wasn't quick enough, an' I catches 'im a cosh on the side o' the 'ead what lays 'im out on the deck. Then I jumps to the mast, whips out my knife, and cuts the girl loose.

Then I wishes I 'adn't!

Phew! I've 'eard some women go off the deep end in my time, but that there woman wi' the green eyes was the worst I've ever known. She called me for everythin'! I was—accordin' to 'er—the blankest blankety blank what she'd ever seen! Naturally I think as 'ow she's gone off 'er 'ead, but she suddenly yells out:

"Silas! Jim! Pete! Come and throw this flat-footed sea-cook overboard!"

Next minute I was surrounded by the ugliest-lookin' gang o' cut-throats you could find in a day's march. They went for me, and although I put up a good fight, I was about 'arf dead before a big fellow in a white suit wi' 'orn-rimmed spectacles an' a megaphone in 'is 'and came along and stops 'em.

Then 'e started on me—an' 'e was worse than the woman! But when the bloke what 'ad been goin' to fire the powder came to and joined in—well, I thought discretion was the best part of valure, so I runs to the side, dives over, scrambles into my boat and rows away as quick as I could! Not never again will I go ashore on the Santa Barbara Islands, mark my words!

I had my own ideas about the bo'sun's yarn, and when I went back to my hotel I looked up an atlas. The Santa Barbara Islands lie off the coast of California, about fifty miles or so from the city of Los Angeles. Then I remembered a certain famous pirate story which had an inci- dent very much like the one which the bo'sun had just described.

Then I remembered that in "making-up" for films, actors and actresses use yellow greasepaint for the face, and green for the eyes!

Which accounts for the fact that a certain American film company had to wait until their leading actor recovered from the effects of a "cosh" on the head with a belaying pin before they could "shoot" again a certain interrupted scene in their latest pirate film!

the Kid, with an amiable smile, but a merciless gleam in his eyes. "You reckon there ain't any guy watching the trail to take a long-range pot-shot. I reckon there is! I don't feel safe on this pinto, but you'll feel as safe as if you was in the middle of Main Street at San Antone. You get me?"

Barney Baker's face was white under its tan.

"I guess you're fooling, Mister Fairfax," he muttered.

"Not by a hatful! I'm talking straight out of my mouth!" declared the Kid. "You know the bunch better'n I do, and I reckon you may be right. So hop off the cayuse, and get on this critter, Mr. Baker."

"I reckon I don't aim to change horses, Mister Fairfax."

"And why not?" cooed the Kid.

"I don't choose!" growled Barney Baker. "You're fooling, and I ain't a guy for fooling. I ain't changing horses."

"I guess you've forgotten that you're my foreman, speaking to your boss!" remarked the Kid.

"Boss or not, you don't own this hoss, and you ain't riding it," said Barney stubbornly.

If the Kid had doubted before, he did not doubt now.

"You sure do give me a jolt, Barney," he said in a pained voice. "I hate to pull a gun on my own foreman." As if by magic a gun appeared in the Kid's hand as he spoke. "Git off that cayuse."

Barney glared at him. He longed to reach for a gun, longed with all his soul. But he was not tired of life.

"If—if you suspect me—" he stammered.

"Suspect you?" smiled the Kid. "That's all hot air, Mister Baker—ain't you a white man, and my foreman? I aim to see my orders obeyed on my own ranch, and I guess I'm ready to let daylight into any guy in my outfit who don't jump to orders, foreman or not. I'd hate to spill your juice, but I'm going to ride that cayuse, and you're going to ride this pinto, and I ain't wasting time about it. Get down, Barney Baker, if you're honing to keep on this side of Jordan."

The Lazy O foreman dismounted. The sweat was thick on his brow. The Kid slipped from the pinto, and mounted the white horse. Barney Baker showed no disposition to mount the pinto.

"I'm waiting for you, feller!" said the Kid.

With a muttered curse, the foreman of the Lazy O clambered on the pinto. They rode on towards the distant post-oaks.

The trail skirted the trees, which lay to the right, at a distance of eight

CHANGING MOUNTS! "I hate to pull a gun on my own foreman," said the Kid. And as if by magic a gun leaped into his hand. "But we're sure changing mounts. You're going to ride my hoss now, and chance the man who's waiting in that belt of timber yonder for us!" With the perspiration thick on his brow, the foreman of Lazy O dismounted. (See this page.)



hundred yards. At that distance, the Kid figured, the marksman would have to judge them by their horses—and the man who rode the white horse would not get the lead.

They were almost abreast of the trees, when Barney Baker pulled a little off the trail to the right. This brought him nearer to the timber belt.

The Kid grinned. As he was no longer to be recognised at a far distance by the horse he rode, Barney wanted to get near enough to the marksman to be recognised on his own. But the Kid was not backing that play.

"Keep to the trail!" he rapped out. "Mister Fairfax—"

The Kid rode close, grasped the rein of the pinto, and dragged the horse back to the trail. Barney's hand itched to grasp a gun. But the steely eyes of the Kid daunted him.

"Dog-gone you!" he muttered hoarsely. "Quit fooling, Mister Fairfax—"

"I ain't fooling any!" said the Kid grimly. "You dog-goned skunk, you know there's a pot-shooter fixed up in cover in them oaks, because you put him up to lay for me, and you fixed yourself with a white horse so that he wouldn't make any mistake at a distance. Now you got to take your chance, you pizen polecat, and if you get yours from your own gun-man, it's your funeral and not mine."

Barney Baker's lips opened—and closed again! The Kid knew—this new boss of the Lazy O did not merely suspect—he knew! It was death to resist—and it was as likely as not death to ride on, mounted on the Kid's horse. But Barney had no choice about

that. With sweating brow, and a hand that shook on his reins, he rode on the trail, abreast of the long belt of post-oaks—from which, at any point and at any moment, the death-shot might come.

A puff of white smoke in the deep shadow of the trees! The bullet came before the report rolled the distance. Barney Baker gave a sudden sharp cry, and reeled over his saddle-horn.

The hidden marksman had fired—and the man who rode the Kid's horse had got the lead. Barney Baker sagged over the pinto's neck, holding on with clutching hands. The Kid, grasped his reins, urged both horses to a gallop, swerving to the left, and dashing away from the direction of the post-oaks that hid the ruffian. Barney swayed in his saddle as he rode, drunkenly, but still holding on. Far out of range of the hidden pot-shooter, the Kid pulled in the horses, and pushed close to the foreman of the Lazy O, with a helping hand.

Barney gave him a bitter, evil look, a look in which rage and hatred were concentrated.

"You dono me!" he muttered thickly. "You done me, dog-gone your hide—but you ain't done the bunch yet! The bunch will get you—"

His voice choked, and he lurched heavily, and the Rio Kid caught him as he fell sideways from the saddle.

THE END.

(Now, chums! Look out for another topping long complete tale of the West in next week's issue!)

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"The JOURNEY of DEATH!"

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THE KID-RANCHER TAMES ROUGH-NECKS AND GUNMEN!

The LAZY O BUNCH!

by RALPH REDWAY

The Rio Kid's first impression of the Lazy O ranch, when he comes to take possession, is that it is going to be a hard fight to keep his newly bought property. But he squares his shoulders for the battle and wades in with grim determination to win through!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Punchers of the Lazy O!

PANHANDLE PETE stared, from the doorway of the bunkhouse on the Lazy O ranch, across the sunlit plain, with knitted brows. Coyote Jenson, leaning on the bunkhouse wall, with his arm in a sling, scowled in the same direction. There were six or seven Lazy O punchers near at hand, and they all looked round to follow Panhandle Pete's fixed gaze. From the prairie a horseman came spurting, riding hard towards the ranch. At the distance it could only be seen that he was a puncher, in Stetson and chaps, mounted on a cow-pony.

"Kansas Jake, I reckon," said Panhandle Pete, after a long, silent stare at the approaching rider.

"I reckon!" assented Coyote Jenson.

The Lazy O horse-wrangler, coming over from the corral towards the bunkhouse, paused to stare at the coming rider.

"That's Jake," he said, after a pause. "What's he hitting it like that for? Anything happened at Packsaddle?"

"I guess he's got news for the bunch!" said Panhandle Pete sourly.

The horse-wrangler grinned.

"Suthin' happened in town to that little guy that's bought the Lazy O, you reckon?" he asked.

"Not in town, I guess, but on the trail hyer."

"I figured that he was riding from town with Barney Baker," said the horse-wrangler.

"You've said it."

"But Barney wouldn't pull on him. That guy Mister Fairfax, who's bought the Lazy O, is no slouch," said the horse-wrangler. "He shot up Lariat at Packsaddle yesterday, and Lariat was sure the durndest gunman in the section. Barney wouldn't have no show with the guy who was too good for Lariat. Besides, it ain't his game to come out into the open that-a-way. It wouldn't look good to let folks hear that the new boss had been shot up by the foreman of the ranch."

"Leave Barney alone to know that," grunted Panhandle Pete. "I'm telling you, Long Bill, that Kansas was waiting for them on the trail, and you know how Kansas Jake handles a rifle."

"Sho!" said the horse-wrangler.

He stared at Pete, and his brows knitted. There was a murmur from some of the punchers standing round.

The Lazy O bunch was well known to be the wildest and toughest bunch on the Rio Pecos. They backed up their foreman, Barney Baker, as one man; and all were in the game to keep the ranch out of the hands of the man who had bought it. But, rough as they were, lawless as they were, they had their limit. Quirting the new boss, and scaring him away from the ranch, picking a rookus with him and shooting him up—such methods did not shock the Lazy O bunch. But assassination was outside their rather wide limit. Shooting up a man in a gun-fight was one thing; picking him off like a buzzard, with a rifle at long distance from cover, was quite another. The

murmur among the Lazy O punchers deepened to a growl.

"Mean to say Jake was lying for that guy, to pick him off with his rifle from cover?" asked Long Bill slowly.

"Sure."

"And not giving the guy a chance?" grunted Long Bill. "Was, that's a game that this bunch won't stand for, Pete. That's a dirty game, like we was a bunch of greasers. If that's how, I guess I'm going to ask Barney for my time."

"Same here," grunted a thickset, bow-legged puncher, Shorty by name. "I guess I don't stand for double-crossing a guy that-a-way. That ain't the Texas way. An even break is the Texas way."

Panhandle Pete grunted.

"You give that guy Fairfax an even break, and it's you for the long jump," he answered. "I'll tell the world that galoot is lightning on the draw. Me and Coyote stopped him on the trail, coming to Packsaddle yesterday; and I tell you he hit me the kick of a mule; and look at Coyote's arm!" Pete rubbed a rough hand over a badly-bruised jaw. "Then didn't Lariat pick a rookus with him at the town and get his? I tell you, an even break won't get that guy Mister Fairfax away from this ranch."

"Tain't no good chewing the rag now," grinned Coyote Jenson. "The guy's got his, an' Jake's riding in to tell us so."

Long Bill, the horse-wrangler grunted.

"It's a dirty game," he said.

"You figure that Barney Baker is going to hand over the ranch to a new boss?" jeered Panhandle Pete. "Ain't the Lazy O been sold seven times, and ain't we always got shut of the new boss every time? This guy Fairfax was warned off, fair and square. If he'd had the boss-sense to hit the trail, he could have humped back to Pecos Bend all in one piece. But he would hunt trouble."

"I don't like it!" growled Shorty.

"Barney ain't asking you what you like," sneered Panhandle Pete. "It's Barney's play, and we're backing it. We all get a finger in the pie. Every man in the Lazy O draws double wages, so long as Barney keeps his grip on the Lazy O. Nobody figured that that guy Fairfax would get away, when Lariat was set on him. But he got away, and Barney fixed it with Jake to lay him on the range. All you guys got to do is to stand pat and shut your mouths."

The spurting horseman was quite near the ranch now.

All eyes were fixed on him; and it was clear that, excepting for Pete and the Coyote, the Lazy O men looked with grim disfavour at the man who was riding up. Had Lariat, the gunman, shot up Mr. Fairfax at Packsaddle, the bunch would have grinned over the episode, but this was quite another matter.

Kansas Jake dashed up to the bunkhouse, pulled in his cow-pony, and jumped down. He nodded and grinned to the waiting punchers.

"You get away with it, Jake?" asked Panhandle Pete.

"I should smile," answered the Kansas man. "Say, it was easy! Barney put me wise that he would ride a white horse from Packsaddle, so all I had



to do was to get the guy on the other horse."

"You fixed him for keeps?" asked the Coyote eagerly.

"How's a guy to say, at eight hundred yards?" answered Kansas Jake. "I know I put the lead right through the guy; that's a cinch. Then I got my cause, and lit out of the timber on the other side, and hit for home. I guess Barney's got a dead guy on his hands. It won't be the first time a new boss of the Lazy O has been shot up mysterious on the range."

Panhandle Pete grinned, and the Coyote gave a chuckle. But the other faces were dark.

"I'll tell the world it's a dirty game, and I won't stand for it!" exclaimed Long Bill, the horse-wrangler. "I'll tell the world—"



morning. He held the reins of his own pinto, on the back of which Barney Baker was hunched, holding on, with a dizzy, half-conscious face that was deadly white. The foreman of the Lazy O, sorely wounded, could scarcely sit the pinto, and but for the Rio Kid's aid he could never have reached the ranch alive. It was like the Kid to lend his aid to the man whose treachery had led him into a deadly snare, from which only his own wariness had saved him.

As the ranch building came in sight in the distance, the Kid spoke to his companion in cheery tones.

"Stick on that cayuse, feller! I guess you ain't far from your bunk now."

Barney Baker turned a glazed eye on "Mister Fairfax."

He did not speak, but there was hate in his look.

For years Barney Baker had run the Lazy O at his own sweet will, and every time the ranch found a new buyer Barney had dealt with him—successfully. No man in the Packsaddle country expected any new boss to make the grade at the Lazy O. Barney and the bunch were too strong for him in a lawless country like the Packsaddle, where the law, such as it was, kept both eyes shut. And if Barney Baker had ever looked for defeat, it would not have been at the hands of a guy who looked little more than a boy. But it was in Mister Fairfax that he had run up against a snag. Even now he did not understand it, though probably he would have understood better had he been wise to it that Mister Fairfax had once been known, all through Texas, as the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. Had Barney Baker known that, he might have realized that he was up against a tough proposition in the now boss of the Lazy O.

The Kid pushed on.

He was wondering a little what sort of a reception he was going to get from the Lazy O bunch, when he horned in at the ranch with the foreman clinging wounded to the back of the pinto.

No man in Packsaddle had expected to see Mister Fairfax alive again after he rode out to take possession of the Lazy O.

But Mister Fairfax had his own ideas about that.

He had bought the Lazy O fair and square, and he did not figure that the wildest bunch in Texas would be able to keep him from taking possession of his own property.

That he was taking his life in his hands in riding out to the Lazy O the Rio Kid was well aware. But that was no new thing to the boy outlaw. But it struck the Kid as curious the way trouble haunted his wandering footsteps. He was an outlaw no longer but a rancher, yet he had to keep his gun as ready as when he was hunted by the Texas Rangers in the rocks of the Mal Pais. Indeed, from what they had told him at Packsaddle, the Kid figured that the ranges of the Lazy O were going to be more dangerous for him than the rocky arroyos of the Mal Pais or the rugged mesas of the Huercas. But the Kid had no grouch. He was accustomed to taking trouble as it came, and hitherto it was not the Rio Kid who had come out at the little end of the horn.

He was riding towards the ranch-house; but at sight of the little crowd of punchers gathered before the bunk-house, the Kid changed his direction a little and headed for them. These rough-looking guys were some of the Lazy O bunch, and the Kid was quite keen on making their acquaintance. Among them he soon recognized Panhandle Pete, with his bruised jaw, and

the Coyote with his right arm in a sling. Those two, at least, had already learned that Mister Fairfax was a galoot who could keep his end up.

The buzz of voices died away, and the Lazy O punchers stood silent, staring, as the Kid rode up leading Barney Baker's horse. They stared in dumbfounded astonishment. At first they had taken it that Barney Baker was bringing the new boss, dead or wounded, to the ranch. But as the horsemen came closer, the wounded man, drooping over the pinto's neck, was recognized as Barney Baker; and two of the bunch, at least, recognized the man who rode unhurt as Mister Fairfax, the new boss. Kansas Jake stared with his eyes bulging from his head. He had carried out his instructions faithfully; he had brought off a long-distance shot with the rifle, from the cover of the post-oaks beside the trail, and he had sent his lead through the man who was not riding the white horse. The two must have changed horses before they rode by the ambush, for it was now Mister Fairfax who was on the white horse, and Barney Baker who was on the pinto. And Jake felt a trickling of sweat down his back as he realized that it was the foreman who had stopped his bullet.

"I swow!" muttered Kansas Jake. "I swow! Carry me home to die! I guess this sure gets my goat! They must have changed hosses. And why did Barney Baker change hosses with the guy, when he knowed I was waiting in the post-oaks, and couldn't tell one guy from another at the distance, only by the hosses? I tell you, he fixed it up with me."

"It's Barney that's got the ticket for soup!" muttered Panhandle Pete. "It's Barney!"

"It's Barney!" murmured the Coyote, his eyes gleaming. "Gee! If a galoot could use his gun-hand—"

Long Bill, lounging over from the corral, grinned.

"I guess suthin's gone skew-ways with that gun game," he remarked.

Then, in silence, the punchers waited till the horsemen arrived at the bunk-house and pulled in.

The Rio Kid released the reins of the pinto as Long Bill stepped forward to give a helping hand to the foreman.

With cheery politeness the Kid swept off his Stetson. But the Lazy O punchers only stared grimly in response to the cordial salute.

"Say, you guys," said the Kid, "I guess this is the Lazy O?"

"You've said it," grunted Shorty.

"I reckoned I was hitting it right, though I'm sure a stranger in the Packsaddle country," said the Kid. "I'm sure glad to meet up with you galoots, seeing I'm the boss of the ranch, and you're my bunch. I guess you're wise to it that I've bought this hyer ranch, through Lawyer Lucas at Pecos Bend."

"You Mister Fairfax?" grunted Long Bill.

"You've got it."

Panhandle Pete strode forward. Two or three punchers lifted Barney Baker from the pinto, and placed him on a bench outside the bunkhouse. The foreman of the Lazy O sagged helplessly, and one of the men held him on the bench. He was evidently hard hit, and he could not speak. His half-glazed eyes stared stupidly at the scene.

Pete fixed his eyes on Mister Fairfax, who had slid down from the white horse now. The Kid gave him a cheery nod.

"You're Panhandle Pete, I reckon, who met up with me on the trail yesterday," he remarked. "Didn't I fire you?"

"What's happened to Barney Baker?"

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"Tell Barney Baker when he humps in," grinned Kansas Jake. "It was his orders, and I'm a guy to jump when my foreman says jump."

"You—you're a dirty, sneaking coyote, shooting a man down from cover," said Long Bill, "and I'm telling you so! I say you're a dog-goned, white-livered greaser; and if you don't like it, draw your gun, you pesky poloccat, and let's see if you've the sand to shoot without hiding yourself in cover."

"Aw, can it!" said Kansas Jake. "If you've got a grouch, blow it off to Barney Baker when he rides in. He won't be long, I guess."

Long Bill gave an angry snort, and tramped back to the corral. There was an excited and angry discussion among the Lazy O punchers. Hitherto, the bunch had backed Barney Baker's play, without hesitation. They stood in with the foreman, to keep the Lazy O out of the hands of the rightful owners. But hitherto Barney's methods had been within the code. This was sheer murder, and the Lazy O bunch did not stand for it.

"Say, is that Barney coming?" exclaimed Shorty suddenly. "Who's he got with him?"

And the discussion, which was rapidly becoming a quarrel, ceased, as two horsemen emerged into view from a fold of the prairie.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Mister Fairfax Meets His Bunch!

THE Rio Kid rode on towards the Lazy O ranch.

He was riding the white horse on which Barney Baker had ridden with him out of Packsaddle that

demand. Pete surlily. "I guess this bunch wants to know."

"I sure ain't keeping it a secret," grinned the Kid. "Barney Baker rode out of town with me this morning on a white horse. It kinder came into my abeza that the guy on the white hoss was a lot safer than the guy on the other cayuse. So I asked him to change critters."

"You asked him?" said Long Bill. "Jest that."

"And he did it!" gasped Kansas Jake. "You telling us that Barney Baker was willing?"

The Kid shook his head.

"I ain't telling you he was willing," he answered. "I never saw a guy who was so unwilling. Why, feller, he was so unwilling to change hosses with me that I knew he'd got a man fixed up in cover on the trail to pick me off like a buzzard—a sneaking, pesky coyote of a man, I guess, who was afraid to show himself in the open, but figured that he could cook my goose with a long-distance rifle-shot." The Kid's eyes were intently on Kansas Jake. "I had to persuade Barney to change horses at the end of a six-gun. You get me?"

"Sho!" ejaculated Long Bill. "That foreman of mine," said the Kid, shaking his head again, "don't seem to be pleased to get a new boss. He fixed up a galoot to put it across me on the trail. But he slipped up on it. He was riding my cayuse, and his man got him by mistake. I reckoned he would!"

There was a groan from the foreman. "It was a dirty game," went on the Kid—"a mean game! I guess that guy Baker is a powerful mean cuss! I allow I don't expect that sort of game in my bunch here."

"Your bunch?" said Panhandle Pete between his teeth.

"My bunch," said the Kid quietly. "Any man that don't want to jump to orders when I wag my chin, can walk up to the office and ask for his time."

There was a growl. Most of the punchers on the spot had condemned the murderous game that had been played on the prairie trail. But the sight of Barney Baker crumpled up with a severe wound, and the presence of the new boss, made a change in their feelings. All Packsaddle knew that the Lazy O bunch scorned the idea of letting a new boss run the Lazy O. Taking orders from a boss, and a boy at that, got the goat of the bunch at once.

"I opine," went on the Kid, "that we're going to pull together on this ranch O.K. We only got to know one another better. You don't want to forget that I'm boss; but I guess I ain't forget that I've been a cow-puncher myself, and ridden with a bunch; and if any guy here has anything to worry him, he's only got to get up on his hind legs and say so, and I guess I'll put it right. Ain't that good enough for you?"

Silence. "Barney Baker has been playing a gum game, years on end, with this ranch," continued the Kid. "That sort of shenanigan is going to stop right now. He sent Panhandle Pete and Coyote to scare me away with quirts, and they can tell you 'uns jest how much they scared me. Then he put up Lariat to get me in gun-fighting—and they'll tell you in Packsaddle that Lariat's got a front seat in the town cemetery." Then he fixed up with an all-fired dirty skunk to get me from cover on the trail, and the skunk got him instead. I guess you're wise to it

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now that you're not dealing with a tenderfoot from Tendertown! I don't want any trouble with this bunch; but if there's trouble, you'll know I'm around. Chew on that!"

Grim silence.

"You, Panhandle Pete and Coyote, I've said you're fired," added the Kid. "But you didn't rightly know me then, and I guess I'm giving you another chance. Stick to the bunch—so long as you toe the line. But them on it that you've got a boss now that is going to run the Lazy O, and run it his own way."

"You reckon?" muttered Panhandle Pete.

"Sure thing! Now that's enough chewing the rag," said the Kid. "Get that man Baker to his bunk, and look after him. He's a pizen scallywag, but he ain't going to bleed to death like a stuck pig. Fix him up the best you can."

The punchers looked at one another. More than one was tempted to reach for a gun, and settle the matter there and then. Long Bill, the horse-wrangler, was the only one who translated the thought into action. But before his hand reached the holster a gun was in the Kid's hand.

"Drop it, feller," said the Kid. Long Bill stared at the Kid's gun. He jerked his hands away from his belt with almost comic precipitation.

"Say, Mister Fairfax, you ain't no slouch on the draw!" he said. "Your game, sir! And lookye here, Mister Fairfax, this hyer is a tough bunch, and I guess you've bitten off more'n you'll ever chew at the Lazy O, but this bunch don't stand for shooting a man in the back from cover, and I'll tell you that we never knowed anything of that dirty game on the trail. If there's two-three guys here who stand for it, that ain't the whole bunch. You don't want to get it into your cabela that you're up agin a bunch of murdering Greasers."

The Kid smiled. "I guess I've sized up this bunch," he said. "You ain't no tender infants, I'll tell the world, and I don't aim to feed you on milk and candy. But I guess you're white, and I ain't got it agin you that you've backed Barney Baker's play. But I want you to get wise to it that that play's over, an' start fair with your boss. You won't find me a worse man than Baker to deal with."

And, with a cheery nod to the punchers, the Kid walked away to the ranch-house.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Kid Takes Control!

"THIS sure puts it over the Mal Pais!" murmured the Rio Kid. "This sure goes one better than the Huecas."

The boy outlaw of the Rio Grande, transformed into Mister Fairfax, boss of the Lazy O, walked through the ranch-house, and was satisfied with what he saw therein.

It was a timber house, well-built, with a veranda in front, and the furnishings, though rough and a good deal knocked about, were serviceable. The Kid guessed that he would make himself comfortable in that rancho, when he had had time to fix things a little. He had ridden hard trails for a long time, and he figured that he was entitled to take it easy on his own ranch. Not that the Kid was the man to live an easy life. Rancher as he was, he was likely to put in as much work on the ranges as any puncher in the bunch. But he was going to have pleasant fixings, and make things comfortable. But there were two things about the ranch-house that dis-

pleased the Kid. First, the place was ill-kept; second, there was no service at hand. Obviously, the house had been lived in, and the Kid knew that Barney Baker must have lived in it, instead of bunking with the outfit. And he guessed that Barney hadn't lived in it without a chore man. The Kid was ready for food after his ride out from Packsaddle; and, after walking through the house and looking round some, the Kid called and then shouted; but no one came in reply.

So the Kid walked out again, and called across to a puncher who was coming away from the bunkhouse.

"Say, feller!" Shorty looked round.

"Who does the chores in this shebang, feller?" asked the Kid.

Shorty grinned. "There's a Greaser cook," he answered. "But I reckon that Diego is Barney's man."

"Do you?" said the Kid pleasantly. "I guess I ain't no use for a foreman keeping a cook. Where's that Diego?" "I guess you can find him, if you want him."

Shorty was turning away with that. "Say, feller, walk this-a-way," said the Kid softly. "I guess I ain't done talking to you yet."

Shorty, walking away without heeding, gave a sudden jump as a bullet flicked his chaps. He spun round, his hands at his belt.

The Kid's gun looked at him. "You pull that gun, feller, and the bunch will have a buryin' job on hand," remarked the Kid. "You want to learn not to give your boss back-chat, feller. You surely do! Step this-a-way."

Shorty relinquished the gun, but he did not stir. He stared at the new boss of the Lazy O from where he stood.

"You walking this-a-way?" inquired the Kid.

"I guess not!" Bang! Shorty gave a howl as a bullet grazed his ankle.

Bang! Shorty jumped. "Keep jumping," said the Kid grimly. "I guess I'm fanning you some. Keep jumping, you pesky bonehead, if you don't want lead in your toes."

Bang, bang! Shorty, the puncher, had played the game of "fanning" more than once, with a Chinaman or some nervous tenderfoot for a victim. It was the first time it had been played on Shorty himself. The thickset, heavy cowman jumped desperately as the bullets crashed round his feet. He had to jump, for the Kid meant business, and a broken ankle or a shattered foot would have been the penalty of disobedience.

There was a shout, and two or three punchers ran towards the ranch-house. They stared at the sight of the new boss fanning Shorty with bullets.

"Jump, you bonehead!" roared the Kid.

There was a shout of laughter from the Lazy O punchers. This was the kind of game that appealed to their rough sense of humour.

"Hump it, Shorty!" shouted Long Bill. "Say, you are some jumper! You sure do beat a prairie rabbit."

Six shots rattled out, and the Kid lowered a smoking gun. Shorty came to a breathless halt, his face burning with rage and mortification. In his rage, he forgot that he was dealing with the man who had shot up Lariat, the gunman, and as the firing ceased, and he came to a standstill, he grabbed a revolver from his hip. But the Kid's second gun was in his left hand, ready. Bang!



THE KID MEETS HIS PUNCHERS! "I'm glad to meet with you galoots, seeing that I'm boss of this ranch, and you're my bunch," said the Kid. He looked round the group, and lowering faces met his glance. "You Mister Fairfax?" grunted Long Bill surlily. (See Chapter 2.)

Shorty's Colt flew from his hand. With a howl of agony the puncher clapped his numbed hand to his mouth, sucking desperately at fingers that felt paralysed, and yelling with pain.

"Aw, can it!" drawled the Kid. "You ain't hurt any. Think I'd spill the juice of a good little man like you? Not by a jugful! I guess you'll want a new gun, but your fist'll be as good as new. You don't want to wake up all the coyotes in the Packsaddle country that-a-way."

He glanced at the staring punchers. "I sure ain't asked for an audience hyer," he remarked. "Me, I'm talking pleasant and peaceful to this guy."

The punchers, with dubious looks, faded out of the picture. The Kid walked over to Shorty, who was still sucking his numbed fingers, though he had ceased to howl.

"Say, you don't want to get mad, feller," said the Kid amicably. "You ain't hurt any. And I guess on your looks you're a good little man, and I'd sure hate to plug you for keeps. Where's that dago?"

Shorty looked at him. "I guess he's somewhere's around," he answered slowly.

"Rouse him out," said the Kid. "Tell him to hop into the shebang just as quick as he knows how, before something happens to him."

Shorty slouched away, and the Kid stepped back into the ranch-house. It was not Shorty's intention to look for the Mexican cook and chore-man; he intended to clear away, and leave the new boss to find Diego for himself, if he wanted him. But, somehow, Shorty changed that intention, the numb ache in his fingers perhaps helping him to do so. At all events, ten minutes later, a swarthy-skinned Mexican presented himself in the ranch-house.

The Kid gave him an amiable nod. "You Diego?" he asked.

"Si."

The man's stare was insolent, his

answer more so. The Rio Kid's jaw set a little. The whole bunch, from the foreman down to the chore-man, objected to the new boss; but the Kid was there to educate them.

"I guess 'si,' in your lingo, means yos," the Kid remarked thoughtfully. "Ain't there another word to follow?"

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders. He was a large, fat man, and almost towered over the slim Kid.

"I guess," went on the Kid amiably, "that you can talk your own lingo to me, if you want, Diego, seeing that I've ridden trails in Mexico, and know the talk like a book. But when you answer me, feller, you say, 'Si, senior, if you talk in your lingo. You get me?'"

"I serve Barney Baker," said the Mexican. "I take orders from the Senor Baker."

"I guess the Senor Baker won't be giving a whole lot of orders on this ranch any more," smiled the Kid. "I guess the Senor Baker's going to be fired, jest as soon as he'll be able to hit the trail. Looks as if he's been camping in this shebang instead of the bunk-house; but that's played out now. You catch on, Diego? I'm your boss now, and I ain't pleased with you, none. You got to hand out a dinner—a good one, mind, if you've any fancy for keeping your carcass in one piece—and then you got to clean up this shebang like she was a new pin. Me, I never stand for a dirty shack. No, sir! You get me?"

The Mexican grinned.

"Now, jump to it," said the Kid. Diego did not stir, but his mocking grin intensified.

"You ain't obeying orders?" asked the Kid gently.

"Yours, no!" said Diego. "Carambo! Before it is night you will be shot to pieces by the bunch! I give only a snap of the fingers for you, hombre!"

And Diego snapped his swarthy fingers at the Rio Kid.

The next moment the Kid had picked up his quirt and was grasping the Mexi-

can. Big man as he was, the Greaser crumpled up in that steely grip, and he went with a crash to the floor.

Across his back, as he sprawled, came the thong of the quirt, with a crash.

There was a fierce yell from the Mexican, and he bounded to his feet, a knife gleaming in his dusky hand.

"Aw, shucks!" said the Kid.

The heavy metal butt of the quirt struck the dusky hand, and the knife went to the floor. It struck Diego's dusky, greasy head the next instant, and the Mexican sprawled once more. The Kid picked up the knife, and snapped the blade off under his heel. Then he lifted the quirt, his eyes gleaming down at the sprawling, cowering man.

"I guess," said the Kid, "that you ain't learned manners, none, while you was being bossed by Barney Baker in this hyer shebang. I kinder got a bunch that I'm the galoot to teach you, Diego."

And the quirt descended with heavy lashes. Diego squirmed and yelled and howled. He leaped up and rushed for the door, with the leather still falling; but the Kid spun the thong of the whip, and it twined round Diego's leg, and he stumbled and crashed down. And the quirt rose and fell.

"Senor, senior; pity!" yelled Diego. "Pardon—a thousand pardons! Por todos los santos! A thousand pardons!"

"You figure that you've had all you want, feller?" asked the Kid amiably.

"Si, senior, si!" spluttered Diego.

Oh, si, si, si!"

"I guess you ain't no hog, Diego; you sure know when you've had enough," said the Kid. "You got it into your greasy cabeza that this hyer infant is boss of this shebang?"

"Si, senior!" moaned Diego. "Oh, si, si, si!"

"That goes," said the Kid cheerfully. "You ever kick up a rookus again, feller, and the quirt's ready for you. You want to remember she's always

handy. Now you want to hand out that grub, Diego; and hand it out smart and smiling, afore you get down to cleaning up this shack."

The Rio Kid sat down to his meal with a cheery face. The Mexican chore-man served him with eager attention, jumping at a word. Whatever might be the Kid's fortune with the Lazy O bunch, at all events he had no more insolence to expect from the ranch-house cook. It was a good meal, and the Kid did it justice; and when he had finished Diego was at work with mops and water-pail. The Kid watched him for a few minutes, with an approving eye. He guessed that Diego was ready to feed out of his hand, and he was right.

Leaving the chore-man occupied in unaccustomed industry, the Kid walked out of the ranch-house. He strolled across towards the corral. That afternoon the Kid aimed to ride over his new domain and survey the ranch and its vast ranges. He gave a cheery nod to

Long Bill, the horse-wrangler, who was lounging by the corral gate. The wrangler looked at him with a curious mixture of respect and hostility.

"Saddle up the pinto for me, feller," said the Kid pleasantly.

"I guess you can saddle your own cayuse, Mister Fairfax!" grunted Long Bill.

"Sure!" assented the Kid. "I can, and do, when I ain't got a lantern-jawed, polecat-faced, ornery, bone-headed wrangler to do as he's told. Jest at present, I've sure got one, and I'm going to see him saddle up that pinto, or else I'm going to boot him right off this ranch. Don't touch that gun, you dog-goned gink. I've got you covered from my pocket, and you wouldn't live long enough to draw!"

The Lazy O wrangler breathed hard and deep. For a long second he stared in the face of Mister Fairfax, and then quietly he stepped into the corral and roped the pinto. Quietly he saddled up

the Kid's horse, and Mister Fairfax nodded his thanks and mounted.

"I guess," remarked the Kid, "that it was Barney Baker who was going to show me over my property, but he sure won't be backing a bronc for a long time to come. I want a man who knows the ranch from A to izzard. I got to see the goods before I pay on them. Where's Panhandle Pete?"

"In the bunkhouse with Barney."

"Send him hyer."

Long Bill hesitated a moment, and then, as if under some impulsion stronger than his own will, strode away to the bunkhouse. In a few minutes Panhandle Pete appeared, scowling blackly at the new boss, and obviously itching to reach for a gun. The Kid gave him a pleasant nod.

"I've heard that you was Barney's right-hand man on this ranch," he remarked. "You're the galoot to show

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The GREAT PYRAMIDS



There is no known monument in the world so vast and aged, and with such a romantic history as the Pyramids of Egypt.

WONDERFULLY ugly, but terribly awe-inspiring. That's the tally you have to tie on to the great Sphinx which almost rubs shoulders with the colossal Pyramids of ancient Egypt. There is no known monument in the whole world so aged or so vast as the Pyramids. They were built somewhere about 4,000 years before Christ, and the largest of them is the biggest building in the world. Originally it was 480 feet high. The Pyramids are, as you know, hollow, so they really are buildings. The Sphinx is not a building, because it is solid—carved out of one stupendously enormous block of solid rock, except the fore-paws, which are made of gigantic stone blocks. The Sphinx of Gizeh is the largest and oldest single sculptured figure in the whole world—187 feet long. There it sits, its base continually being covered over by hurricane-swept sand from the desert on whose edge it is; 5,000 years old, the great lion's body with a man's head, known to the Arabs as The Father of Terror!

A Mighty Target!

That enormous hewn face has looked out over the Egyptian desert, inscrutable and menacing, all those centuries, with a temple built between the out-thrust paws, the only signs of the passage of that vast time being traces of weather-wear and chips which show where once upon a time Mohammedan soldiers used the mighty Sphinx as an easy target.

This battered monster, half-beast, half-human, was erected by the ancient Egyptians as an emblem of majesty and dignity. It is an awful and impressive monument, a fitting companion for the Great Pyramid close by which was built as a tomb for Cheops, one of the greatest of the Pharaohs.

It took 100,000 men something like thirty years to put it up, and how it was constructed can only be guessed at. For nowhere in the vicinity are blocks of stone to be found—only endless miles of storm-stirred, blinding sand, baked by the fierce sun.

Inside the Pyramids!

When the first blocks of stone—wherever they came from—were settled in place, it is thought that a huge sloping roadway of sand was made to the stones' summit. Up that slope slaves in their thousands were compelled to drag the next lot of stones. When they were in place, the sloping bank of sand was carried to their top, and so until the last stone was in place.

Miles long that artificial roadway must have been before the royal tomb was completed. They greased it to make the passage of the stones a little easier, and other slaves followed behind the great blocks driving in wedges to help the masses up.

The great Pyramid of Gizeh is perfect in form, symmetrical which ever way you view it. Its sloping sides each measure about 755 feet, and from

pointed tip to base it is 475 feet. As was customary with the many pyramids which are to be found in different spots, there is a burial chamber beneath it—far underground. But in the Great Pyramid this chamber is in an unfinished state, the real burial chamber being in the mass of masonry itself.

Of course, its interior has been explored, long ago. Which perhaps accounts for the fact that it is now empty. There is a passageway into it, from the Pyramid's north side, up which you can walk until you come to what is now known as the Grand Gallery. From that, there is a turning which leads to a chamber known as the Queen's. But if you go on climbing instead of turning aside from the Grand Gallery, you come to a great empty chamber and then to the King's chamber.

There you find a tremendous sarcophagus, made from one solid block of granite—and empty. That chamber is ventilated by channels which lead to the open air, and we can only surmise that the body of the ancient Pharaoh whose last resting place it was designed to be was stolen by robbers.

Mysterious Names!

At one time there was an outer casing of stone to protect the actual blocks which made this Pyramid. But they have gone, and no man knows the story of their going. It is thought all those outer stones were stripped off and taken away to build the city of Cairo.

The word "pyramid" exactly fits these monstrous burial chambers, and so needs no explaining. But "sphinx" does not explain itself. The word was tacked on to the half-beast, half-human effigy by the Greeks when they came to Egypt. It is a Greek word, meaning "The Throtter."

They used the word to describe a terrible creature which had a woman's head, the body of a lioness, and wings. Legend says she lived in Africa in the beginning, then the gods sent her to Greece, where the mythical monster lived on a rock asking all who passed by a riddle: "What walks on four legs in the morning, on two at noon, on three in the evening?"

All who could not answer she strangled. The answer was "a man," who crawls on hands and knees as a baby, upright in the prime of life, with the help of a stick when old age enfeebles him!

"El Hajar, the Arab slave raider!" he cried.

But before he could utter another word the villain fired again, and, snatching at the diamond, which dropped to the quilt, dashed for the window.

"After him! After him!" shrieked Joe. "He has got the paper, too!"

There was a splintering of rotten woodwork as the Arab leapt as actively as a cat for the balcony, dropped lightly on to it, and, vaulting over, thudded to the mud floor of the courtyard.

Dick looked down, and saw him vanish in the darkness of a doorway.

When he re-entered the room Joe was holding up his hand.

"Be quiet. The poor fellow is dead!" he said in a husky whisper. "It's a pity El Hajar got away with the paper."

"But he didn't!" said Pie. "Dischile was too quick for him. Pieface, the king's son, has got der secret ob King Nadur's diamonds!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

A New Expedition is Planned!

PAUL BARTON had not died as a result of either of El Hajar's cowardly pistol-shots.

Both had missed him by a fraction of an inch, but the shock had proved too much, and in the tense excitement his tired spirit had fled.

This was fortunate for Joe and the boys, as the pistol reports—of frequent occurrence in that part of the town—had apparently attracted no attention, and the fact of the deceased missionary having passed away from natural causes avoided the need for a public inquiry.

"Which would have been the very wust thing possible for the likes o' we," explained Joe, when the funeral was over and the last remains of the gallant gentleman who had risked his life a thousand times to bring back his precious secret to civilization were laid to rest in the little European cemetery outside the town. "As it is, no one except us four and that villain Hajar knows anything about King Nadur's diamonds. Now, young fellow-me-lads, what's the best thing to be done? The ship clears the canal to-morrow. Are we to go home with her or not?"

"Of course not," exclaimed Frank, who had secretly discussed the matter with the other two. "Those diamonds must be found and secured for Great Britain. Pie's father must be discovered, and restored to his kingdom from which El Hajar took him; and if ever the chance comes our way the Arab must be caught and brought to justice."

They were sitting on the balcony of the Hotel Continental, looking towards the lighthouse.

The strange occurrence at the Hotel Splendide had opened up a new and entrancing vista, a call into the very heart of the Dark Continent. And there was every reason why they should obey it—none why should not.

More than a year in the South Seas had not daunted their restless enthusiasm.

"Of course, Pie's as keen as mustard," interjected Dick. "Naturally enough, he wants to see his dad again, but he swears he won't go, Joe, unless you let the bunjik come, too."

"The bunjik!" Joe scratched his head. "Waal, that's not too bad an idea. I've heard a hefferlunt can be very useful in an African forest, roosting up trees and drinking up rivers, and if

ever pervisions giv out we should be able to kill him, and fry the tasty bits for hefferlunt steak."

"I kill you, ole jack-boot fago, if ever you touch dat dere bunjik," muttered the black youth fiercely. "You relember what dat liklum feller can do for us, and you jest lettum come!" Joe pretended to submit with very ill grace.

"All right, grate-polish, we'll take him. Then it's decided, we shift on for Cairo in the morning."

"Why Cairo, Joe?" Frank asked.

The sailor pointed to the west. "Because that's the only place this side of Europe we can fix up proper equipment. You see, we shall need camels and guides, and all the paraphernalias for a long trek across the Sahara."

"But why go that way? Why not cut down the Nile Basin, and strike into Central Africa from the north!"

"Because we should only succeed in losing our sweet selves. Africy is so immense—hundreds of times bigger than England—and away from the big towns we should find no one to guide us."

"You see, the difficulty is we can't go touting and asking all the ju-ju men we meet to tell us the way to the City at the Sun God, because they'd promptly smell a rat, and do us down for the papers. No, my young two-year-old, the only safe way is to go by the way the rev. gent came."

"And that is?"

"First of all, across the desert to Morocco. See, here's his map. His route cuts right across the Atlas mountains, turns south into Nigeria, touches the Cameroons, then east to the Congo, and so on until it breaks off in the land of the fuzzy-zuzzies. Once among them rapscallions—what is relatives of young Pie there—we strike north again, and after a journey of several hundreds of miles, come to a place marked with a cross."

"And that is where we shall find the diamonds."

"No, it ain't," said Joe. "Mr. Barton said we should find the rock-inscription first of all, and when we've deciphered that, we should locate the City of the Sun God."

"But supposing we either can't decipher it, or don't find Pie's dad—what then?"

"Then, my little tiny dears, we've just had several thousand miles of tramp for nowt; so it's up to you to decide what you're going to do."

"We've decided," said Frank Polruan crisply, glancing towards his chum, who nodded agreement.

"And you, blackmoor?" Joe asked.

"Where you three go dis chile goes—with bunjik," replied Pie simply.

"Right!" said Joe. "That settles it. Well, my ebony-faced friend," he added, as a Nubian boy, dressed in a red uniform plentifully edged with thick bands of gold lace, came towards them, "what do you want?"

"Please, mos' honnerabel sar, a letter for you," said the little fellow, holding out a brass Moorish tray.

"For me?" inquired Joe, bending over the envelope. "It's got no moniker on. I mean, it's not addressed to me."

"The sheikh, him said it was for the big white man," persisted the dwarf.

"What sheikh?" questioned the sailor suspiciously.

"Great much big Arab man, in white djellab with blue moon on, so." And bending down, he traced with his

finger a crude design of a crescent on the dust of the balcony steps.

"Right!" said Joe. "Then I'll read it!"

He tore off the covering, and a thin slip of yellow, native-made paper fluttered in the breeze. And on it, in curious Arabesque characters, were these words:

"Take warning, O enemies of Islam! By the beard of the Prophet I swear that if you attempt to reach the sacred City of the Sun God, I, even I, and my followers will take vengeance on you. And this is my oath as the eldest born of my father and by the Prophet and the Koran. Take heed, therefore, while there is yet time.

"(Signed) EL HAJAR."

"Right!" snapped Joe, rising suddenly and tearing the message into tiny scraps, which he flung upon the ground and set his foot upon. "There is my answer to El Hajar. We'll find King Nadur's diamonds, or perish in the attempt!"

THE END.

(The four adventurers realise that they are in for a hot time in taking up this quest into Africa. But they don't mind—they love a stirring adventure. See next week's long story: "THE DESERT RAIDERS!")

"The LAZY O BUNCH!"

(Continued from page 18.)

me round my property, Pete. Git your cayuse from the corral."

Panhandle Pete went without a word into the corral for his horse. Long Bill came back towards the Kid.

"Say, Mister Fairfax—" he began.

"Shoot!" said the Kid.

"I guess you're wise to it that the Lazy O bunch don't want a new boss around here," said the wrangler slowly. "Barney's all shot up, but I guess the bunch are looking to him for orders. But—"

"Spill it!" smiled the Kid.

"You don't want to ride the range with Panhandle Pete," said the wrangler abruptly. "This bunch is rough, and don't give a continental red cent for a new boss, and I'm telling you so. But there ain't more'n two-three guys in the bunch would stand for shooting a man in the back. I guess you ain't wanted on the Lazy O, Mister Fairfax, but I'm telling you that you don't want to ride the range with Panhandle Pete."

"I reckoned you was a square man," assented the Kid. "You'll sure like your new boss when you get to know him. You only want to get it into your cabela that Barney Baker's jig is up, and that there's a now man here to run this ranch. Then you'll be O.K."

A few minutes later the Kid rode out on the plain with Panhandle Pete. The horse-wrangler and several punchers stood watching him go. Long Bill drew a deep breath.

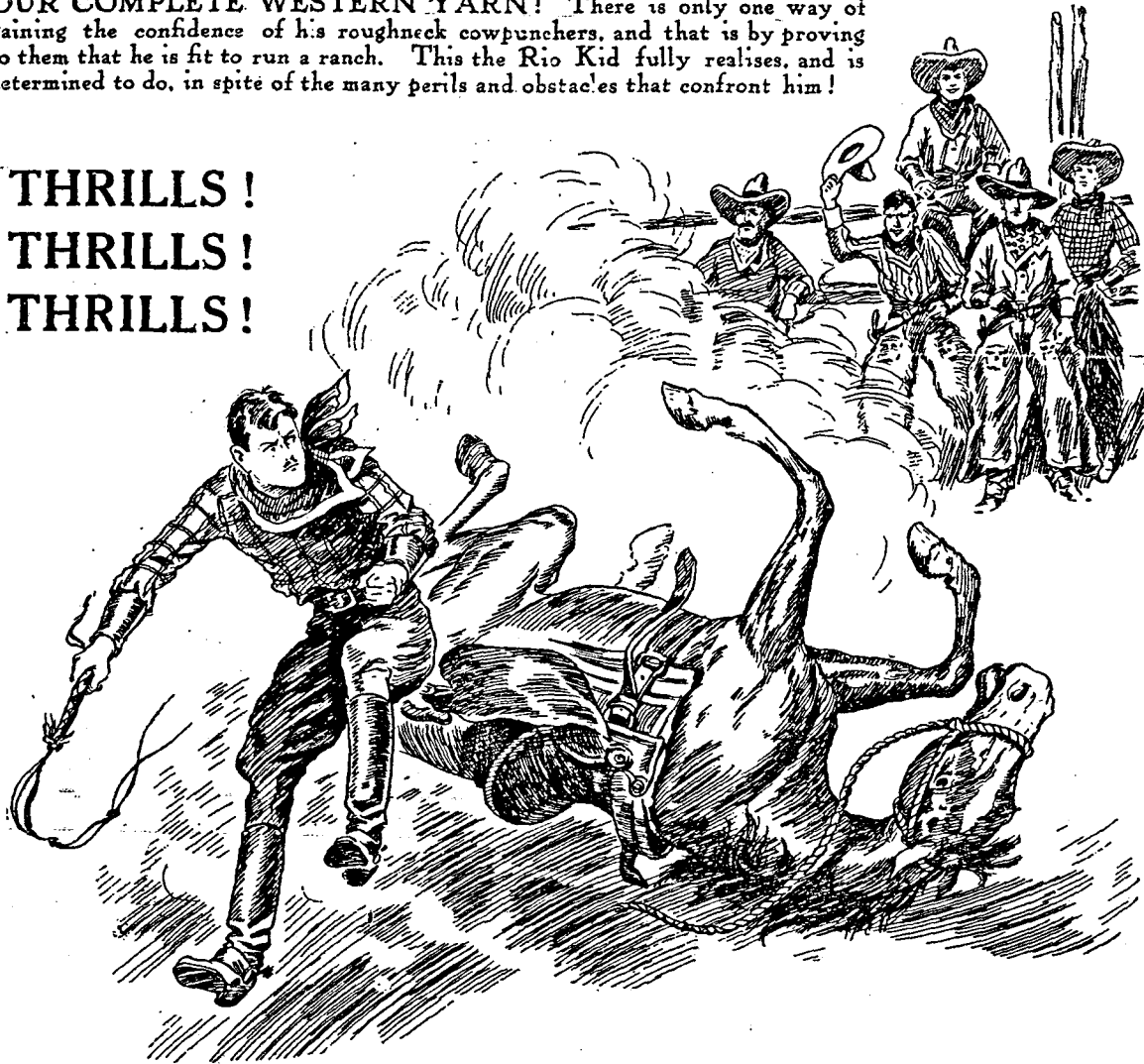
"I've put him wise," said Long Bill. "But I guess he didn't need it any. He knows Pete's game better'n Pete does. Both them guys won't come back to this shebang alive, but I reckon it won't be Mister Fairfax who stops out for the buzzards." The Lazy O wrangler paused. "Boys we've got a new boss who ain't no slouch. If there's a guy in Texas who can run this ranch and handle this bunch, it's that guy, I'll tell the world!"

THE END.

(Another roaring Western yarn next week, chums!)

OUR COMPLETE WESTERN YARN! There is only one way of gaining the confidence of his roughneck cowpunchers, and that is by proving to them that he is fit to run a ranch. This the Rio Kid fully realises, and is determined to do, in spite of the many perils and obstacles that confront him!

THRILLS!
THRILLS!
THRILLS!



THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Gunplay on the Prairie!

THE Rio Kid smiled. He was amused, though the situation was one that few would have found amusing. For three long hours, the Kid had been riding the prairie, in company with a galoot who was watching for a chance to pull a gun on him—watching, waiting, his fingers itching to grasp the butt of a Colt.

A score of times, at least, Panhandle-Pete had sought to drop behind the Kid; but the new boss of the Lazy O Ranch was too wary for that. Again and again had Pete almost resolved to chance it, to pull his gun and make it an even break. But every time he weakened when it came to the pinch. Giving "Mister Fairfax" an even break was not much use to the Lazy O cowman. The boy rancher, who had shot up Lariat, the gunman, at Packsaddle, was too good a man for him at gunplay, and Panhandle Pete knew it. Yet with every hour of that long ride under the hot Texas sun the rage suppressed in his heart grew more savage and bitter.

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and again and again the temptation assailed him.

And the Kid, who read every thought that passed behind the dark, scowling face, smiled. Not for a second was he off his guard, while at the same time he was taking a keen interest in his survey of the wide-stretching ranges of the Lazy O. The Rio Kid, under the name of "Mister Fairfax," had bought that ranch, and he was looking over his new

end of the horn in dealing with the scowling cowman.

"Say, this is sure a good proposition," the Kid remarked amiably as they turned their horses in the direction of the ranch again, with a good ten miles before them. "This hyer is as good land as any I've seen along the Rio Pecos, hombre, and I'm sure glad that I horned in and bought the Lazy O.

"Far as I've seen as yet, it comes right up to specification. Lawyer Lucas at Pecos Bend put me wise to it, and he sure did spill a mouthful; but I guess it was all straight goods. This hyer is the ranch I've been wanting. I guess I'm settling down in the Packsaddle country from now on."

"You ain't the first guy that's bought the Lazy O," said Panhandle Pete, with a venomous glint in his eyes.

"You've said it," agreed the Kid, with another smile; "and I hear that things have happened to the other guys, and they was sure glad to sell again and get shut of it. I guess Barney Baker worked it, and he sure was a whole team and a cross dog under the wagon when it came to a gum game. But he won't put it over on this infant, hombre."

The KID TAKES THE REINS!

by
RALPH REDWAY

property, guided by Panhandle Pete, and the fact that the cowman was watching for a chance to let daylight through him did not worry the Kid any.

He only wondered whether Panhandle Pete would break out before they rode back to the ranch-house. If he did, the Kid was ready, and he did not figure that he would come out at the little

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Panhandle Pete muttered an oath in his beard.

"Figure it out for yourself, feller," said the Kid cheerily. "That pesky foreman has ruled the roost so long he's come to figure that the ranch was his own to play with. He's scared off, or shot up, every guy that's put up his money on it—or he's stood pat and put up the bunch to do it. Where is he now? Lying in the bunkhouse, all shot up. Where's the gunman he set on me in Packsaddle? Not in a place he'll come back from. And look at you," went on the Kid. "I tell you to ride round the shebang with me to guide me over my own ranch—and you a paid man in my bunch and bound to do it—and all the time you're itching to draw a gun and drop me off this pinto—jest honing to let the sun shine through me, ain't you, feller?" The Kid laughed. "And I don't give a continental red cent for you and your gun, and if you drop your paw on it while we're riding round, you know as well as I do that it will be the last thing you'll do on this side of Jordan. Why not forget it, feller, and make up your mind that your new boss has come to stay?"

Panhandle Pete made no reply to that. He had known that the new boss of the Lazy O was on his guard—but it surprised him to hear it put so plainly and cheerfully.

"Look at the way you've been trying to drop behind me," continued the Kid banteringly. "You're the kind of pizen cuss that would shoot a hombre in the back. You've been watching for a chance. Have you got away with it? Say!"

"You reckon—" muttered the cowman.

The Kid laughed contemptuously.

"I guess I'm wise to it, and knew it afore we pulled cut of the ranch," he answered. "It cuts no ice with me. I guess that when a boneheaded jay like you is able to put it across me, it'll sure be time for me to go over the range, and I'll go smiling. I've toted you round the ranges all this gol-darned afternoon, knowing what was in your pizen skunk's mind, and not caring a cuss. If you've got hoss-sense you'll leave your gun where it is, feller—it won't be healthy for you to pull."

The Kid rode on, the smile still on his lips, the cowman at his side scowling more blackly than before. For hours Panhandle Pete had been watching for a chance, and he had had no chance. But he was desperately determined that the new boss should not live to ride back to the Lazy O. The utter contempt with which Mister Fairfax regarded him, and his murderous intention, was the last straw. If no chance of treachery came his way the cowman savagely resolved that he would pull and try an even break.

They rode on in silence for a time. Then the Kid spoke again, as amiably as before.

"Chew on it, feller," he said. "I've bought this ranch—and what I've seen of it has cinched it—I guess I'm paying down the balance to Lawyer Lucas, and the Lazy O is mine. You're an ornery galoot, but I ain't honing to fire any man of the old bunch. Get it into your cabeza that I'm here to stay, and that I'll treat you like a white man so long as you toe the line. And forget all about Barney Baker and his gum game. That's your best holt."

Panhandle Pete breathed hard. "I guess you're about right, Mister Fairfax," he said, with an air of frankness. "The bunch sure don't cotton to

the idea of a new boss running the Lazy O—the foreman's good enough for us, and he's made it worth our while to stand in with him. But if the game's up, it ain't any use kicking, that I allow. I'm your man, sir."

"That's the music," said the Kid encouragingly. "Keep to that, hombre, and we're going to be friends."

And as if the cowman's words had given him confidence the Kid turned a little in his saddle, away from him, to survey a group of cattle gathered round a water hole at a little distance.

Panhandle Pete's eyes snapped.

It was his chance at last—the chance for which he had been longing. A few words had fooled this kid rancher, and now— Like a flash his hand went to his belt, and the long-barrelled Colt leaped out. But the new boss of the Lazy O seemed to have eyes in the back of his head; and lightning had nothing on him when it came to reaching for a gun. There was a sharp report as the cowman's Colt leaped up; but it was not Panhandle Pete who fired. The cowman uttered a yell of pain as the bullet smashed into his hand and the Colt dropped into the grass of the prairie, unused. And the Kid grinned at him cheerily.

"Say, feller, didn't I warn you that you couldn't put it across this infant?" chuckled the Kid. "Why, you durned polecat, I was giving you a chance to play up like a white man or to show that you was a yellow coyote that couldn't be trusted. Say, you sure are some bonehead."

Panhandle Pete groaned as he clasped his shattered right hand with his left. The Kid rode closer to him.

"I guess you'll never use a gun with that paw again, feller," he said coolly, "and it's only because you're a no-account bonehead that I didn't put the pill through your heart."

The cowman muttered curses.

The Kid, smiling, jerked away his neck-scarf, and bound up the bleeding hand with it, and made a sling for the arm.

"Now you're fixed," he said. "But I guess you want to see a doc as soon as you hit Packsaddle."

"I ain't hitting Packsaddle!" hissed Panhandle Pete.

"It's your best guess," said the Kid. "You ain't riding the Lazy O any more. You're fired, you gink! And if I see you on this ranch again, I'll take the quirt to you. Hit the trail for town, and hit it pronto, or you get the quirt for a starter."

The Kid swished his heavy quirt in the air. Panhandle Pete stared at him with rage and hatred in his burning eyes. But his hand hung wounded at his breast, and his gun was in the grass. Slowly, guiding his broncho with his left hand, he swung round in the direction of the distant cow-town.

"I guess—" he began, his voice thick with rage.

"Can it!" interrupted the Kid. "I've sure let you off easy. But it won't be healthy for you to give me any more chin-wag. I've told you to hit the trail for Packsaddle."

The quirt cracked in the air, and touched the flank of Panhandle Pete's broncho. The animal leaped into motion. The cowman, furious with rage, strove to drag him in; and the quirt rose and fell again, with a heavy lash across Panhandle Pete's back. The cowman gave a yell, and let the broncho go.

"Beat it!" snapped the Kid. "If you ain't on the horizon in three minutes, Packsaddle way, my gun talks again. Beat it, you pizen skunk."

and the cowman, foaming with rage, rode for the cow-town as fast as the broncho could stretch. The Kid sat in the saddle watching the galloping horseman till he disappeared beyond a fold in the prairie, in the direction of Packsaddle.

Then, with a smile, the Rio Kid wheeled his horse, and rode on towards the Lazy O ranch alone.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Long Bill's Idea!

BARNEY BAKER, foreman of the Lazy O, lay propped in his bunk in the ranch bunkhouse wrapped in bandages, white-faced, black-browed. Coyote Jenson sat beside the bunk, smoking. Outside the sunset glowed red across the plains. Barney Baker's eyes were turned on the open doorway, and occasionally a puncher passed his range of vision, generally with a glance towards the bunkhouse where the wounded foreman lay. Barney stirred continually with the pain of his wound, and the bitter discomfort of his thoughts. He was no longer foreman of the Lazy O, according to "Mister Fairfax," the new owner and boss of the ranch. He was "fired." And as soon as he was able to travel he was to hit the trail, and never see the Lazy O again, according to Mister Fairfax.

But it was likely to be some time before Barney was able to sit a horse. And the Kid was not the man to turn him out while he was unfit to ride. That gave the foreman a respite. And he was not thinking of hitting the trail as he lay there. He was revolving schemes of vengeance in his mind, and plans for yet keeping his hold on the Lazy O. Every new owner of the Lazy O, hitherto, had failed to make the grade, owing to the wiles of Barney Baker. And he had not despaired of getting the upper hand of Mister Fairfax.

That it was a tough proposition, Barney admitted. So far, he had registered defeat after defeat, and worst of all was the failure of the ambush on the plains, when Kansas Jake had shot him down instead of the new boss. In his disabled state he could do nothing; but, at least, it enabled him to remain on the Lazy O, and plot and plan. Had he been well the new boss would have cleared him off the ranch. And Barney did not feel at all sure that the bunch, who had stood by him so long, would have chipped in to stop it. The wildest bunch in the Packsaddle country were learning to respect their new boss.

"Ain't he come in yet, Coyote?" grunted the foreman, at last turning wearily in the bunk.

Coyote Jenson grinned.

"I guess he won't come in, Barney. Panhandle Pete is taking him over the ranges, and Pete ain't the guy to lose a chance."

"I guess he will put paid to Pete if Pete tries on any gun-play," growled the foreman. "I saw him shoot up Lariat at Packsaddle. And I'll tell the world that that kid can handle a gun. Panhandle Pete won't get away with anything."

"I'm banking on Pete," said the Coyote confidently. "And I guess Mister Fairfax would be a dead coon now, if I could use my gun hand."

And the Coyote scowled down at his right arm, which was in a sling.

"Aw, can it?" snapped Barney Baker. "You could use your gun-hand

when you met up with him on the trail; and he winged you. You ain't good enough for him, any more'n Pete."

The Coyote scowled and smoked in silence.

"Where's Jake?" snapped the foreman.

"Loafin' outside."

"Call him in."

Kansas Jake came into the bunkhouse. He eyed the scowling man in the bunk unasily. Barney gave him a bitter look.

"You dog-goned gink!" he growled. "A pesky mess you made of it, didn't you?"

"I guess it was your own funeral, Barney," answered the gunman. "You sure told me you'd be riding a white horse. And how was a guy to guess that that gold-darned peck would change hosses with you—and that you'd let him do it?"

"He had a gun on me," snarled Barney. "Cry it out! It can't be helped now. You got to try agin."

"Sure!" assented Jake.

"He'll be riding back to the ranch afore dark. You want to get him from cover as he comes in."

Kansas Jake looked dubious.

"The boys won't stand for it, Barney," he said. "They're sure a tough bunch, but shooting down a man from cover ain't the goods for them. They sure been cussing me a whole lot already."

"You don't want to tell them, or let them see you, you gink," snarled the foreman. "I'm telling you, if we don't get that guy Fairfax the game's up hyer, and we all got to ride. Are we goin' to let that kid rancher brag in Packsaddle that he's tamed the toughest bunch in Texas?"

"He's sure tamed them some," said Kansas. "There ain't a guy in the bunch wants to pull a gun on him. They sure don't want trouble with the galoot that shot up an all-fired gunman like Lariat."

"And me lying here!" groaned Barney. "If I was on my feet I'd soon give him his. You got to get him, Jake. I tell you, in a few days he'll have the bunch feeding out of his hand, and the game will be up here. We've run the Lazy O for years on end, and are we going to be beat at the finish by a kid like Fairfax?"

"I guess I'll try," said Kansas Jake; and he lounged out of the bunkhouse.

Barney Baker sank back on his pillows, with a muttered oath. Long Bill, the horse-wrangler of the Lazy O, stepped in and came across to him. Barney gave him a scowl.

"You takin' candy from the new boss, Bill, like the rest of the bunch?" he asked bitterly.

"Not any," answered the horse-wrangler. "I guess I'm as keen as any guy here to set him going. But I don't stand for shooting a man down from behind a tree, Barney Baker, like a dog-goned dago, and I reckon the bunch won't stand for it either. I tell you the boys are talking about booting Jake off'n the ranch."

"Aw can it!" snarled Barney. "The boys can shoot off their mouths while I'm lying here. I guess they'll shut up when I'm around agin."

"I'm telling you, Barney—"

"Can it! Ain't there a guy in the whole bunch that's man enough to pull a gun on him to his face?" sneered Barney.

"I guess I pulled, and he had me covered so quick it made my head swim," grinned Long Bill. "I ain't

trying that agin, siree. No! And you never pulled on him. You put Kansas Jake behind a tree with a rifle, Barney. Why didn't you pull on him yourself, come to that?"

A curse was the only answer.

"But I got an idea, Barney," went on the horse-wrangler. "Apache is in the corral now—the durndest outlaw bronc in the Packsaddle country. That kid Fairfax can sit a hoss, I allow, but if a guy could get him to back Apache for—"

Barney's eyes gleamed.

"Now you're talking!" he exclaimed. "You want to get him to back Apache, and if that hoss don't kill him, I guess he's got a charm on his life. There ain't a man in the valley of the Pecos can ride Apache; and I'd have had him shot afore this, only I reckoned I could sell him to some guy with his eyes shut. Say, you get that gink Fairfax on Apache, and the Lazy O will be in the market agin for Lawyer Lucas to sell to some other guy."

"I guess I can work it!" chuckled the horse-wrangler. "He's come here to run the ranch, and if he can't ride it's his own funeral. I'll sure get him on Apache and leave it to the hoss."

Long Bill lounged out of the bunkhouse, grinning. Barney Baker was left looking a little comforted. Coyote rose from his bench, and looked out of the doorway, and muttered an oath. Far away on the prairie, in the sunset, a lone horseman appeared in sight, riding towards the ranch.

"He's coming in!" growled the Coyote.

"Mister Fairfax?"

"Yep!"

"And Pete—"

"Pete ain't with him."

"What did I tell you?" growled Barney Baker. "He was too good for Pete, jest as he was too good for you. But if Bill can get him on Apache that outlaw bronc will fix him!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Shot for Shot!

THE Rio Kid rode cheerily towards the ranch in the sunset. He hummed the tune of a Mexican fandango as he rode the pinto.

But his eyes, under the brim of his Stetson hat, were wary and on the alert. Well the Kid knew he was taking his life in his hands, every minute of the day and the night, in undertaking to handle the toughest bunch in Texas. As he approached the ranch the Kid would not have been surprised, any minute, to hear the crack of a rifle. Most of the bunch, tough as they were, would not stand for such dirty work as assassination; but there were two or three gunmen in the outfit who were none too good for it. And the Kid was well aware that Barney Baker, lying disabled in the bunkhouse, had not given up hope of ridding the Lazy O of its new boss. The bunch treated Mister Fairfax with more or less respect; but secretly they were still looking to the wounded foreman as their leader, and backing his play.

A quarter of a mile from the gate in the home fence, on the trail that led up to the ranch, a clump of cottonwoods grew; and the Kid had his eyes keenly on that clump as he neared the ranch. If any gunman in the bunch had a fancy for laying for him as he returned to the Lazy O, that was exactly the spot he would select; for the trail ran almost under the branches of the trees, and any passing horseman

was at the mercy of a marksman hidden there. And the Kid smiled as he saw a blue jay fluttering over the tree-tops. The Kid did not need telling that the bird had been startled by someone moving in the trees below; and he knew that a man was in cover amid the tall trees that grew close together over the trail.

"They sure do want to give a guy a lively time on this hyer ranch!" smiled the Kid as he rode on.

The trail ran past the south side of the clump; and the Kid knew, as if he had seen him, that a man was hidden in the trees, with a rifle already bearing on the trail, watching for him to pass. He had already been seen coming, and the gunman was waiting, he figured. And still at a distance the Kid swung to the right, and galloped towards the trees on the north side of the clump.

He plied quirt and spur as he rode, and the pinto's hoofs seemed scarcely to touch the ground as he flew.

Swiftly he reached the cottonwoods, threw himself from the foaming horse, and leaped into the trees.

A Stetson hat showed in the underwoods that grew thickly among the tall, massive trunks. It had gone as the Kid figured. The ambushed gunman had been watching the south; and when the Kid changed his direction the man came scrambling and plunging through the timber towards the northern side. But he had not counted on the Kid's having spotted the ambushade, or on the swiftness of Mister Fairfax in reaching the timber.

The Kid's gun was in his hand, and the bang of the long-barrelled Colt woke a thousand echoes in the timber and across the plain. The Stetson spun from the head it covered, and there was a yell of surprise and rage.

"Say, you gink, here I am, and I'm coming a shooting!" shouted the Kid.

A rifle cracked in the thicket, and the bullet sang by a yard from the Kid.

He could not see the man who had fired; but the shot was guide enough for him. His return fire crashed through the thicket, bullet after bullet as fast as the Kid could pull the trigger. Leaves and twigs flew before the crashing lead, and there was a scream and a heavy fall.

"I guess that gink has got his!" murmured the Kid.

And he ran on.

Kansas Jake lay stretched under the trees, a rifle by his side, groaning.

The Kid looked down at him, his gun ready if the ruffian lifted a hand. But Kansas Jake was past that. Two of the Kid's bullets had gone through him, and the gunman lay helpless in a pool of blood.

He glared up at the Rio Kid with glazing eyes.

"You got me!" he muttered thickly.

"You've said it!" agreed the Kid coolly. "You durned lobo wolf, it was you, I reckon, that laid for me on the prairie afore! I guess you was some hog not to know when you'd had enough!"

Kansas Jake's hand groped feebly towards his belt. But his strength was gone, and his hand did not reach his gun.

The Kid looked down on him grimly. "I reckon your jig is up," he said.

"It was Barney Baker put you up to this game, I guess."

"Durn him!" muttered Kansas. "I guess I'd have let up on you, but Barney—" He choked.

The Kid waited a moment or two, and then turned away and went back to his horse. There came no sound again from the man who was left lying under the cottonwoods.

The new boss of the Lazy O remounted the pinto and rode on to the ranch. He leaped the gate and rode towards the bunkhouse.

From the doorway Coyote Jenson was staring at him moodily; and three or four punchers watched him ride up.

"Where's Pete, boss?" called out Shorty.

"Pete?" answered the Kid. "I guess Panhandle Pete's fired. He pulled on me, and got hurt, and I sure started him for Packsaddle. He won't be around any more—not so long as I'm boss of the Lazy O!"

"Take that cayuse and look after him," said the Kid. "He's sure a good hoss, and I want him cared for. You get me?"

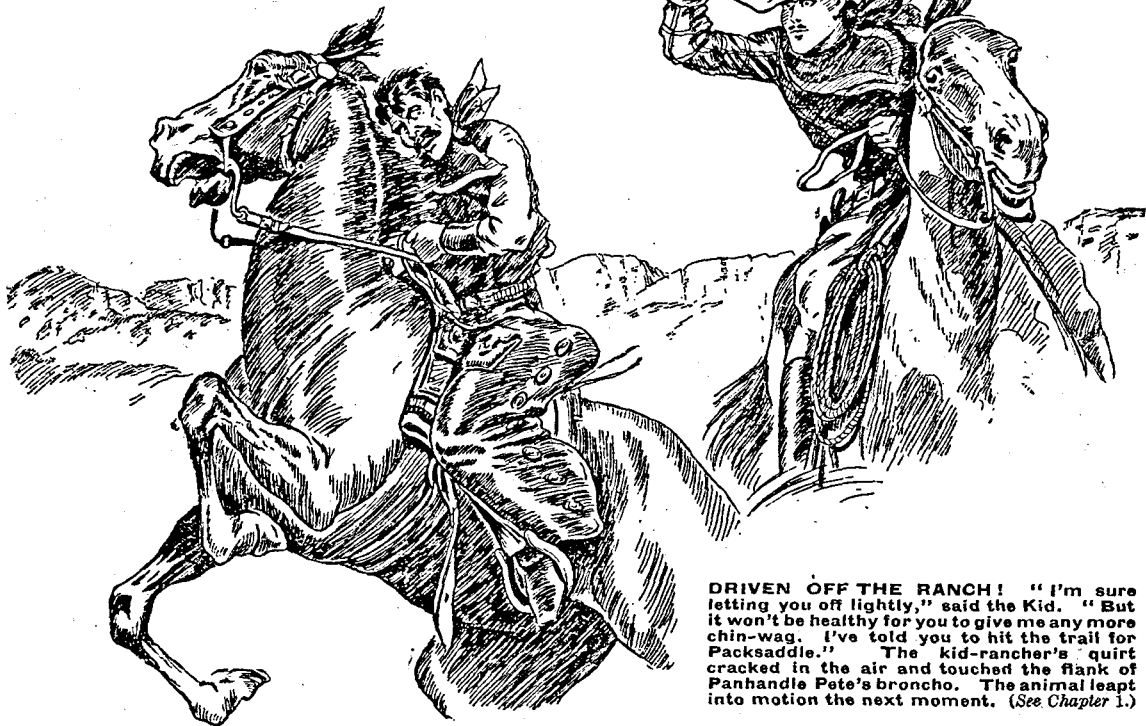
"I get you boss," said Long Bill; and he led the pinto into the corral.

The Kid walked away to the ranch-house. He disappeared into the building, and the Lazy O punchers still stared at one another. Shorty and another man started for the cottonwood clump on the trail. In the bunk-

bought; more than pleased by the new prospect opening before him of life as a rancher in the Packsaddle country.

So long as no galoot tumbled to the fact that he was the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande the Kid figured that it was going to be good. And so far no Packsaddle guy had dreamed of guessing that Mister Fairfax was the "firebug" once known as the Rio Kid.

It made the Kid smile to think what the Lazy O bunch would have said and



DRIVEN OFF THE RANCH! "I'm sure letting you off lightly," said the Kid. "But it won't be healthy for you to give me any more chin-wag. I've told you to hit the trail for Packsaddle." The kid-rancher's quirt cracked in the air and touched the flank of Panhandle Pete's broncho. The animal leapt into motion the next moment. (See Chapter 1.)

"I guess that won't be powerful long!" muttered Coyote Jenson, with a scowl.

The Kid glanced at him.

"What's that?" he asked. "Say it louder, feller, if you want me to hear."

But the Coyote did not say it louder. He backed into the bunkhouse and disappeared from sight.

"Here, you, Shorty," called out the Kid, "take another man, and hit for that clump of cottonwoods along the trail."

"What's the game, boss?"

"I guess you'll find a gink there, all shot up," answered the Kid. "It's the galoot you call Kansas Jake. He laid for me there with a rifle, and came out at the little end of the horn."

"Oh, sho!" ejaculated Shorty.

"He's got his ticket for soup, but I reckon he ain't going to be left for the coyotes and the buzzards," said the Kid. "You take a guy with you, and see him planted decent."

The punchers looked at one another in silence.

"Here you, Long Bill!" called out the Kid, dismounting.

The horse wrangler lounged over from the corral.

house Coyote Jenson stepped to the bunk of the wounded foreman.

"Jake's got his!" he said laconically.

Barney Baker gritted his teeth.

"I guess," said Coyote slowly, "that that guy, Fairfax, is too good a man for this bunch, Barney! If that outlaw bronc don't get him I reckon I'm throwing in my hand."

An oath was the only answer from Barney Baker.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Broncho Buster!

"MISTER FAIRFAX!"

The Rio Kid was sunning himself in the ranch-house porch after breakfast, when Long Bill came loping up. From the porch the Kid could look over many a square mile of rolling prairie and belts of timber all within the borders of the Lazy O. The kid looked, and figured that it was good. This was better, the Kid reckoned, than riding the llano with the Texas Rangers at his heels, or dodging the sheriffs in the tangled paths of the chaparral. The Kid was more than satisfied with the ranch he had

done had they been wise to it; what Barney Baker would have said and done. But it was, the Kid reckoned, all O.K. To the bunch, and to the foreman, he was simply a kid rancher, who had bought the Lazy O and fancied that he could run it.

As the horse-wrangler came up to the porch the Kid turned his head, and gave him a cheery nod. Of all the bunch he liked Long Bill the best, none the less because the horse-wrangler had once tried to pull a gun on him. That gave the Kid no grouch. In fact, rough and tough as the Lazy O bunch were, the Kid did not dislike them any. He knew that they would get the upper hand of him if they could, by any means that came within their rough code, but a fight had always had a good savour to the Kid. He had looked over all the bunch now, and there were a few of them that he reckoned were "pizen" enough for Kansas Jake's tactics, and those few, he reckoned, would watch out how they brought on themselves the fate of Kansas. So long as a square game was played the Kid was not likely to get any grouch against the bunch. As for firing the whole outfit and gettin'

new men in, the Kid did not think of it. He was going to run the ranch, and run the bunch, or know the reason why. Only a guy who asked for it was going to be fired.

"Mister Fairfax, sir," said Long Bill, and there was respect in his tones, though there was a curious glimmer in his eyes.

"Shoot!" said the Kid.

"I guess I want to know, sir," said the wrangler. "There's that there cayuse Apache in the corral, and I guess we've had to keep him fenced off in a corner, all on his lonesome, to keep him from savaging the other critters. There ain't a guy in the bunch can ride him, but I've been telling the boys, sir, that you could do it, Mister Fairfax; and sure if that critter could be broke to the rein he would be worth a thousand dollars to you, sir. Now he ain't worth more'n a rifle cartridge."

The Kid's eyes fixed for a second on Long Bill's face. Then he smiled and nodded.

"I guess I seen that cayuse," he said. "I guess he's an outlaw, on his looks."

"Sure thing," assented Long Bill, "and the boys say there ain't a guy in Texas could ride him, unless it was the Rio Kid."

The Kid started ever so slightly.

"The Rio Kid?" he repeated. "Who's that?"

"Guess you must have come a long way, sir, if you ain't heard of the Rio Kid," said Long Bill, with a stare. "He's the durndest fire-bug in Texas; and they say he's the best rider between the Grande and the Colorado. He ain't never been seen in this section, but any Guy in Packsaddle could tell you all about him."

The Kid smiled.

"But I reckon, sir, I've seen you riding that pinto, and I guess you know suthin' about hosses," went on the wrangler, "and I'm sure telling the bunch you could back Apache, and teach him manners. I've put up ten dollars on it, if you'd care to try it on, Mister Fairfax, sir."

"I can sure ride, a few!" said Mister Fairfax thoughtfully. "I've sat buck-jumpers in my time, but that Apache does look an ornery cuss of a cayuse." Then he nodded. "But if you've bet ten dollars on your boss, feller, your boss ain't letting you lose them if he can help it. Get that cayuse roped in."

"You'll ride him, sir?"

"I'll sure be along as soon as you've got him roped."

Long Bill did not grin till his back was turned. But he grinned widely then, as he walked back to the corral. Shorty was waiting by the corral gate, and he grinned, too, as he received a wink from the wrangler. A dozen punchers, breakfasting at the bunk-house, came out eagerly on the news that Mister Fairfax was going to ride Apache. Even the ranch cook came out of the chuck-house, a frying-pan in his hand, to look on. Coyote Jeneon lounged in the bunk-house doorway, with an eager light in his eyes, Barney Baker, lying in his bandages, breathed hard and waited for what would happen. There was a thrill of excitement when Mister Fairfax sauntered on the scene.

Long Bill roped in the "outlaw" in the corral, and Apache—the wickedest-looking broncho in Packsaddle Country—was led out on two lassoes, one held by Long Bill, the other by Shorty. He came out with his heels lashing, his ears laid back, his eyes glinting, and his teeth showing bare. Two strong ropes held him, but the Lazy O bunch gave him a wide berth, all the same. Long

Bill himself, a master-hand with horses, would never have dreamed of riding Apache; indeed, the outlaw would have been shot long since, but for Barney Baker's hope of selling him to some greenhorn. Nobody on the Lazy O believed that he could be tamed—and every man in the bunch was convinced that if Mister Fairfax put a leg across him Mister Fairfax was a gone coon.

That, according to the ideas of the bunch, was all in the game. If Mister Fairfax fancied that he could ride Apache, and was gink enough to try, it was his own funeral. The bunch were ready to pick up and bury what was left of him afterwards.

Held by the ropes, kicking and squealing, Apache looked a prize-packet, and the Rio Kid regarded him thoughtfully. The Kid had never met his match in horseflesh yet; and his chief thought as he looked at the outlaw was what a fine cayuse he would be if he found his master.

The Kid was quite wise to the game that was going on; he knew that the whole bunch expected him to be killed by the outlaw bronc, and that the wrangler fancied that he had led him into a death-trap. It made the Kid smile. He reckoned he could ride any four-legged critter in Texas, and he knew, too, that if he wanted to put it over on the Lazy O bunch he could not do it better than by riding a horse that no other man in Packsaddle dared to ride. Horsemanship was the surest way to the heart of a cowpuncher.

"I guess he's ready for you to saddle up, Mister Fairfax!" said Long Bill, grinning. "Say, he looks sorter wild, but I guess you'll handle him. I've bet the boys ten dollars you'll make the grade, sir."

"You'll win!" said the Kid.

He took the saddle and fixings and approached the sprawling broncho coolly but cautiously. It was not easy to saddle Apache, even while the ropes held him, but the Kid contrived it; and the staring punchers had to admit that he was "no slouch." But riding the outlaw was another matter.

"Let him rip!"

The Kid's voice rang clearly.

The ropes slipped off, and the sprawling outlaw scrambled furiously to his feet, squealing with rage. He was scarcely on his feet when the Kid was on his back.

"He's up!" yelled Long Bill.

Not a man had expected Mister Fairfax even to be able to mount the outlaw. They had expected the brute to trample him, tear him with his teeth, savage him to death. And they were prepared to watch, with grim ruthlessness, that fate befall the man who fancied that he could run the Lazy O ranch and handle the Lazy O bunch. They stared as they saw him in the saddle, with a powerful grip on the reins.

Apache for a second stood stock-still, as if thunderstruck. Then the circus began.

In a cloud of dust bared teeth gleamed, a shaggy tail whisked, hoofs lashed and leaped and pounded. Every second the punchers expected to see Mister Fairfax go down, to be trampled to death under crashing hoofs, torn by savage teeth.

But Mister Fairfax did not go down. He stuck to the saddle as if he were part of it, an iron hand gripping the reins, the other hand gripping the quirt and lashing.

Squealing and snorting with rage, panting and foaming, Apache tried every demon's trick he knew—and tried them all in vain. He reared on his

hind legs and seemed as if about to topple backwards on his rider, and the Kid clung to his back like a limpet; he came down again with a crash of his forefeet that seemed to shake the earth, but the Kid did not shoot over his head. He rolled sideways on the ground, and the Kid leaped clear; and as the horse scrambled up again he sprang into the saddle once more.

Long minutes passed while man and horse fought for the mastery, and the Lazy O bunch stared on spellbound. They had seen buck-jumping before and hard riding, but they had not seen the like of this.

"He'll make the grade!" gasped Long Bill. "Gee-whiz! I'm telling you guys that he'll make the grade!"

"Carry me home to die!" said Shorty in awe.

Crash, crash, crash! went the thundering hoofs. Again and again the outlaw broncho strove to wind round his neck and tear at the rider with his teeth, and every time his head was jerked grimly back, and the quirt took its toll.

The enraged broncho threw himself down at last and refused to rise; but the lashing quirt drove him to his feet once more, and as soon as he was up the Kid was in the saddle, sticking there like grim death.

And suddenly Apache broke into a frantic gallop, heading for the gate on the trail, and it seemed that he would crash into the strong pine bars; but, under the Kid's iron hand, he rose to the leap and cleared the gate. Down the trail he went thundering at a mad gallop, as if by wild speed he sought to unseat the steady rider; but it was clear by this time that Mister Fairfax had mastered the outlaw, and that it was only a question of time before the horse gave in.

They vanished across the rolling prairie, leaving the Lazy O bunch staring in a buzzing, astonished crowd.

"He'll make it!" said Long Bill, with conviction. "Say, that guy Fairfax is some broncho buster! He sure is some broncho buster!"

Clatter, clatter, clatter!

Back from the prairie came Apache and his rider, leaping the gate and clattering on to the corral. But it was a docile Apache now, covered with dust and sweat, obedient to the rein, the devil in him quelled if not tamed.

"I guess you can turn that cayuse into the corral, Long Bill," drawled the Kid, as he dismounted. "I'll ride him agin to-morrow, but he's sure had enough for a day. Say, he's a good cayuse, and I'll be proud to ride him."

"Mister Fairfax, sir, I take off my hat to you!" said Long Bill almost reverently. "I ain't denying that I reckoned that cayuse would cook your goose, sir; but you've rode him, and I take off my hat to you, sir. The guy who can ride that a-way is good enough to boss me and the Lazy O—and I reckon this bunch says the same!"

"You've said it!" grinned Shorty. And there was a roar of approval from the bunch as Apache was turned into the corral.

The Kid lifted his Stetson to the cheering and walked away, smiling.

He had won the hearts of the wildest outfit in Packsaddle, and he knew—as Barney Baker, cursing in the bunk-house, knew—that from that hour he had the Lazy O bunch feeding from his hand.

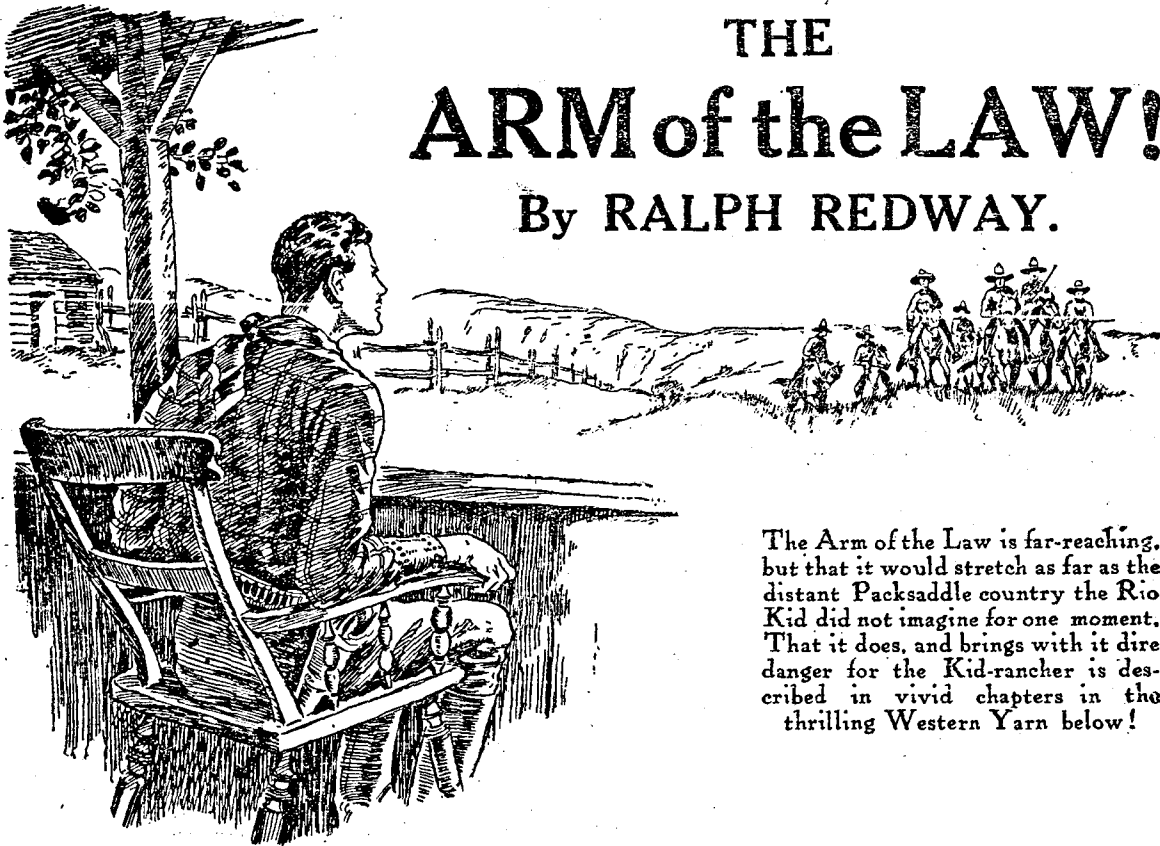
THE END.

(Now, chums, look out for another topping long tale of the Rio Kid next week!)

HE'S ONLY A BOY—YET THE RIO KID MANAGES A BIG TEXAS RANCH!

THE ARM of the LAW!

By RALPH REDWAY.



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Boss of the Lazy O!

"MORNIN', boss!"
"Mornin'!" smiled the Rio Kid.

Nothing could have been more respectful than the greeting of Long Bill, the horse-wrangler of the Lazy O Ranch, as the Rio Kid came swinging cheerily towards the bunkhouse.

Half a dozen punchers on the benches outside the bunkhouse rose to their feet with a cheery "Mornin', boss!" The ranch cook looked out of the chuckhouse and grinned a cheery good-morning to the boy rancher.

The Kid could not help smiling.

He smiled from cheery good-humour, also from the reflection of how he had tamed the Lazy O bunch.

It was hardly more than a week since the Kid had bought the ranch. It was only a couple of days since he had made the final payment to Lawyer Lucas at Pecos Bend, and could call the Lazy O definitely his own. The buying of the Lazy O had made a deep hole in the pile the Kid had made, long ago, at the gold-mines of Arizona. But it was a good bargain; the Kid, who knew everything about land and cattle that a galoot could cram into his cabeza, knew that he had a big bargain in the Lazy O. Forty thousand dollars had bought it; and the Kid figured that if it wasn't worth twice the sum, under capable management, he had better quit ranching and go and chop logs. For so short a time had the Kid been master of the Lazy O, yet already the wild trails of the boy-outlaw of the Rio Grande seemed far away in the past, and the Kid was quite startled every now and then to reflect that Mister Fairfax, boss of the Lazy O, had been known so short a time ago as the Rio

Kid, hunted by the Texas Rangers and half the sheriffs in Texas.

The Kid had made the grade at the Lazy O. Every galoot in the cow-town of Packsaddle had opined that the Lazy O bunch would never take an order from "Mister Fairfax." He was the sixth or seventh guy who had bought that ranch; and every time previously Barney Baker, the foreman, had put paid to it. Former buyers had been scared off, bullied off, quirted off; and, the law being rather a minus quantity in the Packsaddle country, they had been glad to throw the ranch on the market again.

That had not happened to the Kid. In Packsaddle they reckoned that Mister Fairfax had been booted off the ranch long since, or else shot up or lynched by the bunch. It was well known all along the Rio Pecos that Barney Baker and the bunch would never stand for having a new boss. And the Kid had tamed the bunch—the wildest bunch in Texas. If there was a man on the Lazy O who still nourished hostility, it was Coyote Jensen, who still carried an arm in a sling to remind him of the Kid's gunplay. And if he nourished hostility, he said nothing about it to the Kid or the bunch. For—a fact that would have made Packsaddle open its eyes wide—the Kid was popular with the whole bunch, as popular as any ranch boss could be with his outfit.

Cheerily the Kid nodded to his men as he lounged into the bunkhouse. He liked the Lazy O; he liked the bunch, rough and lawless as they were; he liked to remember that sheriffs did not care to ride Packsaddle trails; he liked to think that his wild days as an outlaw were over, and that from now on the Rio Kid was dead and buried, and that Mister Fairfax, the rancher, lived in his place. The Kid had never wanted to be an outlaw—never of his own

The Arm of the Law is far-reaching, but that it would stretch as far as the distant Packsaddle country the Rio Kid did not imagine for one moment. That it does, and brings with it dire danger for the Kid-rancher is described in vivid chapters in the thrilling Western Yarn below!

accord had he ridden a lawless trail; and now he reckoned that he had done with it. Raising cattle, buying and selling steers, cutting his alfalfa, and riding in the rodeo—such were the activities the Kid had marked out for the future. No man had recognised the Rio Kid since he had ridden into Packsaddle, though once or twice he fancied he had caught a curious gleam in the eyes of Barney Baker fixed on him intently. The Rio Kid was dead, and Rancher Fairfax was alive, and all was going fine.

"Say, feller!" said the Kid, as he stepped into the bunkhouse and stopped beside the bunk of the one-time foreman of the ranch.

Barney Baker, still bandaged, but getting well from his wound, sat in his bunk at breakfast brought him by Coyote Jensen. The Coyote gave Mister Fairfax a dark look from under his brows, but saluted him civilly and stood back as he addressed Barney Baker.

The foreman of the Lazy O—foreman in name, but boss in fact till the coming of the Rio Kid—looked up, his eyes glinting at Mister Fairfax.

"Mornin'!" said the Kid cheerily.

Barney grunted.

"I guess I've come to give you the office, feller," said the Kid. "You're mended enough to hit the trail, I reckon. There ain't room for two bosses on the Lazy O, and you want to hit the trail bright an' early. You get me?"

Barney Baker did not answer.

"I ain't got it agin you that you played a low-down game on me here," continued the Kid. "You aimed to keep the Lazy O in your own paws, Barney; you've man-handled every guy that bought it afore I humped in, and I guess you shot up one man, or some guy did it for you. You tried the same game on me and slipped up on it. I ain't got any grouch about that. I guess

this here ranch was worth a fight; and you put up a fight, and you come out at the little end of the horn. I bought this ranch fair and square, and you figured that you'd put me under the alfalfa to make it grow and keep the goods. I ain't grousing none. But you're fired, and you've been allowed to hang on here till you mended. Now it's time to quit."

Still Barney did not speak.

Under his thick brows his glinting eyes were on the handsome, sunburnt face of the boy rancher.

The same thought that had come into his mind at the first meeting in Packsaddle was in Barney's mind now.

Where had he seen Mister Fairfax before?

Somewhere, he was certain, he had seen that handsome, reckless face, those clear, blue eyes as cool as ice, that well-

cut mouth with its good-humoured, mocking smile—but where? The face, when he had seen it before, had been different somehow, but the same. Where had he seen this kid rancher who had ousted him from the Lazy O? Not in the Packsaddle country, he was sure of that; somewhere else in Texas, when he had been on one of his trips buying or selling steers. He knew the galoot; he was sure, as well as he knew the back of his own hand, and yet he could not place him.

The searching, penetrating look in Barney's deep-set eyes did not escape the Kid. His sense of danger, born of his wild life on the outlaw trails, reacted to that look of struggling recognition. The smile died off his lips. More guys knew the Rio Kid than the Kid could possibly know; and though he was certain he had never seen Barney till he rode into Packsaddle, it

was quite on the cards that Barney might have seen him. A grim look came over the Kid's face.

"You got a tongue in your cabeza?" he demanded sharply.

"I reckon!" growled Barney.

"I guess you want to use it, then!" snapped the Kid. "I'm telling you that it's time for you to quit."

"I guess I ain't fit to sit a bronc," said Barney Baker slowly. "But it's your say-so, boss; you got the cinch on me. I guess you got the bunch feeding out of your hand now." His eyes blazed for a second. "Tell them to ride me on a rail off'n this ranch that I've run for years, and I reckon they'll do it. I ain't got no kick coming. You've beat me, and you've got me by the short hairs."

The Kid's face softened a little. He could feel for a defeated man, even if that man had been defeated in a lawless, desperate attempt to cinch another man's property. Barney Baker had run the Lazy O so long that he had come to look on the ranch as his own. Lawless enough his actions had been; but the Kid, after all, had not always been a respecter of the law himself.

"I guess I ain't the galoot to go hard on a guy when he's down to bedrock," said the Kid. "You got to beat it, that's a cinch. You've feathered your nest pretty well, I reckon; selling cattle that never belonged to you, you've got a roll tucked away somewhere, Barney, and I ain't asking you to pony up. But all the time you've been lying here you've been trying to put it across me. I had to shoot up Kansas Jake that you put up to lay for me on the prairie. I guess every time you chew the rag with the Coyote here you're aiming to fix me. I guess I'm going to be my own foreman, and there's sure ain't room for two. But if you can't sit a bronc, like you allow, I'm giving you time." The Kid looked long and searchingly at the foreman of the Lazy O. "I reckon you could ride if you liked, and you're freezing on here because you figure that the game ain't up yet and you may get a chance of fixing me. It ain't good enough, Barney! You got to go. I give you three days, and if you ain't sitting a bronc by that time, I'll fix you up in the chuck-wagon and send you into Packsaddle."

"It's your say-so!" answered Barney sullenly.

"You've said it," agreed the Kid.

And he walked out of the bunk-house, and went to the corral for the pinto horse he was accustomed to ride with the Lazy O. Happy and contented as the Kid now was, there was one lurking regret—Side-Kicker was no longer with him. The grey mustang with the black patch was well-known as the Rio Kid's steed, too well-known for the Kid to ride him into Packsaddle, when he was taking a new name and throwing the past behind him. But the Kid's heart yearned for the faithful mustang that had carried him through many a wild fight, and over many a dangerous trail, and he figured that before long he would take a chance, and bring Side-Kicker to the ranch.

Barney Baker, when the Kid left the bunk-house, did not resume his breakfast. He leaned back in the bunk, his haggard eyes fixed on the doorway by which the Kid had gone, and the sunny plains beyond. His eyes were glinting, and there was a wrinkle of deep thought in his brow. The Coyote came closer to him.

"That cinches it, Barney," he said. "You got to beat it! That Kid Fairfax means cold business."

"Sure!" growled Barney.

"There's nothing to it," said Coyote

All About This Guy Fawkes Business!

New light shed upon the Gunpowder Plot, and upon Guy Fawkes, who has endeared himself to the hearts of all boys and girls.

PLEASE to remember the Fifth of November . . . Yes, we all know that old tag. But who the dooce is this Guy Fawkes chap?

Not one fellow in ten thousand has ever seen a picture of the one and only Guy Fawkes, and so most of us see nothing incongruous in the fact that of all the umpteen guy-dummies that are hawked about and set fire to on this day devoted to Guy scarcely two are in any way similar!

"Oh, I know who he was, right enough!" I can hear someone say. "Tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament—somewhere back in the history book."

But *did* he? Latter-day investigators have been throwing much doubt on the old history book yarn which says that this Yorkshireman was closely wrapped up in a conspiracy which had for its object the blowing sky-high of king and parliament in the reign of King James the First.

They even say that the official account of the plot, its discovery and frustration, as issued by the government of that day, was "all my eye"—a deliberate fake to serve dishonest ends. Certainly some of the details as they have trickled down to us through the history books seem a bit shaky.

For instance, the official account says that Guy Fawkes and his fellow villains had stacks of gunpowder stored in a cellar underneath the House of Lords, ready "to touch" off at the moment that the greatest damage could be done.

Well, there positively was no cellar in Guy Fawkes' time beneath the House of Lords. And as gunpowder was a monopoly of the government and simply not obtainable in the ordinary way, it looks as though this gunpowder plot must have been gunpowderless, doesn't it?

However, Guy Fawkes was collared—not with a lighted torch in his hand and about to fire a train to the barrels of gunpowder, but well away from the scene of the alleged intended crime.

The Parliament Buildings had been searched, on account of an anonymous letter which had been sent to a Lord Montague warning him not to attend

the opening of Parliament because of what might happen.

Gunpowder was alleged to have been found. So they had to find conspirators. Court and political intrigue pounced on Guy Fawkes and certain of his companions.

Guy was tortured—and they afterwards produced a document supposed to be signed by Guy himself amounting practically to a confession. Tremendous suspicion, to put it mildly, attaches to that document—and you mustn't forget that Guy Fawkes had been tortured.

In due course he went to the scaffold—thirty-six years old, and so we got our Fifth of November merriments!

He went to school at York as a youngster, inherited property when his father died, and later went out to Spain and joined the Spanish army. He took part in several battles, and then returned to England and his doom.

And now for many weeks past hundreds of pairs of hands have been busy making crackers of all sorts and sizes, squibs that give a gentle splutter and giants of their kind that nearly split your ear-drums with their hissing, rockets that shoot screaming into space, Roman candles and catherine wheels—the making and selling of all of which comprise industries that keep several big firms going the year round.

It isn't a simple operation, making even the simplest of fireworks. Some must pass through perhaps a score of different hands, each of the separate components needing to be filled into the "shell" in due and settled rotation.

Mighty displays of fireworks, such as those given at the Crystal Palace, are marvels of organisation and mechanical ingenuity. "Set pieces," as they are called, may represent, in fireworks, an enormous human face, a battleship in action—nothing seems impossible for those who stage huge Fifth of November displays to depict in crackers.

These wonderful firework scenes are "done" on an immense upright framework to which the varied "bangers" are attached, and there may be fifteen or more assistants stationed behind that framework each waiting for their separate cue to touch off the particular fireworks for which they are made responsible.

Jensen. "The bunch are feeding from his hand, and you ain't a chance of setting them agin him now. He's boss, and I guess he's staying boss. I reckon I'm the only guy here that would care to pull a gun on him, and I ain't pulling any gun on the galoot that shot up Lariat and Kansas Jake! It ain't healthy. There's nothing to it, Barney, and you may as well chew on that, and beat it!"

"I seen that guy afore, somewheres, afore he hit the Packsaddle country," said Barney slowly. "I don't rightly place him, I guess he's changed some, but I seen him afore. Say, Coyote, who 's this here Mister Fairfax? What was his lay-out afore he hit Packsaddle? He rides like a Comanche, and handles his Colt like a gunman. He claims to be a rancher, and hands out forty thousand dollars for the Lazy O, but he don't talk none about where he comes from, or what folks knew him."

"I guess there's plenty in Packsaddle you can say the same of, or near it," grinned the Coyote. "You want to believe that Mister Fairfax is a guy with a bad record?"

"I sure been figuring on it!"

"It won't hurt him any in the Packsaddle country. There's sure a lot of citizens in Packsaddle that wouldn't like to meet the sheriffs in other counties. There's nothing to it, Barney."

The Coyote lounged away, leaving Barney Baker in deep, bitter thought. His black brow grew blacker, as he caught a glimpse, through the open sunny doorway, of the Kid riding the pinto down to the prairie. The Kid rode as if horse and rider were one, with ease and grace, and in his look as he rode, in the easy action with which he lifted the pinto over the gate, there was something familiar to Barney's eyes—familiar but elusive. He had seen Mister Fairfax before, and when he had seen him, Mister Fairfax had been riding, he was sure of that now. But where, and when, and what was there to it, even if it was so?

Somehow, it seemed to the bitter, brooding mind of the foreman, that if he could 'place' Mister Fairfax, if only he could recall when and where he had seen him before, it might mean something to him, might give him the chance for which he longed, of getting the upper hand of the new boss of the Lazy O. No doubt the wish was father to the thought, but the thought would not leave Barney's mind, and he brooded and brooded, the handsome, sunburnt face dancing elusively in half-recalled memory.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Danger!

THE Kid's heart missed a beat. In the golden afternoon, the new boss of the Lazy O was lounging in a rocker on the porch, his feet on a rail.

The Kid had spent most of the day in the saddle; never tiring, so far, of visiting the out-lying ranges of the

for a bunch of his own punchers. But as they drew nearer to the ranch, the Kid sat bolt upright in his rocker, and stared at them, his keen eyes narrowing to pin-points under his knitted brows.

The approaching riders were not cowmen. At a distance, the Kid's eyes picked them out as Texas Rangers. And his eyes fixed on a man who rode a little ahead of the bunch, a man of



NEWS FOR THE TEXAS RANGER! The wounded foreman sat up in his bunk and faced across at the stern-looking ranger. "You seen Mister Fairfax?" he asked. "No!" "Well, you want to see him, if you can. I know he's a man you're after—he's only took sick the moment you guys were seen comin'." (See Chapter 4.)

Lazy O, inspecting lonely stockmen's huts, calculating water supplies and cattle feed. The bunch had learned that "Mister Fairfax" knew the ranch business from A to Z, and respected him the more for it. And the Kid showed an intelligent consideration for the comfort of his outfit, and had made many little changes for the better, remembering his own days as a puncher.

Bitter as it was to Barney Baker, the Kid was growing more and more popular with the Lazy O bunch, the bunch that had sworn that they never would submit to a new boss. They submitted now, and seemed to like it. If Mister Fairfax was a 'kid' in years, he was a man in everything else, and the bunch knew it.

Life seemed good to the Kid now. Sitting in the rocker on the porch, he surveyed wide grasslands that were all his own, moving herds of cattle of which every head among the hundreds belonged to him.

This, the Kid figured, was a heap better than lonely trails on the llano, hidden camps in the chaparral. Better than hunting cover in the Huecas, or dodging the Texas Rangers among the rocks of the Mal Pais.

From the blue distance a bunch of riders came in sight, and for some time the Kid watched them idly, taking them

small stature, almost hidden under a Stetson hat.

"Gee!" murmured the Kid. For a second his heart missed a beat, and he was very still.

Texas Rangers—who seldom rode Packsaddle trails. Why had that bunch ridden into Packsaddle country, and who was the little man on the black broncho at their head? The Kid could not see his face, but he had no doubt of him. It was Jim Hall—"Mule-Kick". Hall—captain of the Rangers, the man who had hunted the Rio Kid in the Mal Pais.

The Kid did not move.

But the cheery smile faded from his face; the wide green grasslands glowing in the Texas sunshine, grew dull to his eyes.

No man in the Packsaddle country knew the Kid. A vague thought had crossed his mind that Barney Baker had some suspicion of him, but that was all. He was in a new country, where his name was known, as it was known in all Texas, but where no man knew him by sight. The little moustache he now wore, and the darkening of his eyebrows with an Indian pigment, had made a change in him, enough to defy a chance recognition. But it would not defy the keen, bitter eyes of "Mule-

"Kick" Hall, if once they rested on Mister Fairfax.

"Gee!" repeated the Kid.

His face hardened.

Outlawry he had thrown behind him. He asked nothing better than to live the life of a rancher, raising cattle on his own land, buying and selling honestly and fairly. But always the thought had been at the back of his mind, that the past was not so easily dropped; that sooner or later it would rise against him and hit him hard. Now it was rising up in the shape of that ugly, wiry, resolute man-hunter on the black broncho. They were heading for the ranch, six stalwart Rangers, headed by the man who had sworn to take the Rio Kid alive or dead.

It was cruel luck on the Kid. His hand went to his gun, and his face was grim. Like enough, the bunch would stand for him if it came to a rookus. There were men in that rough bunch who had had trouble with the law, like many of the men in Packsaddle, men whose reasons for being there at all were somewhat like the Kid's own. If these guys were coming for him, it was going to be gun-play, and the Kid did not figure that he was going to get the worst of it.

But it was going to be the end of his ranching. With or without the help of the Lazy O bunch, he might beat that crowd, or escape from them, but the word would go forth on all sides that Mister Fairfax was the Rio Kid, the outlaw of Texas, and that was the finish. The Kid's glance dwelt blackly on the approaching riders.

But he reflected further. "Mule-Kick" Hall was riding Packsaddle trails, doubtless in search of the Rio Kid, and he could not know that the Kid was at the Lazy O.

He could not guess that Mister Fairfax was the boy outlaw, even if he had heard of Mister Fairfax at all—which was doubtful.

If he saw Mister Fairfax his keen eyes would penetrate at once the slight disguise, the Kid knew that. But if he did not see Mister Fairfax he would ride on his way, never knowing how near he had been to the Rio Kid. The Kid smiled at that thought.

He rose from the rocker and disappeared into the ranch-house.

It was wiser to keep out of sight of the rangers while he considered the matter.

Hall and his bunch, he reckoned, were hunting for the elusive outlaw, but never dreaming that the "fire-bug" had turned into a rancher. Most likely they were coming to the ranch to ask questions, and to camp for the night, merely taking in the Lazy O on their way. The Kid knew Hall's character; if he fancied that the outlaw had hit Packsaddle he would question every rancher and cowman in the country that he came across, in the hope of picking up news. He would expect to hear of shootings, of hold-ups; but he certainly never would expect to hear of the Rio Kid ranching a big ranch. So long as Hall did not see him—

Playing sick was the Kid's first thought. The rangers were not likely to camp there for more than one night—Hall never let the grass grow under his feet. If the rancher was confined to his bed Hall would not expect to see him, and the name of Fairfax would tell him nothing. The rangers would be given the hospitality of the ranch, and they would ride on their way the next morning. "Playing sick" was not an idea that appealed to the Kid, but there was much at stake. He did not want gun-play at the Lazy O.

From the window of the ranch-house living-room the Kid looked out at the bunch of horsemen, who were now near at hand. He had observed that there was a led horse in the party; and now they were near the Kid saw with startled eyes that the led horse was a grey mustang with a black patch.

"Side-Kicker!"

It was his own famous mustang, the fastest cayuse in Texas, that was led along with the rangers.

"Gee-whizz!" muttered the Kid.

He had left Side-Kicker in charge of a Mexican half-breed way down the Pecos when he first started on his new stunt. The half-breed was paid royally for taking care of Side-Kicker, and the Kid had had no doubt that the mustang would be safe till he reckoned it wise to send for him. And the cayuse had fallen into Hall's hands!

It spelled danger, the Kid knew; yet his face brightened and his eyes gleamed at the sight of his faithful steed.

Hall, hunting for the Kid, had picked up the Kid's horse, and brought it along with his crowd. Why, the Kid could not guess. But there was Side-Kicker—and it gladdened the Kid's heart to see him again.

But it spelled danger; for once the grey mustang came within sight of his old master, the recognition would be instant, and it would betray the Kid. And with that thought came knowledge of Hall's object in toting along the grey mustang. He was using the cayuse as a guide to the outlaw.

"Dog-gone him!" muttered the Kid.

Again his hands dropped to his guns. He was powerfully tempted to resort to gun-play, if only to regain possession of his horse.

But wiser thoughts prevailed. He crossed the broad passage that ran through the ranch-house and entered his bedroom. There he shouted for Diego, the Mexican chore-man of the ranch.

"Si, senior!"

Diego came instantly. Diego had been insolent when first the Kid took possession of the Lazy O, and had handled a knife. But Diego, like the bunch, was feeding from the Kid's hand now.

The Kid had thrown himself on his bed.

"Say, feller, I guess them frijoles are sure giving me a pain," he drawled. "I guess I'm going sick."

"Oh, senior!" exclaimed Diego.

"I sure reckon I'm turning in, and I guess I don't want to be woke up any," said the Kid. "You put the bunch wise that I'm off my feed, and there ain't any guy to disturb me, not on no account whatever. You get me, Diego?"

"Si, senior."

"I'll call you if I want anything, but I guess a long sleep will pull me round," said the Kid. "Keep that door shut."

"Si, senior."

Diego retired, closing the door; and the Kid stepped to it and fastened the wooden button that served as a lock. Then he sat on the bed and waited.

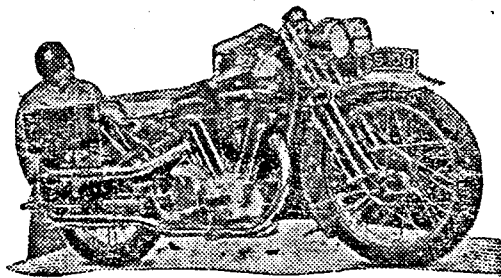
Ten minutes later there was a tramping of horses' hoofs in front of the porch. Mule-Kick Hall had arrived.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Doggo!

MULE-KICK HALL dismounted from his broncho, his deeply-bronzed face dark and sour under the shadow of his Stetson. Diego came to the door to look at the new arrivals, and Hall fixed his keen eyes on the Mexican.

(Continued at bottom of opposite page.)



SOME BIKE!

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FOOTBALL 40 YEARS AGO

The Cup—the famous and much-coveted trophy of the Football Association—comes under discussion this week by the Old Veteran. Battles of past "Finals" are lived through again, and vivid pen pictures are painted of tussles that will live for ever in the history of the Grand Old Game!

League games from '90 to 1911. Well, during that time they got into the Final about four or five times. And how many times d'ye think they won the Cup? Once!

"Aston beat 'em. Everton beat 'em, but the biggest crash of all was when little Wolverhampton Wanderers smashed 'em 3—1 at the Crystal Palace in 1908. That was a game. Newcastle all clever and dainty football—and Wolverhampton out for goals. The Wolves had a parson playing

"THE CUP! Ay, lad, you're right—it's a wonderful thing—the Cup!"

Having set the ball rolling, I snuggled deeper into my huge armchair, and stretched my toes a bit nearer the roaring fire in Old Tiny's cosy study.

I had been having another shot at discovering my new friend's name, for I was sure it was a very famous one once, but, as usual, he gently dried up. He had had enough publicity in his time, he said, and didn't want any more. So I had to give up and, prompted by the two Cup medals dangling on his watch-chain, led the conversation round to the famous F. A. Cup.

And the great old veteran, carefully filling his pipe, shook his head as he mused on Cup days of the past.

"Have I seen 'em all? Nearly all, son, right from the start almost. It was a bit primitive when it first started in 1871. There was all sorts of trouble always cropping up and I mind more than one Cup-tie that finished in a rare old fight.

"IT was the Old Boys of schools and colleges who started the game—there weren't any pro's. But when the professional teams really got going after 1885, the amateurs gradually faded out. Old Etonians were the last I remember in the final when Blackburn Olympic beat them in '82—they were the last of the amateurs' sides to get that far. Still, perhaps the Corinthians will do it one of these years.

"There was one rare good amateur side in the old days—the Wanderers, and they won the Cup three times in succession. All the Finals were played at the Oval then and the Wanderers won the Cup for the first three years it was played for. Since then, only Blackburn Rovers have won it three times running.

"DOES clever football pay in the Cup? Well, that's a mighty funny question. I've seen some brilliant sides win—Preston, for instance, in '89 won the Cup without having a goal scored against 'em, and the League without losing a match!—but I've seen clever teams knocked silly by a little club that in the ordinary way wouldn't last ten minutes!

"Some time back—about twenty-five years it was—Newcastle had some wonderful teams. You couldn't hold 'em in

in their half-backs, the Rev. K. R. G. Hunt. He played for England, too, and what a terror. The Newcastle forwards fairly crumpled up before his charging and tackling.

"No, lad, clever football and combination are all right for a full season in the League—in fact, you've got to have 'em. But in the Cup, it's goals that count and the side that goes rip-snortin' for the uprights generally takes the silver pot home.

"AND Cup-tie day has changed, too! Now it's Wembley and tickets, and everyone files in nice and quiet-like. Except in 1923? Ah, ye had me there. That was a mess-up and no mistake.

"Still, things are smooth nowadays. You book your seat for Wembley at the start of the season and that's that. Your own club may never get past the first round, but you still go to see the Final—even if you've never seen either of the two clubs before and won't want to again.

"But not in the old days. Then, you held your breath while your club fought round after round and you saved your money, and when at last the great day came, you got up early, or else the night before, caught the train to London, walked all the way down to Sydenham, fought and clambered your way into the Palace and cheered your lungs out till you couldn't speak for excitement. Then, if you were lucky, you went back on the train with the team—and the Cup!

"WHAT a day it was. More like a Derby! There were picnic parties, chaffing, music, and always a dance on the grass at the Palace. Yes, and if the other side's supporters got funny, you just waded in and snatched 'em baldheaded—if you could.

"I remember the day I earned this second medal—no, I'm not telling ye the year!—the trees round the Crystal Palace were solid with spectators—it's a wonder they didn't snap in half!"

"Funny the Cup doesn't come South, much, Tiny!" Is said "It is that, lad! Let's see—the Spurs won it in 1901, didn't they, and then again after the War in 1921. They're the only ones, although Chelsea, West Ham, the Arsenal, and Portsmouth have each had a good try."

"The Arm of the Law!"

(Continued from previous page.)

"Boss at home?" he jerked out.

"Si, senor."

"Captain Hall of the Texas Rangers wants to see him. Tell him so!"

"The senor is sick," said Diego dubiously. "Mister Fairfax he go to his bed, senor."

"I guess that cuts no ice. Take him a message that a bunch of Texas Rangers ask leave to camp here for the night."

"Si, senor."

Diego went back along the passage to the Kid's room and tapped. The door did not open to his touch, and he tapped again and called.

"Say, you gink, didn't I put you wise that I wasn't to be disturbed any?" came the Kid's voice from within.

"Si, senor. But—"

"Shoot!" grunted the Kid. Diego repeated Hall's message through the door.

The Kid listened, with a smile, as he sat on the bed figuring what Mule-Kick Hall would have thought had he guessed who was receiving his message.

"That's O.K.," answered the Kid.

"You fix them up comfortable, Diego, and give them the run of the shebang. They're to have everything they want. And you tell Mister Hall that I'm plumb sorry I can't see him, but I reckon I got to keep to this here bed."

"Si, senor."

From the seclusion of his room, with the door secured, the Kid listened to the sounds of the ranch-house. Horses were tied up at the rail outside, and the rangers were in the spacious living-room, where Diego, obedient to his master's orders, provided for their wants. Heavy footsteps in the passage, the murmur of deep voices, came to the Kid.

From what he could hear, there was no suspicion among these unwelcome guests at the ranch. Mister Fairfax happened to be sick, and keeping his room; but the hospitality of the ranch was offered to the rangers, and they made themselves at home. There was nothing in that to excite suspicion even in Hall's keen, suspicious mind; probably he did not care a Continental red cent whether he saw the boss of the ranch or not. All he wanted was hos-

pitality for the night, before he resumed his long trail in the morning.

Much of the talk of the rangers as they fed in the living-room reached the ears of the Kid, and he soon found that the Rio Kid was the chief topic. The sight of Side-Kicker, led along with them, had told him that they were on his trail, and what he heard of their talk left no doubt on the matter. But he gathered, too, that Mule-Kick Hall was taking a chance in riding the Pack-saddle country; he had no definite clue to guide him. It was chiefly because Packsaddle was a section where sheriffs did not care to ride that Hall was combing it for the outlaw.

In the sunset the rangers mostly gathered on the porch to smoke, and many of the Lazy O men came to talk with them there, and the deep voices reached the Kid through his shuttered window.

Confinement in his room was irksome enough to the Kid, but his life on the trails had taught him the patience of an Indian. Many a time had the boy outlaw lain doggo in a patch of mesquite, or hidden in the rocks of an

arroyo, while the footsaps of his enemies passed and repassed in his hearing. It was the old life over again for the Kid, and his cool patience did not fail him. On the morrow the rangers would be gone.

"Say, that's some cayuse!" It was the voice of Long Bill, the horse-wrangler, and the Kid guessed that he was looking at Side-Kicker, the handsome mustang that was always certain to draw the glances of any galoot who knew anything about horses.

"He sure is!" answered one of the rangers. "I guess that cayuse is lightning when he's going. Search me!"

"You selling that hoss?" asked Long Bill. "I'm telling you our boss is some guy on a cayuse. I reckon he'd want that mustang if he seed him."

The Kid smiled as he heard that. Long Bill's remark was nearer the truth than he reckoned.

"The hoss ain't for sale!" It was the gruff voice of Jim Hall. "He don't belong to this bunch."

"Say, you guys totin' around a critter that don't belong to you?" exclaimed Long Bill in astonishment.

"We're sure looking for his master!" said one of the rangers, with a chuckle. "You'd never guess his master's name in a month of Sundays, if you ain't seen that cayuse afore."

"Say, you've got me guessing! Who's the hombre?"

"The Rio Kid!"

There was a buzz of astonishment from the Lazy O punchers. The name was repeated on every tongue.

"The Rio Kid!"

"Sure!" came Mule-Kick Hall's gruff voice again. "We're totin' round that cayuse till we find his master."

"You-uns figure that the Rio Kid has hit Packsaddle?" exclaimed Shorty.

"We figure that he might," answered Hall. "Nobody's seen him since he got away from the Mal Pais. That's a good while ago. He's on some new game, or he wouldn't have parted with his hoss."

"I reckon the Rio Kid's gone up," said Shorty. "I've never seen the hombre, but I've heard a whole heap about him. He wouldn't part with that cayuse while he could pull a gun. He's sure gone over the range, I reckon."

"He sure ain't!" growled Hall.

"How'd you get the cayuse, then?" asked Long Bill.

"We got it from a half-breed down the Rio Pecos. It was left with him for feed," answered Hall. "He never knowed that it belonged to the Rio Kid—I guess he never asked questions so long as he was paid. I guess I knowed that cayuse the minute I set eyes on it, and I sure roped it in. The Kid's been sending money to the half-breed for caring for it; and that shows that he ain't gone up."

"Sho!" said Long Bill.

"He's on some game where he don't want a hoss, and he left the critter safe, as he figured," said Hall. "We got the critter, and we're going to get the Kid. There's a thousand dollars reward for the guy that can help us cinch that fire-bug; and you-uns want to figure whether you've seen or heard anything of him in the Packsaddle country."

"Not any," said Long Bill. "But I reckon you'll see or hear suthin' of him if you tote that cayuse around. Soon as the Kid gets wise to it that you've got his cayuse he'll sure make a break to get him back."

"That's what I figure!" answered Hall coolly.

Long Bill approached nearer to the

grey mustang, his admiring eyes on the handsome animal. Every puncher there was looking at Side-Kicker, interested less, now, in his points as a cayuse, than in the fact that he was the celebrated mount of the Rio Kid, the outlaw of whom every man had heard and talked, many a time, in the bunkhouse or in the range camps. Young as he was, the Rio Kid was almost a legendary figure on the banks of the Pecos and the Rio Grande del Norte.

"He's sure some cayuse!" said Long Bill. "I guess the boss would like to see that mustang. He's some rider, is Mister Fairfax; I guess you-all would have seen a sight for sore eyes if you'd seen Mister Fairfax backin' Apache, the maddest broncho in Packsaddle. You sure would."

"Your boss been sick long?" asked Hall carelessly. "What's the trouble?"

"Search me!" answered the horse-wrangler. "I never heard he was sick till the dago humped along and let on that he was; and I guess that wasn't ten minutes before you-all hit this ranch. Suthin' sudden, I reckon."

"Hittin' the cornjuice too hard, mebbe," said one of the rangers, with a laugh.

"I should smile," answered the wrangler. "Mister Fairfax don't worry the firewater any. Say, dago," he shouted to the chore-man, "what's the rookus with Mister Fairfax?"

Diego shrugged his shoulders.

"The senor he say it is the frijoles," he answered. "He have one pain. Me, I zink I cook them frijoles O.K., sar."

"The dago's cooking did it!" grinned Shorty. "I sure been knocked out by a ranch cook's chuck in my time."

And there was a laugh, and the talk turned to Side-Kicker again, and the Rio Kid. It died away at last, and under the clear-shining stars of Texas, sleep descended on the Lazy O ranch. But in the room where Mister Fairfax remained the Rio Kid did not sleep.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Cinched!

"SPILL it!" said Jim Hall curtly.

He stood beside Barney Baker's bunk, looking down on the bandaged man with a glance of disfavour. The hard face, bitten with hatred and the longing for revenge, did not impress him favourably; moreover, Jim Hall had not ridden Packsaddle trails without hearing something of the Lazy O and its foreman, and the way that boss after boss had been boosted off the ranch.

But he had come to hear what Barney had to say, and he was prepared to listen. It was all Texas to a Mexican dollar, he figured, that he was only going to hear hot air; but it was Mule-Kick's way to give every guy a hearing, sifting what grain of useful information there might be from a wagonload of chaff.

His men were sleeping, when Coyote Jenson brought him the message from Barney. Hall had followed the Coyote to the bunkhouse at once. In many of the bunks punchers were asleep, and a dim lamp burned, glimmering on the bearded, bitter face of Barney Baker.

The foreman glanced uneasily round. The wild bunch of the Lazy O, who once had backed his play through thick and thin, were no longer at his beck and call. They would never back him again against Mister Fairfax; and he doubted whether they would stand neutral if they found him yorcking

against the new boss, so great a change had there been in the Lazy O outfit since the Kid had taken control. And when the foreman spoke it was in a low voice:

"You seen Mister Fairfax?"

"Nope."

"And why ain't you?"

"He's took sick, I reckon."

Barney grinned savagely.

"Yes! He's took sick jest afore you struck the ranch—arter your bunch was in sight of the house, I reckon, from what the Coyote allows. I guess he sure spotted you riding in, afore he took sick."

Hall surveyed him with cold curiosity. "You figure he don't want to see me?"

"I figure he don't want to see any Texas Ranger," said Barney, between his teeth. "I figure he's in Packsaddle because sheriffs and rangers don't find this country healthy to ride in. I'm telling you he ain't no more sick than you are, Jim Hall; and he's playing possum to keep outer your sight."

"Why?"

"I'll tell the world," said Barney huskily. "I'll tell all Texas, sir, that guy ain't what he makes out to be. I seen him afore—and I can't place him. No man knows who he is or where he comes from. He's a gunman—he's lightning on the draw, he backs a hoss like a Comanche Indian, he's jest a kid in years, but an all-fired fire-bug every inch of him—and I guess I ought to be able to place a guy like that—and I can't! But—I seen him afore he hit Packsaddle, and he wasn't no rancher then."

Hall's eyes glittered strangely.

The description Barney had given of the boy rancher of the Lazy O, wanted little amplifying to fit the outlaw of whom Mule-Kick was in search. But—the thing was so impossible that his thoughts did not follow it up.

"You got a grouch agin the guy, because he's spoiled your game here, and a dog-goned gum-game it was, too," said Hall coldly. "From what I've heard since I hit this country, you've played shennannigan at this ranch for years, Barney Baker, and this guy, Fairfax is the first man to put paid to you. That's your worry, I guess. What else you got agin him?"

"I'll tell all Texas," hissed Barney. "I know he's hiding suthin—I feel it in my bones. I tell you, I know it. I reckoned it was so, and when I was told he'd took sick as soon as Texas Rangers was in sight, I knowed it for a dead cinch. I tell you that guy ain't sick—that guy's playing possum, and if you got eyes on him, I reckon you'd size him up as some fire-bug you want."

Hall stood silent. The thought of the Kid came back into his mind. But surely it was impossible—the boy outlaw, ranching the Lazy O! The ranger captain smiled at the idea. And yet—and yet—a boy in years, a finished gunman, an unequalled rider—and he had hit Packsaddle only a few weeks after the Rio Kid had vanished from all knowledge. Impossible as it seemed, the thing fitted together.

Was it possible: had he hit, by sheer chance, guided by this rascal's revengeful hatred, on the trail he had long lost? Jim Hall felt his tough heart beating faster.

That Mister Fairfax might be the outlaw of the Rio Grande, had not crossed Barney Baker's mind, that was clear. Only his hatred and suspicion fastened on the belief that Mister Fairfax was a man with a past, a man with

(Continued on page 28.)

THE ARM OF THE LAW!

(Continued from page 18.)

A secret, a man hiding from the law, like many another in Packsaddle. But Jim Hall's thoughts went further than that.

"You want to get a look-see at that guy," hissed Barney. "He's playing possum—he ain't no more sick than you are! I'll tell the world, he's a man you want, if you seed him."

Hall's lip curled. Hatred inspired every syllable uttered by the ranch foreman; it was rather hope than belief that moved him. He would not lose the least chance of making trouble for the man who had defeated him. Yet Hall was not wholly unimpressed.

"I guess I'll see the guy before I quit!" said Hall abruptly. "Leave it at that!"

And he left the bunk-house, leaving Barney Baker to ringled hope and doubt.

Slowly the captain of the rangers walked back to the ranch-house.

His brows were knitted in deep thought. Was it possible, he asked himself, and he shook his head. Likely enough, Mister Fairfax was a man who had ridden away from trouble, as the foreman suspected; Packsaddle swarmed with such galoats.

One chance in a thousand, perhaps—but Hall was not the man to let the thousandth chance pass him by. He entered the ranch-house, a glint in the eyes under his knitted brows.

His men were sleeping; Diego's snore could be heard from somewhere in the darkness. The oil-lamp still burned in the living-room; the wide passage was shadowy, and Hall stopped there, outside the door of the rancher's bedroom, and listened.

No sound from within, the hour was nearly midnight, and the rancher, sick or well, was doubtless sleeping soundly. Or was he planning escape in the cover of darkness—if by the thousandth chance he was Jim Hall's game? The rancher stood some minutes in thought.

Then he lifted his hand to the door. One glance at the sleeping man, by the light of a match, would resolve all doubts.

The door did not open, it was fastened within.

For a moment Hall was grimly suspicious, but he remembered that Mister Fairfax had trouble with men in his own bunch, treacherous foes to watch out for, it was likely enough he would bar his door at night. There was nothing to that.

The rancher stood silent for some minutes longer. Then he moved and left the ranch-house, and stepped round to the shuttered window of the rancher's room. Wooden shutters covered the window, perforated for air, fastened within by a wooden button. Quietly, grimly, Hall worked with a long bowie-knife for a few minutes, and the shutter opened.

He stared into the quiet interior of the rancher's room. All was dark within save for a glimmer of starlight at the window.

Mule-Kick Hall stepped in over the low sill. He cared little if the rancher awakened—if the man was merely a rancher, a word of explanation would be enough, and whether he liked it or not, the grim-faced rancher cared nothing. But if he was the man Hall wanted—

Dimly he made out the shape of a bed in the further corner. He stepped quietly towards it, reached it, and saw, at a glance, even in the gloom, that it was unoccupied. Mister Fairfax was not there!

The next moment Mule-Kick Hall knew where Mister Fairfax was. A grip of iron was laid on his arm. The muzzle of a Colt was pressed against his heart. And a voice—a voice he knew—whispered.

"Keep your can shut, you dog-goned man-hunting gink, and put up your paws! Jest one yap to your men, dog-gone you, and you'll get yours so sudden, you won't know what hit you. Dog-gone your pesky hide, you ain't got me yet, Jim Hall—but I sure got you."

Mule-Kick Hall stood silent; still, as if turned to stone. He had found the Rio Kid—and the Rio Kid had found him!

THE END.

(Now what's going to happen? How can the Rio Kid escape from this tight corner? See next week's long Western yarn, entitled: "RANCHER OR OUT-LAW?")

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RANCHER OR OUTLAW?

BY

RALPH REDWAY.

With a ranch of his own, and a bunch of punchers who he knows are willing to follow him to the death, the Rio Kid settles down to enjoy himself and forget the outlaw life he has lived so long. But Fate ordains otherwise for the kid-rancher!



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Let Up!

"PUT 'em up!"

The Rio Kid's voice was low—scarce above a whisper. But in that whisper in the shadowy darkness there was a world of menace.

It was midnight; and silence and slumber lay on the Lazy O ranch.

In the ranch-house six Texas Rangers were sleeping, rolled in their blankets, and from somewhere in the house came the rumbling snore of Diego, the Mexican chore-man.

The room occupied by "Mister Fairfax," the new boss of the ranch, was dark, save for a faint glimmer of starlight from the open window shutter.

In that room Mister Fairfax—alias the Rio Kid—had not been sleeping. The Rio Kid was not likely to close his eyes while Texas Rangers were in the ranch-house.

Wakeful in the darkness, the Kid had waited and listened and watched, wondering what would be the outcome of this strange situation.

Strange enough it was for Jim Hall and his rangers to be camped in the ranch, never knowing that Mister Fairfax, the boss of the ranch, was the boy outlaw of whom they were in search.

On the morrow they were to ride on their way without—if the Kid could help it—having seen Mister Fairfax and never guessing that they were leaving behind the outlaw they were hunting.

But the Kid had doubted; and when

Mule-Kick Hall had stepped in quietly at the window in the darkness, he realized that he was not going to get away with it as he had hoped.

Jim Hall knew—or suspected; and he had come to the rancher's room to make sure. He could not know—he could only suspect—or it was not thus that he would have come. But that cut no ice—for one glance at Mister Fairfax would have resolved his suspicion into certainty. And the Kid acted promptly.

The muzzle of his revolver was grinding into the chest of the ranger over his throbbing heart, and the Kid's finger was on the trigger. And Jim Hall, nearer to death than he had ever been, stood silent, peering in the gloom at the shadowy figure before him. The Rio Kid's whisper went on:

"Put 'em up! Jest you give one yaup to call your galoots and you're buzzards' meat, you dog-goned geck! Put 'em up and keep your can shut! You get me!"

Slowly the ranger raised his hands over his head.

The slightest pressure of the Kid's finger and he was a dead man. One call would have brought the rangers to their feet—would have brought them rushing to the room, gun in hand—would have circled the Kid with deadly foes, thrown hopeless odds against him. But they would not have found their leader alive.

Mule-Kick Hall did not fear death. He had faced it too often and too recklessly for that. But he did not figure

on throwing his life away. With the Kid's gun pressing over his heart he put up his hands and stood quiet—his eyes glinting at the Kid.

"That's better!" The Kid drew away the ranger's gun, and tossed it on the bed. "I guess you won't be wanting your hardware, feller." He ran his hand quickly over the ranger for concealed weapons, but there was none. "Now you can put down your paws if you want; but don't yaup above a whisper if you ain't honing to hit Jordan all of a sudden!"

In grim silence the ranger lowered his hands.

"I guess I needn't ask you if you know me?" said the Kid softly.

"Not any!" answered Hall, speaking for the first time and carefully subduing his voice. He did not intend, if he could help it, to let this encounter end to the Kid's advantage; but for the present he was in a cleft stick, and he knew it.

"How'd you get wise to it?" "I wasn't wise to it when I humped in hyer, or I reckon I'd have come a-shooting!" said Hall. "I jest stepped in for a look-see. I guess it wasn't easy to cotton to the idea that the Rio Kid was playing rancher; that sure wasn't the game I guessed you'd be at, Kid Carfax."

"Sit on that bed, and I'm goin' to talk turkey to you, Jim Hall!" said the Kid quietly.

Hall obeyed.

The Rio Kid sat on a bench, facing

him. His revolver no longer touched the ranger. It rested lightly on his knee. But it made no difference, for Hall knew that it was ready for instant use.

The Kid's face was dark and thoughtful as he looked at the dim visage of the ranger.

It was some moments before he spoke again.

"I guess we're both cinched, Jim Hall, in a way," he said at last. "You got six men within call—and I ain't banking that the Lazy O bunch would stand for me if they knowed I was the Rio Kid. Anyhow, my game's up here if the Packsaddle country tumbles to it that Mister Fairfax is Kid Carfax from Frio. But I got you, Jim Hall!"

"You got me!" said Hall calmly. "I guess it's time to talk turkey," said the Kid. "I'm goin' to put it to you like a white man, Hall. You been after me a long time, and you allow that you never fail to get your man. You cornered me in the Mal Pais, but I got away. I guess it was luck, running me down here—jest luck and chance."

"Jest that!" assented Hall. "You're a hard man, Hall, and you got a bite like a bulldog," said the Kid. "But I guess you're a white man. You're after me because I'm an outlaw—because I've pulled my gun on galoots who reckoned they could rope me in—because—"

"Because you're the Rio Kid, wanted by half the sheriffs in Texas!" said Hall curtly.

"You've said it! But I'm goin' to put you wise," said the Kid, and there was a note of deep earnestness in his voice. "I never honed to be an outlaw, Hall. I was boosted into it. I punched cows on the old Double Bar Ranch at Frio, till Old Man Dawney suspicioned me, and I had to hit the horizon. He owned up afterwards that he was wrong, and that I never did what was laid to me. But that came too late. I was an outlaw and wanted for other things—most of them things that I'd never done, I'm telling you. I ain't denying that I've pulled my gun to keep my neck out of a rope, more'n once. But most of them shootings and hold-ups that they lay to me are jest hot air."

"You can tell that to the judge!" remarked Hall.

The Kid laughed softly.

"I guess I'm a cowman and never had no truck with lawyers," he answered. "I know what would happen if I stood for that. I was boosted outside the law, agin my will; but there's plenty true enough to cook my goose at a trial. I ain't monkeying with any judges, so long as I've got a gun in my hand. Forget that!"

Hall sat silent and grim.

"You've found me here," resumed the Kid. "What have you found? Did you find me holding up the Pecos Bend back, or shooting up Packsaddle, or running off cows? You did not! You found me on a ranch that I've bought with my own money."

Hall gave a shrug.

"You ain't taking that?" asked the Kid. "I tell you I made that money in the gold mines of Arizona, and earned every cent of it fossicking."

"Mebbe," said Hall. "That ain't my business."

"I'm here to run this ranch," said the Kid. "I'm telling you that I bought it with my own money. I've had trouble with the bunch. That pesky foreman, Barney Baker, was running the ranch, and figured on getting his new boss shot up. But I've made the grade. I've

made good here, Jim Hall. Let alone and I'm a rancher—and never riding an outlaw trail again. You was after an outlaw—well, the Rio Kid ain't any outlaw now—he's Mister Fairfax, boss of the Lazy O ranch. He don't ask anything better than to be let alone to raise cattle and keep inside the law. You get me?"

Hall made no reply. "I'm puttin' it to you fair and square!" urged the Kid. "If I wanted to keep on the outlaw trail, what's to prevent me from shootin' you up, here and now, stepping out of that window, and getting on a cayuse and hitting the horizon?"

"Nothing!" said Hall.

"Then can't you take a galoot's word and let up?" asked the Kid. "Leave me alone, and the Rio Kid is as dead as if he was riddled with rangers' bullets, or strung up on the limb of a cottonwood. Dead and buried, Jim Hall! Mister Fairfax is alive in his place—a law-abidin' rancher, raisin' cattle fair an' square, and giving every man a fair deal. Ain't that good enough for you?"

"I guess," said Hall slowly, "that if I didn't stand for the law, Kid, it would be good enough for me. But it ain't good enough for a captain of the Texas Rangers specially commissioned to rope in the Rio Kid."

There was a silence.

"It ain't a cinch, then?" asked the Kid at last.

"It ain't."

The Rio Kid's face hardened.

"What you aim to do, then?" he asked. "You don't reckon you're goin' to get me, and you with your hardware out of reach, and my gun looking at you?"

"Shoot, if you like!" rejoined Hall laconically. "I guess my men will round you up."

He paused.

"There's nothing to it, Kid," he said quietly. "I got my duty to do. I been after you a long time. I nearly had you in the Mal Pais. But for that cloud-burst, you was cinched there. I ain't denying that you saved my life in the flood, and let me hit the trail when you had a gun on me. But it cuts no ice. I got to get you. I've hunted you all through Texas, and you beat me to it." Hall's eyes glowed.

"I never guessed you was setting up as a rancher, though I sure knowed you was on some new game, when I found you'd parted with your horse. I got your cayuse. I found him where you'd left him, with a half-breed down the Pecos, for feed. I've got that mustang along with my outfit here. I reckoned he might help in trailing down his master. I guess it would have worked, too, if you hadn't played sick, and kept out of sight, when we hit this ranch."

"Sure!" assented the Kid. "I guess Side-Kicker would have given it away at once that he knowed Mister Fairfax."

Hall breathed hard.

"I took a chance, coming in here to look at you," he said. "I couldn't rightly reckon that there was anything to it. But I guess I was a gink to take a chance. A galoot can't afford to take chances with the Rio Kid."

"He sure can't!" said the Kid.

"You got me," said Hall. "You can shoot me up, if you want, jump out of that window, and get hold of your old cayuse, and hit the horizon. I ain't got no kick coming. But the shot will wake my men, and they'll be on your trail, and that's good enough for me. Get to it, and be darned to you!"

The Kid's revolver was lifted again.

"You're too good a man to throw away your life this-a-way, Jim Hall," he said. "Let up, old man!"

"Not by a jugful!" The Rio Kid's eyes gleamed over the levelled revolver. Mule Kick Hall was looking at death, but he did not falter. Coldly and grimly he stared at the outlaw, whom he had hunted down, and who held his life in the hollow of his hand.

In that moment the ranger tasted all the bitterness of death. But there was only grim, hard resolution in his face.

The Kid's finger trembled on the trigger.

Then he lowered the gun.

"I guess I can't do it," he said slowly. "I ain't never pulled trigger on a guy without giving him an even break. You're a hard man, Jim Hall—a pesky hard cuss, but you're a white man, and I ain't wiping you out like you was a rattler!"

The Kid rose to his feet, and thrust the revolver back into the holster at his belt.

Then—watched by Hall's wondering stare—he stepped to the door, pushed back the wooden button, and threw the door open.

"Git!" he said curtly.

Hall rose to his feet, staring at him. "I guess—" he began, in sheer wonder.

The Kid pointed to the open door.

"Git!" he repeated. "I got you by the short hairs, Jim Hall, and I'm letting up on you! Git! Call your men, and tell them that the boss of this ranch is the Rio Kid, the man they're hunting, and begin the circus as soon as you like! Git, afore I change my mind, and let lead through you, you darned lobo-wolf!"

The ranger stared at him blankly for a long moment. Then, in silence, he stepped from the room—a free man, unharmed!

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Nothing to it!

BARNEY BAKER, in the bunkhouse on the Lazy O, watched the daylight grow clearer and clearer at the window, with sleepless eyes. Hardly once had the foreman of the Lazy O closed his eyes through the night. He lay in his bunk, in his bandages, unresting. In the bunks punchers were sleeping. Barney was the only man awake. Black and bitter thoughts, hope and fear, kept him from rest.

But in the light of dawn the punchers turned out. Barney watched them with bitter eyes. Long had the Lazy O bunch stood by him, backing him up against boss after boss who had bought the ranch, and for years the Lazy O had remained in Barney's hands. But his long reign had ended with the coming of the new boss. Excepting for Coyote Jensen, there was not a man in the bunch who would stand by him now against Mister Fairfax; and Jensen, with his gun-arm in a sling, was of no account. And Barney himself was "fired," and only stayed till his wound had mended sufficiently for him to sit a broncho and hit the trail. One gleam of hope had come to him in the coming of the Texas Rangers to the ranch. And that hope was failing him.

A day or two more, at the most, and he would have to go, leaving Mister Fairfax in possession, with the bunch devoted to him. His game was up at the Lazy O, unless fortune turned up the cards in his favour at the eleventh hour.

Some of the punchers gave him a

"Mornin', Barney!" before they went out of the bunkhouse; others did not heed him at all. Barney Baker was a fallen man, and no one sympathised with his grouch against the new boss. The bunch reckoned that a good man had come to the Lazy O—a man they were proud to ride with. They were, as Barney put it bitterly, feeding from his hand. Only the Coyote lingered beside his bunk.

"Nothing's happened?" asked Barney.

"Nix!"

"I put Jim Hall wise last night!" muttered Barney. "I told him I figured that Mister Fairfax was a man the sheriffs wanted."

The coyote grinned.

"I guess it's your grouch ag'in him, Barney," he said. "Jim Hall don't care a continental red cent who Mister Fairfax is. He's riding the Packsaddle country looking for that fire-bug from the Rio Grande—the galoot they call the Rio Kid. He ain't arter any other game!"

"He allowed he would see Mister Fairfax before he left the Lazy O," said Barney.

"Mister Fairfax is took sick, and keeping to his room," said the Coyote. "Hall won't see him any."

Barney gritted his teeth.

"Took sick, jest when the rangers was hitting the ranch," he said. "What does it look like?"

"Mebbe Mister Fairfax is a guy that don't want to meet up with any rangers," admitted the Coyote. "There's a heap of guys in the Packsaddle country of the same heft. But I'll tell the world, Barney, the boys won't like it if he's a galoot that's seen trouble and you put the rangers on to him."

Barney snapped his fingers.

"That for the boys!" he growled. "I tell you, Coyote, that guy Fairfax is a man that the sheriffs want. I feel it in my bones. I've seen him somewhere afore he came to Packsaddle, though I can't place him. I tell you, he's skipped into Packsaddle to get away from trouble, and, like as not, Hall knows him, if he set eyes on him!"

"Aw, forget it!" grunted the Coyote. "There's some sheriffs I don't want to see myself, and I guess there's some places in Texas that you're careful to keep clear of, Barney. Half Packsaddle would want to lynch you if they knowed you was setting the rangers on to a guy."

And the Coyote lounged out of the bunkhouse, with another grunt.

Barney Baker was left alone, with his black thoughts.

Was there anything in his suspicion of Mister Fairfax, or was it only born of his hatred and longing for vengeance? Barney hardly knew himself.

But he was sure of one thing—that he had seen Mister Fairfax before he came to Packsaddle—somewhere he had seen him, and under quite different circumstances. That much he was sure of.

He had searched his memory, bitterly, savagely, but somehow the recollection escaped him. There was some change in Mister Fairfax since that time—some change he could not trace. That was why he could not place him. But he had seen him—when he was not rancher, when he was not called Fairfax. He was sure of it.

There were plenty of men in Packsaddle who had come to that lawless section, where sheriffs did not care to ride, because they had had trouble with the law. And Mister Fairfax was one of them, Barney felt sure. His vague

suspicions had crystallised when he learned that Mister Fairfax had "took sick," and was keeping to his room, when the rangers camped at the Lazy O. Instantly Barney jumped to it that the rancher was aiming to keep out of the sight of eyes that might have known him in the past.

But if Jim Hall saw him—and he had said that he would sure see him before he left the Lazy O—Jim Hall was a man of his word; and though it was the Rio Kid he was hunting he would not lose a chance of roping in any other man who was wanted by the law.

Barney crawled out of his bunk and dressed himself, and went to the doorway to look out. He was almost mended now; his confinement to his bunk was chiefly a pretence, an excuse for remaining at the Lazy O. Not till he was driven would Barney Baker leave the ranch that he still hoped to get back into his hands. But now he was too anxious and eager, to keep up his malingering. He stood in the doorway of the bunkhouse, staring out in the sunny morning.

The daily life of the ranch was beginning. The punchers had had their early breakfast from the chuckhouse, and some of them were already riding out on the plains. Long Bill, the horse-wrangler, was at the corral, where the rangers were taking out their horses. Apparently the rangers were preparing for the trail; but Barney did not see Jim Hall among them.

Jim Hall was a man of his word—he would not go without having seen Mister Fairfax. Was he seeing him now? There was no sound or sign of trouble at the ranch.

Barney Baker gritted his teeth. Was his hope, after all, founded on nothing but hatred and revengeful malice? He called to one of the rangers, who led his horse near the bunkhouse.

"Say, where's Jim Hall?"

The ranger looked round.

"I guess he ain't around," he answered.

"Is he in the ranchhouse?"

"He sure ain't," said the ranger.

"I guess he rode out afore dawn—he ain't come in yet. We're sure waiting till he horns in ag'in."

The man passed on, leaving Barney staring. Jim Hall had ridden out on the plains before dawn? Why? If he was going to see Mister Fairfax, as he had told Barney, why was he not seeing him?

That Hall's absence puzzled others, as well as the foreman, was soon clear. The rangers, with their horses saddled for the trail, stood in a group by the gate, looking out over the plains and talking in low tones. They were waiting for their leader, and did not know why he was keeping them waiting. Barney Baker limped to the corral, and called to the horse-wrangler.

"Say, Bill! You savvy where Jim Hall is?"

"Nope!"

"Where's Mister Fairfax?"

The wrangler looked round at him.

"I guess he's in his room, Barney. He was took sick last night. It was the Dago's cooking, I guess—he allowed that that greaser's frijoles gave him a pain."

"He's still in the ranch, then?" asked Barney.

"Sure! Why shouldn't he be?" asked Long Bill, in surprise.

"Has Hall seen him?"

"I guess not—him being sick," answered the wrangler. "Hall's gone out on a pascor on his lonesome. His guys are waiting for him to come in, to hit the trail. I guess they won't be seeing Mister Fairfax, him being sick."

"Sick?" jeered Barney Baker savagely. "Playing possum, you mean, because he's a guy that's skipped from the law, and he ain't honing for Texas Rangers to see him."

Long Bill stared at the foreman.

"You reckon?" he asked slowly.

"Yep, for sure."

The wrangler came a stride nearer to Barney. His hand was very close to the gun that swung at his side.

"Mebbe," he said. "I guess I was plumb s'prised to hear that Mister Fairfax had took sick. Mebbe! Plenty of galoots in Packsaddle have got secrets



JUST THE PRESSURE OF HIS FINGER, AND—! The Rio Kid's eyes, gleamed over the levelled revolver. Mule-Kick Hall was looking at death; but he did not falter. Coldly and grimly he stared at the outlaw, whom he had hunted down at last, and who held his life in the hollow of his hand. (See Chapter 1.)

to keep, I reckon. You, Barney Baker, you don't want to put them rangers wise to it, if you're right. You get me? I'm telling you that this bunch would string you up over the corral gate, if you gave a guy away to the rangers."

Barney eyed him fiercely.

"And I'm telling you—" he began.

"Forget it," interrupted Long Bill.

"I guess I seen trouble myself, afore I hit Packsaddle—and so's half the bunch. We ain't tin angels on this here ranch, nohow. Why, dern your hide, don't every guy here know that you had to skip the San Antonio country years ago? You say a word agin Mister Fairfax and look out for what's coming to you, Barney Baker."

Barney opened his lips and shut them again. The wrangler was staring at him hard, his hand on his gun now. Never had Barney realised so clearly, how utterly he had lost his hold on the Lazy O bunch. They were standing for Mister Fairfax, and that was a cinch. But Barney, had his mind been less warped by hatred, would have figured that nothing could have discredited him more with the bunch than a suggestion

of giving up a man who had run from trouble. For half the Lazy O bunch had run from trouble in their time.

He turned slowly away, and Long Bill, with a grunt, let go his gun. He had warned Barney what would come to him if he betrayed the boss of the Lazy O, but the word had been already said. All that Barney could say had been already poured into the ears of the captain of rangers. And Barney was thankful to remember that only the Coyote knew it; and Coyote Jensen was still his man.

He limped away towards the ranch-house. At an open window a handsome sunburnt face looked out into the sunny morning. Barney stared with black malevolence at Mister Fairfax.

The Kid sighted him and nodded coolly.

He dismounted at the gate and strode towards the ranch. Barney looked at him, and looked at Mister Fairfax. The captain of rangers strode direct to the open window where the boy rancher was standing, and Mister Fairfax smiled as he came. And with a bitter oath Barney Baker turned away and tramped back to the bunk-house, sick with rage and disappointment.

THE THIRD CHAPTER. A White Man's Way!

MULE-KICK HALL stood before the Rio Kid—a thick-set, grim, bcw-legged figure, with lowering brows and sour eyes. The Kid looked at him quietly. What was in the ranger's mind he could not tell.

He had let up on Jim Hall, let him live, in the full expectation that gun-play would follow, that guns would be roaring, and blood flowing freely, before the night was many minutes older. But it had not come to pass. The Kid had waited tensely, a gun in either hand, ready for the most desperate fight of his wild life. But only silence had followed. And for once the keen mind of the Kid was at a loss.

Was Mule-Kick Hall waiting for morning before he came a-shooting? Was he giving the outlaw a chance of escape, as return for the sparing of his life? Or was he calculating on the Kid seeking escape, and laying a snare for him outside the ranch-house? The Kid could not tell. He could only surmise—with watchful eyes and guns handy—but he did not think of quitting. The odds against him were terribly heavy, if it came to a cinch, but the Rio Kid was a bad man to crowd. He waited, while night gave place to morning—wondering more and more what was in the mind of the grim-faced, iron-willed captain of rangers. What was coming to him the Kid could not guess; but whatever it proved to be he was ready for it.

From his window he had watched the rangers preparing to take the trail. Obviously Hall had told his men nothing, so far. And where was Hall? The Kid was mystified.

And now the grim-featured ranger stood before him, as he looked from the window—grimmer than ever, but with no weapon in his hand. The Kid waited for him to speak.

"You still hyer?" said Hall at last.

"Sure!"

"I guessed you'd have beat it."

"I ain't beating it a whole lot," said the Kid coolly. "I'm boss of this here ranch, and I'm staying boss."

Hall bit his lip hard.

"You gave me my life," he said. "I gave you a chance to beat it, Kid. I figured that you'd get out and corral that mustang of yours and hit the horizon like blazes!"

"That ain't the programme," said the Kid quietly. "I put you wise, Jim Hall, that I'd quit outlaw trails. I ain't going back to them unless I'm driven. Call on your bunch, if you like, and begin the circus; I guess there won't be a lot of them left to carry the news home when we're through. I'm a rancher now, Jim Hall, and no outlaw; and if you make me an outlaw ag'in, that's on you." The Kid's eyes flashed. "I ain't taking a step from this ranch—not while I can handle a gun! Chew on that!"

Hall stood silent, looking at him.

"If you'd gone, I reckon I'd have been on your trail at sun-up!" he said at length. "But—"

"I ain't gone!" said the Kid.

Hall breathed hard.

"I never let up on a man afore when I was on his trail," he said. "I never reckoned I'd let up on the Rio Kid, least of any. But—"

He paused again, and the Kid looked curiously at the hard, sour face. There were signs in it of stress of thought, of anxious pondering. The hours that had passed, since the Kid had spared his life, had been hours of anxious and bitter reflection to Mule-Kick Hall.

"I guess," he said at last, speaking slowly—"I guess you was giving it to me straight, Kid, when you talked turkey to me last night. You sure acted like a white man. You had me cinched; and you could have shot me up and make your get-away easy."

"I sure could!" said the Kid.

"I'm making a bargain with you," said Hall. "I believe what you allowed when you was chewing the rag in that room—you've quit outlaw trails, and you're ranching, fair and square. I guess it's my duty to rope you in, all the same; but I'm sure letting it slip. I'm riding away from this ranch with my mouth shut."

The Kid drew a quick breath.

"You're sure spilling a whole hatful, Hall!" he said softly.

"You keep to a straight trail, and I keep my mouth shut," said Hall. "I'm riding away this morning—out of Pack-saddle country. I've quit hunting you, Kid. You've got to take your chance of another hombre spotting you—but I've quit."

"That's heap good talk," said the Kid.

"But you got to ride straight," said Hall. "So long's you're ranching, fair and square, I guess I'm going to forget you. But"—his jaw set square—"but if I get the news that the Rio Kid is on the rampage again, then you look out for yourself, Kid—I'll take your trail again, and never quit till you're strung up. You got your chance—if you mean business, you'll never see Jim Hall ag'in. Break out, jest once, and I'll get you, if I have to track you from Texas to Alaska."

"It's a cinch!" said the Kid.

"That's the lot!" said Hall, and he was turning away. But an impulse moved him, and he turned back and held out a brown hand. "Shake, Kid! We part friends—though if we meet ag'in, we meet as enemies."

The Kid grasped the rough hand.

"It's a cinch!" he repeated.

The ranger strode away. Five minutes later he was mounted, and riding away from the Lazy O at the head of his men. The Kid went out on the porch, and stood looking after them. His face was thoughtful. Long Bill came up to the porch, leading a grey mustang.



"Say, you're up, Barney!" he greeted. "I guess I'm glad to see you on your pins! You'll ride to-day."

Barney stared at him. The rancher stood at the open window, as if he feared nothing, least of all being seen by the rangers. Had he deceived himself all along the line?

In an access of hatred and rage the foreman reached for a gun. Like magic a Colt appeared in the Kid's hand.

"Don't!" he said quietly. "You're mending, Barney, but you won't mend if I pull trigger on you, you pizen polecat!"

Bang!

The gun came out of the foreman's belt, and the Kid fired. There was a yell of rage and pain from Barney Baker, as the revolver was shot from his hand.

It spun away and crashed on the ground, leaving Barney nursing a numbed hand, and cursing.

"Beat it!" snapped the Kid. "You dog-goned geck, beat it—or the next hits you where you live."

Barney backed away, mouthing curses. From the plains a horseman came in at a gallop. It was Mule-Kick Hall.

"Mister Fairfax, sir—" He broke off, as the mustang gave a joyous whinny, and muzzled his glossy head under the Kid's arm. "Carry me home to die, if the critter don't seem to know you, boss!"

"Looks like!" agreed the Kid, caressing his steed, his face glowing. "He sure does seem to take to me!"

"Sure!" said the astonished wrangler. "Say, Captain Hall handed that cayuse over to me, Mister Fairfax, sir, and told me to bring him to you—he said he hadn't no use for the critter now, and he was making you a present of him. I guess that's sure handsome."

"Mule-Kick Hall is sure a white man," said the Kid. "I reckon I'll freeze to that cayuse."

Long Bill grinned. "He was the Rio Kid's cayuse, boss, afore Captain Hall cinched him. I guess if the Kid knowed you had him you'd have trouble with that fire-bug."

"I'll sure chance that!" chuckled the Kid.

"They say the Kid thought more of that cayuse than of his own self, boss," said the wrangler. "My idea is that the Kid is dead, or Side-Kicker wouldn't be running on another guy's rope."

"I guess the Kid is dead," murmured Mister Fairfax, after the wrangler had gone. "He sure is—and he'll stay dead if folks will let him. Say, old hoss, you glad to see your master agin? Shucks! I guess the sight of you is good for sore eyes, old cayuse. You and me, old hoss, is going to have one daisy time on this here ranch, and I'm telling you so!"

The Kid's face was bright. Mule-Kick Hall and his men had ridden into the horizon, and were gone. Side-Kicker was with his old master, to ride peaceful trails together. The future was rosy for the Kid. The peril had come and it had passed, leaving him safe to lead his new life; and Side-Kicker had come back to him in a way that could bring no suspicion on Mister Fairfax.

Yea, the Rio Kid was dead, and was going to stay dead—so Mister Fairfax figured. The boss of the Lazy O was going to forget that such a fire-bug ever had ridden Texas trails. Life was going to be good, the Kid figured, as he saddled the grey mustang for a ride, longing to feel his old mount under him again—life was going to be very good.

So the Kid figured, never knowing that Fate—which he believed he had baffled—had another kick coming.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

At Last!

"YOU can bring my cayuse round to the bunkhouse, coyote!" said Barney Baker hoarsely.

The coyote gave him a look. "Quitting?" he asked.

"Yep!"

"I guess you're wise," said the coyote. "There ain't nothing to it, Barney; the jig's up here. Mister Fairfax has got the ranch and he's got the bunch; and I reckon he ain't nothing to fear from Mule-Kick Hall, like you reckoned. They sure parted friends, and Hall's given him the Rio Kid's cayuse. Nothing to it, old-timer. And I reckon it's time to quit; and I'm riding, too. I done finished with this bunch."

THE POPULAR.—No. 563.

And the coyote lounged away to the corral for the horses.

In the doorway of the bunkhouse Barney Baker stood taking his last survey of the ranch of which he had so long been master.

The jig was up, as the coyote said. Barney realised it. Cunning and treachery, plotting and lawless violence had done all they could, and left him at the wrong end of the rope. His last hope had failed him when the ranger captain rode away with his men after talking to Mister Fairfax face to face. The jig was up, and all that remained to the foreman of the Lazy O was to ride.

He looked over the ranch, over the wide grasslands where he had ridden as master, over the corrals that had been his; he looked at the punchers who had so long backed him, and who backed him no longer. All was lost; and he had to go. Black and bitter was his

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brow, black and bitter—were his thoughts as he looked from the bunkhouse.

There was a clatter of hoofs, and Mister Fairfax, mounted on the grey mustang with the black patch, rode down to the gate.

Barney's eyes followed him. The boy rancher was riding Side-Kicker, the Rio Kid's horse. Barney knew that the grey mustang had been brought to the Lazy O by the rangers. Why Hall had left it there as a gift to the rancher he did not know, but he had given that no thought till now.

Now a gleam shot into his eyes. He almost staggered with the glare of sudden illumination that came into his mind.

"Search me!" whispered Barney to himself. "Search me!"

He leaned on the doorpost, his face white, his eyes, shining, fixed on the graceful rider. He watched the Kid lift Side-Kicker to the leap at the gate, and his eyes blazed.

The chord of remembrance was touched; the missing memory came back with a rush as he saw the Kid riding Side-Kicker. He had seen Mister Fairfax before, he knew; and now he knew where and when. The sight of Side-Kicker had supplied the clue. The galoot hadn't sported a moustache when Barney had seen him last; that had beaten his recollection, or helped; and there were other little changes. But he knew him now—he knew him as he lifted Side-Kicker to the leap. If he'd seen him on that cayuse before he'd have known him before; and he knew him now—knew him.

He panted with the knowledge, with the consciousness that what he knew was enough to feed fat his bitter revenge.

He knew him—knew him now that he was riding the grey mustang with the black patch. For Mister Fairfax had been riding the grey mustang with the black patch when Barney had seen him, long ago, in a street at White Pine—riding for his life, with roaring guns, and a maddened crowd round him and after him.

Back in Barney's memory with photographic clearness now came the scene—White Pine in a roar with the news that the Rio Kid was shooting up the town; men running and riding, buckling on revolvers as they ran, shouting, cursing, firing; and in the midst of the mad mob the Rio Kid on the grey mustang, spurting, a gun in either hand, shooting right and left as he rode for his life.

Barney saw it all again. He had drawn a gun himself and taken a pot-shot at the wild rider. He remembered it now. Back to his mind came the shooting-up of White Pine—one of the wildest of the Rio Kid's wild doings. And he knew!

Coyote Jensen came back with the horses. He stared in surprise at Barney's fixed, white face, and, following his gaze, saw Mister Fairfax riding Side-Kicker down the trail. Then he looked at Barney again.

"What's got you?" he asked. "Hyer's the cayuses, Barney. But what's got you? Ain't you riding?"

Barney panted. "I ain't!" He grasped the coyote by the arm convulsively. "Nope, I ain't riding to-day—I ain't going to ride. Not any! That guy—

You see that guy—that dog-goned galoot that calls himself Mister Fairfax? I got him now—I placed him now! And, by thunder, I'm going to put the rope round his neck! Boss of the Lazy O!" Barney laughed discordantly. "Outlaw and fire-bug—with a rope waiting for him! And it's me that's telling you!"

"You gone loco?" asked the amazed coyote.

"I tell you I know him now!" Barney sank his voice to a husky whisper. "The Rio Kid! The fire-bug that's wanted by half the sheriffs in Texas! The galoot I saw shooting-up White Pine! The outlaw of the Rio Grande!" Barney Baker laughed gloatingly. "I got him now! And I guess I'll be running the Lazy O Ranch after the Rio Kid's gone up with a riata round his neck!"

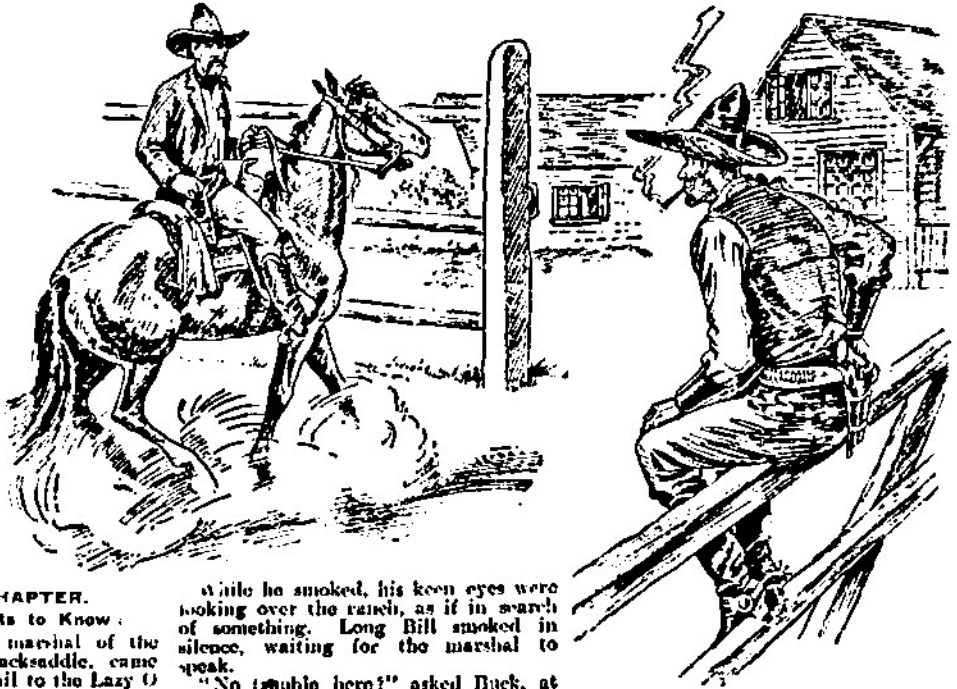
THE END.

(It's a black outlook for the Rio Kid with Barney Baker holding the whip hand. Order your POPULAR now to ensure reading next Tuesday's enthralling complete story, entitled: "THE LUCK OF THE RIO KID!")

THE LUCK of the RIO KID!

RALPH REDWAY'S COMPLETE WESTERN YARN WITH A HUNDRED THRILLS!

Once more the luck of the Rio Kid holds good when the Sheriff of Packsaddle pays a visit to the Lazy O ranch. But to this luck must be added pluck, for without that the boy outlaw would never have won through!



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Buck Sidgers Wants to Know.

BUCK SIDGERS, marshal of the cow town of Packsaddle, came riding up the trail to the Lazy O ranch.

As he drew near to the ranch-house the marshal of Packsaddle hitched his holster a little closer to his hand and loosened the gun in it. A man who stood for law and order, as Buck did, in a wild cattle country like Packsaddle needed to keep a gun handy, especially when he was visiting a lay-out like the Lazy O. The Lazy O bunch had a juicy reputation up and down the valley of the Pecos, and they were the wildest outfit that ever rode into Packsaddle for a jamboree.

The gate was open, and Long Bill, the Lazy O horse-wrangler sat on it, smoking a Mexican cigar. He looked at the marshal grimly, under the broad brim of his Stetson, and, as Buck had done, he gave a hitch to his gun-belt.

Buck pulled in his horse in the gateway.

"Mornin', Bill!" he greeted.

"Mornin', marshal!" answered Long Bill, civilly but cautiously.

If the marshal of Packsaddle wanted one of the Lazy O bunch for some wild frolic in the cow town Long Bill was prepared to argue the matter with a gun in his hand. But if it was a friendly call the marshal was welcome to the hospitality of the bunkhouse.

"How's things?" asked the marshal.

"Fine!" answered the wrangler.

"How's things at Packsaddle?"

"Oh, so-so," said Buck. "The Bar-10 boys was shooting up the town last night. Jimmy Daco lost a wheel at the Bend, and his hack went into an arroyo, and I allow it will want some pulling out. They say there's been cows rustled on the Sun-dance ranch. Euchro Dick shot up young Parker at the dance at Henson's Barn; but the boys allow that young Parker pulled first, so there ain't nothing on Dick."

Having thus related the local news, the marshal sat at ease in his saddle, reached for the "making," rolled himself a cigarette, accepted a match from Long Bill, and smoked.

While he smoked, his keen eyes were looking over the ranch, as if in search of something. Long Bill smoked in silence, waiting for the marshal to speak.

"No trouble here?" asked Buck, at last.

"Not any."

There was another silence, and then the marshal of Packsaddle came to the point abruptly.

"What's happened to Mister Fairfax?"

Long Bill grinned. He understood now why the marshal had ridden the long trail from the cow town.

"I guess the boss is O.K.," answered the horse-wrangler. "You don't want to worry any about that guy."

"Say," said Buck, "that guy Fairfax is the seventh—or is it the eighth?—man that's bought the Lazy O. I guess every guy that's bought this ranch has bought trouble. Barney Baker has made it too hot for him. He's stayed foreman all the time, and he's put paid to every boss that ever moseyed along to this shobang. The bunch have backed his play all the time. In Packsaddle they figure that Mister Fairfax has been shot up on this ranch. I guess I've come out for a look-see."

Long Bill chuckled. "Mister Fairfax" was the first boss of the Lazy O who had made the grade at the ranch. But he had made it.

"You don't want to worry any about that guy," repeated the wrangler. "I guess if there's a guy in Texas who can look after himself it's Mister Fairfax. I ain't denying that the bunch was up agin him, marshal. We figured that Barney Baker was good enough for us, and we allowed we didn't want a boss cavorting around on the Lazy O. But that guy, Fairfax, is sure one man-sized galoot, and I'll tell a man the bunch are feeding from his hand now."

"You don't say!" ejaculated the marshal in astonishment.

"I should anilo!" answered Long Bill. "Say, there ain't a hombre in the bunch that wouldn't stand for Mister Fairfax now. 'Ceptin' p'Barney, Coyote Jensen—and, of course, Barney. He hit trouble here, and that's a fact. He fired Panhandle Pete and shot up Kansas

Jake, and Barney was laid out in an ambush he set for Mister Fairfax. He's lying in the bunkhouse yonder, now, all handaged up, though I reckon he could ride if he liked, but he ain't anxious to quit. But he's going, you bet your life. And Mister Fairfax is running this ranch, and the bunch are backing him."

"Sho!" said the marshal.

"Barney's madder'n a rattler about it," said Long Bill. "He was foreman so long, he figured that the ranch was his'n. But that guy Fairfax has made the grade, I'll tell a man. I guess he's only hanging on byer watching for a chance to double-cross Mister Fairfax. But there ain't nothing to it. His jig is up. Say, marshal, you sure don't want to worry about Mister Fairfax. I'm telling you, he's the goods. And I guess he's got this outfit jest where he wants it."

"Sho!" repeated the marshal. "I guess they'll sit up and stare in Packsaddle when I let on that the Lazy O has got a boss at last who can run the ranch, and who's put paid to Barney Baker. They sure will! Say, this here is good news. Where's Mister Fairfax now?"

Long Bill waved his cigar towards the grassy plains.

"I guess he's out on a pascar on that mustang of his'n—the cayuso that was the Rio Kid's."

Buck raised his eyebrows.

"How in thunder did Mister Fairfax get hold of the Kid's cayuso?" he inquired. "Say, you ain't seed that fire-bug from the Rio Grande around these parts?"

"Nope! I guess the Rio Kid is dead an' planted," answered Long Bill. "He had a long run, that fire-bug had; but I reckon he passed it up at last. The Texas Rangers hit this ranch trailing for the Kid, and they brought the mustang along. Jim Hall had rounded it.

up where the Kid was with it with a half-breed down the Pecos for feed. And when the rangers hit the trail he gave the cayuse to Mister Fairfax. He sure is some boss!" The wrangler's eyes glistened. "I'll tall all Texas there ain't a cayuse between the Grande and the Colorado that could keep a sight of Side-Kicker's heels in a race. Mister Fairfax is sure one lucky hombre to cinch that cayuse."

"Why did Hall give him the cayuse?"
"You can search me!" said Long Bill. "That ranger galoot, Hall, is a sour little cuss. But he sure seemed to cotton to Mister Fairfax, somehow. I guess he hadn't no more use for Side-Kicker, seeing as it's all Texas to a Mexican dollar that the Rio Kid has gone up; and I allow he was trailing along that mustang to help him find the Kid. Anyhow, he left the boss for Mister Fairfax, and the boss is s'pore riding him on the range this here morning."

"I guess I won't be seeing him if he's out on the range," said Buck Sidgers. "I'm sure pleased to hear that he's made good here. I met up with him at Packsaddle, and I reckoned he was a good little man, and I'd have been plumb sorry to hear that Barney Baker had run him off'n the ranch."

"Say, boss'n the Coyote," said Long Bill, as a man with his arm in a sling came across from the bunkhouse. "He's the only hombre in the bunch that don't stand for the boss; and I guess he's lighting out soon. He's got a pill in his fin that he cinched in gun-play with the boss."

Buck glanced at the Coyote as he came up.

"Say, marshal, Barney Baker seen you from the bunkhouse," he said. "I guess he wants you to step in and talk some."

"I ain't no objection," answered Buck, and, with a nod to the horse-wrangler, he rode on to the bunkhouse, dismounted there, threw his reins over the hitching-post, and strode in.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Forget it!

BARNEY BAKER was sitting on his bunk.

He still wore his bandages, though by this time the foreman of the Lazy O was very nearly mended. But, as Long Bill had said, Barney was not anxious to quit; and Mister Fairfax was allowing him to stay until he could sit a broncho.

His eyes gleamed under knitted brows at the marshal of Packsaddle.

Buck gave him a nod.

There was a faint grin on the marshal's face. He stood for the law in Packsaddle; but the law in that wild section had never been strong enough to deal with Barney Baker and the Lazy O bunch. And Buck was glad that a man-sized guy had come along who was able to deal with them.

"Howdy!" said Buck cheerily.
Barney paid no attention to the greeting.

"Say, I've news for you, Buck," he said. "You've heard of that firebug the Rio Kid, who's raised Cain in nearly every part of Texas in his time?"

"I should smile," answered Buck.

"I guess you'd like to hear that he was around in this section, and to get a cinch on him."

"You bet!"
"I can put you wise to him," said Barney.

Buck's eyes glistened.
"You allow that the Rio Kid is

cavorting around the Packsaddle country," he asked.

"Sure!"

"You seen him?"

"I seen him."

"Then he ain't dead, like some guys allow?"

"He sure ain't."

"You put me wise to him, Barney, and I'll sure have him in the calaboose, at Packsaddle, so quick it will make his head swim," said Buck. "Where is he?"

"On this ranch," said Barney.

"Sho!"

"He calls himself Mister Fairfax!"

added the foreman of the Lazy O.

The marshal of Packsaddle jumped.

"What you giving me?" he exclaimed.

"The goods," answered Barney Baker.

"I'm telling you, Buck, that I seen that guy, the Rio Kid, months back, when he was shooting up White Pine—seventy miles from here. I had a shot at him myself, when he was riding down Main Street at White Pine, with his guns going. And that's the galoot that's come to Packsaddle calling himself Mister Fairfax."

Buck Sidgers stared at him. His look was first of blank amazement and then of contempt.

"Carry me home to die," he said at last. "You figure that I'm going to swallow a yarn like that, Barney Baker?"

"It's the truth," said Barney hoarsely. "I never placed the guy when I first saw him in Packsaddle, but I knowed I'd seen him afore somewhere. And when I saw him this morning riding the Rio Kid's cayuse, Side-Kicker, I knew who he was. He's the Rio Kid!"

Buck's lip curled.

"And you ain't reckernised him afore, and you and him on the same ranch all this time?" he sneered. "You ain't tumbled to it that he was the Rio Kid, not till you slipped up in your gun-gamo byer, and had to get? Now you've come out at the little end of the horn, you allow that Mister Fairfax is an outlaw and a firebug, and you figure to put me on his trail. Aw, forget it, Barney!"

Barney gritted his teeth.

"I'll toll the world, Buck, that guy Fairfax is the Rio Kid!" he hissed.

"You got your duty to do."

"Forget it! Why, Jim Hall and the rangers has been here, and Mule-Kick Hall knows the Kid like the back of his own hand!" exclaimed the marshal of Packsaddle. "If he's the Kid why didn't Hall cinch him when he had the chance he's been hunting for for dogs' ages?"

"I don't rightly know—"

"I guess you don't!" jeered Buck.

"Great gophers! I allow you are wild with Mister Fairfax for spoiling your game byer, Barney, but you want to think of something better'n that! It's too thin, old man."

"I'll toll all Texas—"

"You can toll all Texas, if you want,"

grinned Buck. "But it ain't no use

telling me. Is that what you had to say?"

"Sure! And you want to cinch that

firebug while you've got the chance!"

hissed Barney.

"I guess I'd be plumb glad to cinch the Rio Kid, but I ain't cinching Mister Fairfax a whole lot," answered the marshal of Packsaddle. "You've got another guess coming, feller."

And with that the marshal of Packsaddle turned and strode out of the bunkhouse, with jingling spurs.

Barney Baker sat and stared after him, and curses fell in a stream from his lips.

Buck Sidgers had laughed at the accusation, and yet Barney knew that it was the truth. If nobody else in Packsaddle was wise to it Barney Baker knew that the new boss of the Lazy O was the Rio Kid. Recognition and knowledge had been slow in coming, but they came at last. Mister Fairfax was the outlaw for whom a reward of a thousand dollars was offered. Barney Baker knew it, and the marshal of Packsaddle laughed at the story.

Coyote Jenson lounged into the bunkhouse and cast a curious glance at the foreman.

"Buck don't take a lot of stock in it," he remarked.

"The dog-goned bonehead!" snarled Barney. "He's got a chance of cinching the worst firebug in Texas, and he's letting it slip."

"I guess it sounds a tall story, Barney. Jim Hall was here, and he saw Mister Fairfax. If he's the Kid why did Hall let up on him?"

"How'd I know?" snarled Barney.

"The Kid fooled him somehow, I guess."

"Jim Hall ain't so easy fooled."

Barney spat out a curse.

"I tell you I know he's the Kid! Soon as I seen him on Side-Kicker I knowed who he was. Buck Sidgers ain't taking it in, but the White Pine crowd would jump at it if they was here. There's a hundred guys in White Pine know the Kid, and want him."

The Coyote shrugged his shoulders. He was the one man in the Lazy O bunch who still stood for Barney Baker; but he only half-believed the foreman's story. He figured that malice and revenge had warped Barney's judgment a good deal.

"Buck Sidgers is a peaky bonehead," went on Barney. "The Kid's got him fooled, like he's got the bunch. But if Jake Nixon, the sheriff of White Pine, seen Mister Fairfax, he'd jump at him with both feet. And I guess Jake is going to see him."

"White Pine writes don't run in Packsaddle," said the Coyote. "Jake Nixon won't ride over his own border."

"I guess he would ride over the Rocky Mountains, and the Sierra Nevada afterwards, to get at the Rio Kid," said Barney. "I tell you, Jake got lead in his laig when the Kid was shooting up White Pine, and he still limps. He owes the Kid a game leg."

"What's the game, then?" asked the Coyote.

"I guess Buck Sidgers has got to be counted out. Jake Nixon of White Pine is the guy we want," said Barney, "and you're going to ride to White Pine, Coyote, and you'll make it in a day if you kill you, cayuse, and you'll give the sheriff word from me. Mister Fairfax won't cavort around the Lazy O, playing at ranch boss, after Jake's got his eyes on him. He sure will not. I done business with Jake at White Pine, and he's my friend, and he will sure allow I've got the right cayuse in the rope when I tell him that the Rio Kid is around."

"I guess I'm ready to hit the trail," answered the Coyote. "If you've got it right that firebug is sure fixed."

Five minutes later the Coyote, with a written note folded in his pocket, left the bunkhouse and walked to the corral. He roped his horse, saddled up, and rode away from the Lazy O to the west.

Barney Baker, in the bunkhouse, heard the beat of the horse's hoofs dying away along the trail, and drew a deep breath. He had been beaten in the fight for the Lazy O; but revenge was within his grasp, and when the outlaw rancher was in the hands of the sheriff of White Pine, who would stand between Barney

and the ranch that had so long been his own? Boss after boss had come to the Lazy O, and Barney had beaten him to it every time. The fight with Mister Fairfax had been the longest and hardest, and defeat had fallen on the foreman. But it seemed to Barney that he could now see victory ahead, at long last.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Hands Up!

"SAY, you want to hear the prize story?" asked Buck Sidgers, as he checked his broncho in the gateway, where Long Bill sat and smoked.

The marshal of Packsaddle was grinning widely.

"Shoot!" said the horse-wrangler.

"I guess it's the best I've heered!" chuckled Buck. "Barney Baker allows that your new boss, Mister Fairfax, is the Rio Kid."

Long Bill almost fell off the gate.

"Barney Baker does!" he gasped.

"He sure does!" grinned Buck.

The boss of the Lazy O was mounted on Side-Kicker, the Rio Kid's mustang. A handsome figure he made as he rode the cayuse that was known all over Texas for his speed and endurance.

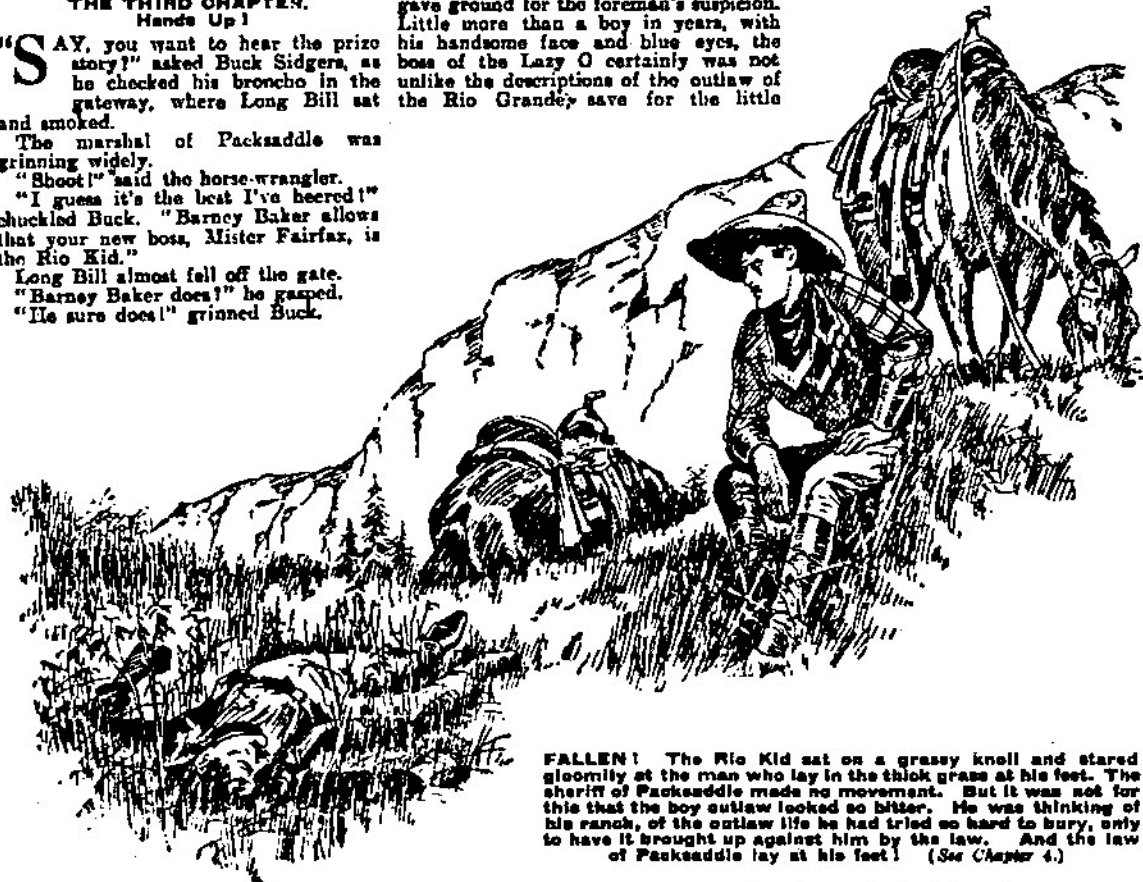
A strange look came into Buck's eyes as he drew nearer to the rancher. He had never seen the Rio Kid; but he had heard many a description of him, and he could not help feeling that there was something in the rancher's looks that gave ground for the foreman's suspicion. Little more than a boy in years, with his handsome face and blue eyes, the boss of the Lazy O certainly was not unlike the descriptions of the outlaw of the Rio Grande; save for the little

ridden the grey mustang on the prairie trails that sunny morning. Only Side-Kicker had been wanting to complete his happy satisfaction in his new life; and now he was riding Side-Kicker.

Life seemed good to the Kid—and the wild days of outlawry far behind!

"Mornin', marshal!" he greeted "You been to my ranch?"

"Sure!" said the marshal. "I reckon



FALLEN! The Rio Kid sat on a grassy knoll and stared gloomily at the man who lay in the thick grass at his feet. The sheriff of Packsaddle made no movement. But it was not for this that the boy outlaw looked so bitter. He was thinking of his ranch, of the outlaw life he had tried so hard to bury, only to have it brought up against him by the law. And the law of Packsaddle lay at his feet! (See Chapter 4.)

"The Rio Kid! Search me!" ejaculated Long Bill. "Why, I guess the galoot must be plumb loco."

Buck chuckled loudly.

"That's what he allows, and I guess he wanted me to cinch Mister Fairfax for the Kid! Ha, ha, ha!"

And the marshal of Packsaddle, with a wave of his hand to the astonished wrangler, rode away laughing across the prairie, leaving Long Bill staring after him blankly.

Buck was still grinning as the Lazy O ranch dropped out of sight behind him, and he cantered across the rolling prairie towards the distant cow town. Not for an instant did he figure on believing the wild accusation that the disgruntled foreman had made against his boss. It seemed to Buck that only the sincerest revengeful malice could have induced Barney to make such a charge. So far from believing a word of it, Buck was intending to relate it in Packsaddle as a screaming joke.

"Gee, that's Mister Fairfax!" ejaculated Buck, as he sighted a horseman on the prairie, and he turned off from the trail to ride towards the new boss of the Lazy O.

His eyes dwelt curiously on Mister Fairfax as he approached him. The boy rancher, sighting him at the same time, rode to meet him.

moustache that adorned his upper lip. The Rio Kid, it was well known, never sported a moustache. But a thought came into Buck's mind that a moustache was easy enough to grow in the months that the Rio Kid had been hidden from all knowledge.

Nobody, as far as Buck knew, had seen the Kid since the time when the Texas Rangers had nearly cinched him in the Mal Pais.

"Gee-whis!" muttered Buck. "There ain't nothing to it—there sure ain't nothing to it! I guess nobody in Packsaddle knows where Mister Fairfax came from—and he sure looks like he might be own brother to the Kid—but there ain't nothing to it! Barney was jest shooting off his mouth promiscuous, because Mister Fairfax horned in and spoiled his game!"

Mister Fairfax rode up to the marshal of Packsaddle and drew in his mustang. The Rio Kid's face was bright and cheery that morning.

Danger, in the shape of Jim Hall and his Rangers, had fallen on the Kid in his new role as a rancher; but the danger had passed. He had made his compact with Hall, and the rangers had ridden away in peace, leaving him in possession of his beloved Side-Kicker. There was now, so far as the Kid could see, no cloud on the horizon; and it was with a light heart that he had

I was plumb glad to hear you've tamed the bunch, Mister Fairfax!"

The Kid smiled. "They're good boys," he said. "I guess they ain't a bunch of tin angels, nohow; but they're plumb white! I sure reckon I'm going to pull wall with that outfit, marshal."

"Not with Barney Baker, I reckon!"

"Barney's hitting the trail pronto," answered the Kid. "I guess he feathered his nest while he was running the Lazy O; and I ain't no use for a foreman of Barney's heft."

The marshal nodded. His eyes were on the Kid's mount. Somehow, the grey mustang, so celebrated as the cayuse of the Rio Kid, made it seem likelier that there was something more than hot air in Barney Baker's accusation. True, the rancher had got it from Jim Hall, the ranger, and Mule-Kick Hall was the last man in Texas to let up on a fire-bug like the Rio Kid. Still, the sight of the grey mustang and the rider's evident pride in his horse and affection for it, brought strange thoughts into Buck Sidgers' mind.

"Say, that's some cayuse!" he remarked.

The Kid stroked the glossy neck of his favourite.

"You've said it," he agreed.

"It's the Rio Kid's cayuse; Long Bill

Bill's told me about it," said the marshal. "Say, it was sure handsome of Hall to give you that cayuse."

"Hall's a white man!" said the Kid. "You don't figure that the Kid will be after that cayuse again, if he's alive?" asked the marshal.

Mister Fairfax laughed. "I'm sure taking the chance!" he answered.

"Folks allow that that cayuse never would let any guy mount him, 'cepting the Kid, without giving a heap of trouble," said Buck. "But you sure can ride him with a loose rein, Mister Fairfax."

The Kid's smiling face tensed a little. With his old instinct for danger, born of his wild life, he realized that something lay behind the marshal's words.

His blue eyes narrowed a little, and his gaze at the marshal was as keen as the edge of his bowie. But he still smiled.

"I sure do handle this cayuse easy," he assented. "He seemed to take to me, marshal, he sure did. But I guess there's pecky few cayuses that I can't handle if I want."

"You ever seen the Rio Kid?" asked Buck.

"I sure seen him!" "Folks allow that he's a dog gone, all-fired scallywag," said Buck. "They allow he's shot up more guys than he's got fingers and toes."

"I guess folks shoot off their mouths a lot about that hombre," said Mister Fairfax, smiling. "Mebbe he ain't so black as he's painted!"

"Heard of him in the Packsaddle country?" asked Buck.

His eyes were sharply on the rancher. He had laughed at Barney's story in the bunkhouse. Yet, somehow, as he sat in the saddle gazing at the boy rancher on the Rio Kid's mustang, that story had ceased to seem so wild and unfounded. Buck was a horseman and a lover of horses, and he could have sworn at sight that this was not the first time that Mister Fairfax had ridden the Kid's horse before the rangers brought the cayuse to the Lazy O.

The Kid shifted a little in his saddle as if for ease as he sat and talked; but that shift brought the butt of the gun in his holster a little nearer to his hand. And the eyes of the Packsaddle marshal narrowed almost to pin-points.

"Any guy allow he's seen the Kid in Packsaddle?" asked Mister Fairfax carelessly.

"Yep!" "Who's the guy?" "Barney Baker!" The Kid started.

More than once, it had seemed to him that he had seen something like struggling recognition in the eyes of the foreman of the Lazy O. He had wondered whether Barney had ever seen him before as the Rio Kid.

"If Barney Baker's wise to that fire-bug, I guess he can put you on to a thousand dollars reward, marshal!" said the Kid, laughing.

"He allows he's seen him evorting around the Lazy O," said Buck Sidgers slowly.

"Sho!" said the Kid. "Not one of my bunch?"

"You!" said the marshal of Packsaddle.

The Kid's heart almost missed a beat! It had come at last, then!

"Me!" he repeated mechanically.

"Jest you!" said the marshal, and his face was grim. "That's what Barney Baker allows, Mister Fairfax. He allows that you're the fire-bug of the Rio Grande—the outlaw that's wanted by half the sheriff's in Texas. But I

reckon you'll be able to prove up that you're Mister Fairfax, like you say; you'll be able to bring witnesses from the part of Texas you hail from. You've got friends, and mebbe relations, who'll swear that you ain't that pecky fire-bug, the Rio Kid."

The Kid sat still and silent in Side-Kicker's saddle. It had come at last like a bolt from the blue! Like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky! When all seemed set and fair, the Kid's past had another kick coming.

There was more than suspicion in the grim face of the Packsaddle marshal now. There was something like certainty. Buck Sidgers liked Mister Fairfax, and admired the man who had tamed the Lazy O bunch. But if that man was the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw of Texas, he was Buck's game. The marshal's hand slid towards his revolver.

"I reckon you'll ride into Packsaddle with me, Mister Fairfax," he said. "I guess you'll be glad to make it clear that there ain't nothing to what Barney Baker allows."

"I guess I ain't hitting Packsaddle this morning, marshal," answered the Rio Kid quietly.

"Not to prove that you ain't that fire-bug, like Barney Baker allows?"

"Nop!"

"You got another guess coming," said Buck Sidgers grimly, and his gun came out as he spoke. "I got my duty to do—hands up, Mister Fairfax."

Bang! There was a roar of a six-gun as the Kid fired from the hip, and the marshal's hand slid towards his wide and wild, as Buck Sidgers pitched out of the saddle and crashed head-long into the grass.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Luck of the Kid!

THE Rio Kid sat on a grassy knoll, staring gloomily at the man who lay in the thick grass at his feet. Close at hand, the marshal's broncho and the Kid's mustang grazed peaceably. The burning sun of Southern Texas blazed down on the scene.

In the high grass the group would have been invisible at a distance. Twice, as he sat there, the Kid had seen a passing horseman—one of his own bunch at the Lazy O. But the puncher had not looked towards him, and had passed on unseeing; for which the Kid was thankful.

Buck Sidgers lay at his feet, his tanned face white, a streak of blood across the bronzed skin. No sound or movement came from the marshal of Packsaddle.

The Kid, sitting the grassy knoll, with clouded face, was thinking. His thoughts were bitter enough.

They called the Rio Kid a fire-bug, a scallawag, a desperado who would shoot up a guy without thinking twice about it. Wild tales were told of him in every cow town in Texas, at every round-up camp and rodeo. Fables had gathered about the name of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. The Kid was thinking bitterly that it would have been well for him, had he been as black as his enemies painted him. For Buck Sidgers' life was in his hand, and he spared it, and if he spared the marshal of Packsaddle, it was for his own destruction. That hasty shot from the hip had not been fired to kill, it had stunned the marshal of Packsaddle, "creasing" him as a cowpuncher creases an obstinate steer that will not come to the rope. Buck Sidgers lay senseless at his feet—his life the Kid's to take or spare. And the Kid knew

that he was going to spare it, and that in consequence his game was up in the Packsaddle country. Nothing remained for Mister Fairfax of the Lazy O but to mount and ride.

It was bitter luck.

He had escaped the peril of the rangers, and it had seemed to him that the trail was clear ahead, the Rio Kid dead and buried, Mister Fairfax alive in his place, the future rosy. But always at the back of his mind had been the lurking doubt that the past would rise against him once more, as it had risen in the days when he had found refuge on the Sampson Ranch in the San Pedro country. The name of the Rio Kid might be blotted out, but while the Kid lived, the past could not die.

The malice of the rascal who had sought to rob him of his ranch, had brought this new peril on him. And—the Kid realized it—his possession of Side-Kicker. He had been wise to leave the mustang at a safe distance, when he started his role of a rancher in Packsaddle. Buck, he figured, had not believed Barney's story, but the sight of Side-Kicker had somehow cinched it in his mind. And now, if Buck Sidgers died there in the high grass, the Kid's game was not up. Barney Baker he could deal with—he would know how to silence his envious tongue. But Buck Sidgers was not going to die there in the high grass, unless the Kid let drive a bullet through his heart, and that the Kid could not do.

It was useless to kick against fate, the Kid reflected. He was an outlaw, and only outlaw trails were open to him. He had dreamed of a law-abiding life on a ranch—a ranch bought with his own money, hard earned in the gold-mines of Arizona. But it was only a dream—and now came the waking. Unless—

Blacker and gloomier grew the Kid's brow, as he looked down at the senseless man in the grass, and his hand dropped to the butt of his gun.

Why should he give up everything—why should he go back to the wild life of the trails and the chaparral? A man's life stood in the way—and life was cheap in the Packsaddle country. They called him a fire-bug, a gunman, a desperado—and if he chose to live up to it he was safe. The Rio Kid's grasp was almost convulsive on the walnut butt of the gun. Not till that bitter hour, had he realized how dear his new life had come to be to him—how passionately he longed to throw outlawry and reckless defiance of the law behind him.

Buck Sidgers' eyes slowly opened.

The Kid's hand dropped from his gun. He was only fooling himself with those black thoughts, he knew that he could not do it. Why had he not shot the marshal dead, when he pulled on him? Buck had had a gun in his hand, and it was an even break, few men in Packsaddle would have blamed a guy who had shot to kill, when the other man had a gun drawn. Yet the Rio Kid, outlaw and fire-bug, had not pulled the trigger to kill. And now it was too late—now it would be murder. Better to mount Side-Kicker, and hit the trail, leaving his new life behind him, than that.

The marshal of Packsaddle stirred. His dazed eyes fixed on the Kid's moody face, unseeing at first. He groaned faintly, and his hand went to his head. There was the crease of a shot under the thick hair, and the marshal's fingers came away reddened.

But he knew that he was not badly hurt. A headache and a slight loss of blood—that was all. He was dazed and

dizzy; but his mind cleared. Recollection came back, and Buck dragged himself to a sitting posture, still staring at the Kid.

He fumbled at his belt. But his gun was gone; he was disarmed.

The Kid grinned at him sourly.

"You ain't got yours, feller," he drawled. "I guess you'll be s'pry as a gopher in a few minutes. I jest creased you, feller—you sure was going to do some damage with that gun of yours."

The marshal of Packsaddle still stared blankly.

"You're the Rio Kid!"

It was not a question, but an assertion. If the marshal had doubted before he was certain now.

The Kid nodded.

"Right in once," he agreed. "I guess you're wise to it. But I ain't taking any close-up view of the inside of Packsaddle calaboose, feller."

"You got me," said Buck, eyeing him curiously. "They say the Rio Kid never missed a man—but you sorter missed me, Kid, though I allow you was lightning on the shoot."

The Kid laughed derisively.

"Forget it, hombre," he said. "Ain't I shouting that I jest creased you, like I used an ornery steer on the old Double-Bar? I guess you'd have got that pill where you do your thinking if I'd wanted."

"And why didn't you want?" asked the marshal.

The Kid did not answer.

"I laughed at Barney Baker when he allowed you was the Rio Kid," said Buck slowly. "I reckoned it was all

hot air. Somehow I tumbled to it, when we was talking byer. I guess that cayuse of yours helped—he sure did seem to know you a whole heap well, seeing as you allowed you'd only jest got him. I reckon that was how."

"Side-kicker is some cayuse," said the Kid, with an affectionate glance at the grey mustang. "He's saved my life more'n once; but this time I guess he's given me away, the poor old cayuse."

The marshal of Packsaddle staggered to his feet. He stood a little unsteadily, his hand to his head.

His glance was still strangely and doubtfully on the Kid.

"Beat it!" said the Kid. "I ain't pulling on you, marshal! Beat it—and put Packsaddle wise that the Rio Kid's around. The Lazy O will want a new boss again, I reckon. But it was good while it lasted, and I ain't got no kick coming."

"You ain't answered me yet," said Buck quietly. "You had me where you wanted me, Kid, and you let me live I sure want to know."

"Aw, cut it," grunted the Kid. "How'd I know? You're a good man, Buck, and I like you—you're a white man, and I ain't never spilled lead on a guy 'cept to save my own skin."

"You're testing me, rite?"

"Don't I keep on a-shoutin' it?" exclaimed the Kid impatiently. "There's your critter—hump yourself on him and beat it!"

Buck Sidgers called his horse.

"You allow I'm a white man, Kid," he said. "I guess you're one, too. I'm hitting Packsaddle, pronto, with my

mouth shut. You're Mister Fairfax, boss of the Lazy O—and a guy I admire. I don't know nothing about no Rio Kid. You get me?"

The Kid looked at him silently.

"I don't know nothing," repeated Buck deliberately, "about no Rio Kid. If I knowed anything, I've forgot it, owing to getting a crack on the cubeza. So-long, Mister Fairfax!"

Buck Sidgers mounted his horse, and with a wave of his hand, rode away towards the cow town.

The Kid, standing waist-deep in the high grass, looked after him.

"Gee!" said the Kid.

All was not lost. He knew what Buck Sidgers meant. Buck was going to forget what he knew, and Mister Fairfax was still Mister Fairfax, boss of the Lazy O—unknown to the Packsaddle marshal by any other name. The Kid drew a deep, deep breath.

"That guy is sure a square man!" he muttered. "He sure is, I'll tell the world!"

The Kid's heart was light as he mounted Side-Kicker, and he hummed the tune of a Mexican fandango as he rode away towards the Lazy O.

THE END.

(Is the Rio Kid's reign at the Lazy O Ranch coming to an end? It seems so, with so many enemies out to corner him. But the Kid is a dangerous man to crowd, as many a foe has discovered to his cost. Don't miss: "BARNEY BAKER'S LAST TRAIL!" next week's roaring Western yarn.)

Saved from Sacrifice!

(Continued from page 22.)

The other started at the recognition. "I am no Arab. I come from the East, where the friends of the Gwigi live.

Joe's patience was now run out.

"Don't you believe him, king. He's an Arab slave-dealer—like those who have taken thousands of your men and women away to the coast, and sold them to the big ships on the sea. If he's the medicine-man he claims to be, let him wash his body in water. The white will come off and show that he lies! There is the test. Let it be done."

"Is what the white man says true, O witch-doctor?" he asked, turning to the Arab.

"It is not true," he answered swiftly; and then, seized by a happy thought, added: "Have not I cured hundreds of your people?"

"Cured them, yes," mocked the sailor. "But how? I will tell you, king. Among my possessions was a case filled with the bark of the cinchona-tree. We call it quinine in our country. It is a certain cure for all fevers of the forest. There was no magic about it. He gave your people quinine, and they became well."

The chief seemed impressed. "Let all the live prisoners be brought before me and I will hear them all," Spageli said.

The sailor started. "There were but four, O king," he explained. "Myself, my two white friends, and a boy of your own colour."

The king shook his head.

"There were five in all—three whites and two black. See, each has been kept under separate guard."

And he pointed his spear in turn to the five boys.

In a flash Joe understood. As the descent on their camp had been carried out in darkness, the chief's men had made a prisoner of Nobi, his own son.

"They have not yet seen the light of day since they were brought to my village. Now they shall stand before me," Spageli went on.

Joe, however, raised his hand.

He swung round again and pointed to the waiting Arab.

"The villain here says he is an African witch-doctor!" he cried contemptuously. "He claims to have worked great marvels. Very well, chief, I accept his challenge. I will work a greater wonder than he."

"And that is?" questioned the king. "I will produce your own son!" shouted Joe.

The old man shook his head.

"No; that cannot be, for my son went away, seized with the sickness, many suns ago. He wandered in the great forest. And now he is dead."

"But I will bring him here before you," persisted the sailor. "If I fail, then will I and all who came with me die. But if I succeed, then that man shall be my prisoner!"

And he pointed an accusing finger at the astounded Arab.

The thought of having his son restored to him was too great a temptation for Spageli to resist.

"The white man has spoken well," he cried. "It shall be even as he says. O great white man, perform this miracle!"

"Not while that fellow is near," said Joe. "He must be taken away, under guard, as I was."

The king nodded, and summoned his bodyguard, who led the Arab away.

Directly he was gone Joe turned a beaming face to the chief.

"Let your warriors surround me and take me to the bats," he said, pointing to where Dick, Frank, and Pie were lying captive.

A minute later Joe had passed from one to another without a word to the surprised boys.

In the last hut he came upon the prone form of Nobi, still bound. In the darkness no one had recognised him. He was brought into the light of day, and a mighty shout went up.

"It is Nobi, the king's son!" was the cry that rose from a thousand throats.

No one was more surprised than the chief himself to see his son again. Nobi lost no time in telling his father of the good which the white men had shown to him.

"Let them be freed at once," commanded the overjoyed king. "And now, O white man, he whom you claim is yours!"

Joe Tremorne gripped the hands of each of the boys in turn.

"Come on, you young rascals! I'll give you the surprise of your lives!" he said, pointing to the hut in which the Arab was imprisoned. "I'm going to show you El Hajjar, dressed up and nowhere to go, as a medicine man!"

But the promised treat was never given. When the door of boughs was pushed wide the sunlight streamed through an opening in the back.

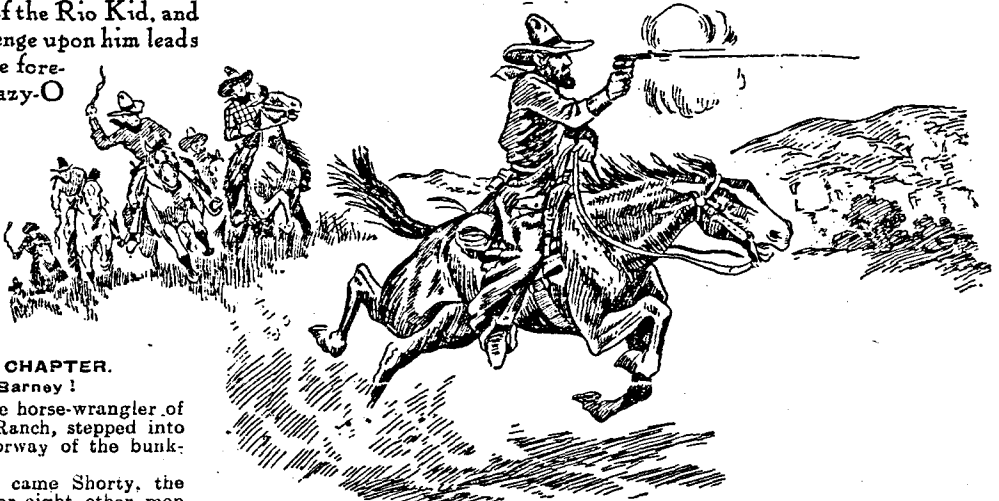
El Hajjar had cut a way through, and so had made his escape.

THE END.

(Thus ends another episode in the Four Chums' thrilling journey through the African jungles. That they have not seen the last of their enemy, El Hajjar, is proved in next week's thrilling tale: "THE PRICE OF TREACHERY!")

OUR LONG COMPLETE WESTERN YARN WITH A KICK IN EVERY CHAPTER!

His fierce hatred of the Rio Kid, and his longing for revenge upon him leads Barney Baker, late foreman of the Lazy-O ranch, to commit an action which brings about his own downfall. But even though the consequences prove disastrous for Barney, so do they for the Kid!



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Beat it, Barney!

LONG BILL, the horse-wrangler of the Lazy O Ranch, stepped into the open doorway of the bunkhouse.

Behind Long Bill came Shorty, the puncher, and seven or eight other men of the Lazy O bunch.

There was one man in the bunkhouse, Barney Baker, one-time foreman of the ranch, and boss of the bunch, monarch of all he surveyed in the wide grasslands that stretched along the valley of the Rio Pecos.

Barney sat on the edge of his bunk, his hard, unshaven face grim and savage in look.

He knew that there was going to be trouble.

The murmuring voices of the punchers had reached him for some time—a deep and threatening murmur. Now they had come, and he knew that they had come for him.

The foreman of the Lazy O had a revolver in his hand, resting on his knee, as he sat on the bunk. What the bunch intended he did not know, but he knew that it was trouble.

Black and bitter was Barney's hard face. Only a short time before he had been undisputed master of the Lazy O, and every man in the outfit had jumped to do his bidding. Now, of all the bunch, only one man stood for him—Coyote Jensen; and the Coyote, just then, was hitting the trail for White Pine as fast as his cayuse could carry him. Barney was alone at the Lazy O, among foes who had once been friends.

It was the coming of the new boss, Mister Fairfax, that had made all the difference, and Barney's hatred of the boy rancher, his longing for revenge upon him, burned fiercely in his heart. Had Mister Fairfax been among the crowd that surged in at the doorway of the bunkhouse, Barney would have been tempted to lift his gun and pull the trigger, reckless of what would follow. But Mister Fairfax was not there; he was riding the plains far away towards Packsaddle.

Barney's eyes glinted at the crowd of cowmen. Their faces were as grim as his own.

"Say, you'uns, what's this rookus about?" growled Barney.

Long Bill came to a halt a few feet from the foreman. His followers halted behind him. One or two of the punchers had drawn their guns. All eyes were fixed threateningly on the haggard, sullen man in the bunk.

"I guess we've come for you, Barney," said Long Bill.

"You moseyed in to tell me that you're standing by me agin that meddling guy Fairfax?" asked Barney, with bitter sarcasm.

"Not any," answered the horse-

wrangler. "Cut it out, Barney. That game's played out!"

"It sure is," said Shorty. "This bunch is standing for Mister Fairfax, and don't you forget it, Barney Baker."

"You dog-goned, pesky bunch of greasers!" growled Barney. "What you got agin me? Ain't we stood together for years, and kept the Lazy O in our own hands, and scared off every boss that bought the ranch, till this scallywag Fairfax moseyed in, and got you all scared to a frazzle? What grouch have you got, you durned bunch of coyotes?"

"Aw, can it!" said Long Bill. "You played a low-down game agin Mister Fairfax, and the bunch would never have stood for it, if they'd knowed. You got all shot up in an ambush you laid for the boss on the prairie. This bunch never stood for shooting a guy in the back, Barney. You sure got what you was asking for; and I'm telling you that that guy Fairfax is a man-size galoot, and good enough for this bunch. This bunch knows a white man when we see one, Barney, and Mister Fairfax is the whitest man that ever struck the Lazy O."

"You've said it, Bill!" agreed Shorty.

"Mister Fairfax has let you hang on here till you was mended enough to ride," went on Long Bill, "and all the time you've been trying to double-cross him, and get the ranch off'n him agin. I guess he was some bonehead not to boot you off the ranch as soon as he knowed your game. You're making out to be still a sick man, jest to keep on here and work agin the boss, but you can sit a bronc if you want. And I guess you're hitting the horizon afore you're an hour older, Barney Baker."

"Mister Fairfax's orders?" sneered Barney.

"Nope. Mister Fairfax is out on the plains, and he don't know nothin' about this here rookus," answered the horse-wrangler. "This bunch is giving you orders to quit, Barney."

"The bunch can go to the hot place!" snarled Barney. "What you got agin me, you all-fired scallywags?"

"You've been telling Buck Sidgers, the marshal of Packsaddle, that the boss is that fire-bug from the Rio Grande they call the Rio Kid!"

Barney's eyes glittered.

"It's sure straight goods," he said. "That guy that calls himself Fairfax is the Rio Kid, the outlaw that's wanted by half the sheriffs in Texas."

"Aw, forget it!" snapped Long Bill. "I'll tell a man, Buck was snickering fit to bust a button when he told me what you'd said about the boss. He don't take it in any."

"Buck Sidgers is a locoed bonehead," snarled Barney. "I'll tell the world the boss is the Rio Kid, and I know it!"

There was a growl of angry derision from the punchers. Not a man believed a word of the accusation.

"I'm telling you, Mister Fairfax is that fire-bug the Rio Kid," went on the foreman savagely. "I saw him once at White Pine shooting up the town. There's guys at White Pine that would give a stack of dollars to get a bead on him!"

"I guess that's a plumb lie!" said Long Bill. "You want to make out you saw the Rio Kid once, and you say Mister Fairfax is him, and all this time he's been at the ranch you ain't let-on to it. Shucks!"

"I never was able to recognis him," said Barney sullenly. "It wasn't till I saw him riding the Rio Kid's cayuse, Side-Kicker, that I knowed for sure. He was riding that mustang when he shot up White Pine three months ago."

"Can it, you gink," said Long Bill. "The boss got that cayuse from Jim Hall, the Texas Ranger, who roped it in when he was hunting the Kid. You figure that Jim Hall would let up on the Rio Kid and give him back his cayuse?"



"Mister Fairfax has let you hang on, you making out you wasn't fit to ride," jeered Long Bill. "I guess you've fooled him some. You was able to ride days ago, if you'd wanted. Now you're riding, Barney. You got ten minutes to pack you traps, and if you ain't absquatulated by then, you'll be put! You get me?"

Barney Baker gripped his revolver convulsively.

Three or four guns were lifted at once. There were grim faces behind them.

"Put down that barker!" snapped Long Bill. "I guess if you burn powder, Barney, you'll get yours so sudden you won't know what hit you."

"You sure will, Barney!" said Shorty, looking at the foreman over the levelled barrel of a Colt, his finger on the trigger.

Barney spat out a curse, and the gun went with a clatter to the floor of the bunkhouse.

He rose to his feet.

"I'll git!" he snarled. "But this here ranch ain't seed the last of me, and don't you forget it! I guess I'll be running this ranch, with a new bunch, after Mister Fairfax has been roped in and swung up to the branch of a cottonwood."

"Forget it!" jeered Long Bill.

The punchers crowded out of the

bunkhouse. Barney Baker, with a black brow, made his preparations for departure.

The horse-wrangler brought his broncho from the corral.

Barney came out of the bunkhouse, and the punchers stood round, looking on, as he packed his roll behind the saddle.

Slowly, reluctantly, Barney Baker mounted the broncho.

He sat in the saddle, taking his last look round at the wide grasslands of the Lazy O, where he had so long ruled as master.

"Beat it!" grunted Long Bill.

Barney gave him a bitter look. "I'm hitting the trail!" he said, between his teeth. "But you'll see me again—and the Rio Kid will see me again!"

"Aw, beat it, you geck!" Barney gave a savage glance round at the circle of unfriendly faces.

It was on his lips to tell the bunch that the Coyote even then was riding

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"He squared that dog-goned Ranger somehow."

"I guess you're plumb loco," said Long Bill. "But even if it was as you say, you dog-goned geck, what sort of a yellow coyote do you call yourself, giving the guy away? Ain't there a heap guys in Packsaddle that have had trouble, and come to Packsaddle to keep out of the way of the sheriffs? Why, you yourself, you durned skunk, you don't dare to ride into the San Antone country, and every man in the bunch knows it."

Barney's answer was a curse.

"This here bunch ain't no collection of tin angels," went on Long Bill. "Most of the boys have hit trouble one time or another. Packsaddle's full of such guys. Why they'd lynch you in town if they was wise to it that you was putting the law on to a guy that was taking cover. Heap plenty guys in Packsaddle wouldn't feel safe if they knowed there was a skulking coyote around giving a nan away."

Barney was sullenly silent.

So far as the Lazy O bunch were concerned, he had made a bad break in accusing Mister Fairfax to the town marshal. Buck Sidgers might be glad of a chance of cinching an outlaw, if he believed the accusation. But the wild section was a refuge for many who had had trouble with the law, many of the Lazy O bunch among them, and Barney himself for that matter. In Packsaddle it was an unwritten law that a galoot did not horn into another galoot's private history.

"You dog-goned pesky polecat," went on Long Bill, "you got a grouch agin Mister Fairfax, and you'd set the sheriffs on him, if you knew how. If you got a grouch agin me, or Shorty here, or Mexican Dave, or any of the bunch, you'd do the same. I guess no guy in Packsaddle is safe with you around, Barney. You double-crossing scallywag, you're quitting, pronto. There ain't no room on the Lazy O for a squealer!"

"There sure ain't!" said Shorty.

hard for White Pine, seventy miles down the Pecca, with news for Jake Nixon, the sheriff—news where the Rio Kid was to be found.

But Barney checked himself.

That was his own secret, and when the blow fell he calculated on its taking "Mister Fairfax" by surprise.

He realized that even had the Lazy O bunch believed that Mister Fairfax was indeed the celebrated boy outlaw of the Rio Grande they would have stood for him all the same. Mister Fairfax had won the hearts of the rough bunch, and they were devoted to him as they never had been to Barney. Likely enough they would stand for him when the sheriff of White Pine came for the Kid. Barney shut his teeth on his secret.

Long Bill cracked his quirt.

"Beat it, Barney!" he repeated.

Slowly the fallen foreman of the Lazy O set his broncho in motion. The bunch watched him in grim silence.

At the gate Barney turned to take a last look at the ranch, to bestow a last savage scowl on the bunch who had turned him down and turned him out.

He shook a clenched fist at the grim faces.

"You'll see me agin!" he shouted. "You durned pack of pesky coyotes, you'll see me agin, and I guess I'll run every galoot of you off'n this ranch when I come back. I guess—"

Bang!

Long Bill's revolver roared, and the bullet cut through the brim of the foreman's Stetson.

"Now git!" growled Long Bill.

Bang, bang! Crack, crack! came the reports of half a dozen guns. Bullets buzzed like mosquitoes round the savage-faced rider. Barney grabbed his reins, drove his spurs into the flanks of the bronche, and dashed away at a gallop. The punchers rushed to the gateway after him, still firing; "fanning" the galloping horseman with bullets till he disappeared in the high grass in the distance.

"I guess that puts paid to Barney Baker!" growled the horse-wrangler, as the foreman's Stetson vanished in the blue distance. "I guess this here ranch will be healthier without that skunk around."

"You've said it," agreed Shorty.

Barney Baker was gone.

To his threats no man in the outfit paid heed; none expected to see Barney Baker again on the trails of the Lazy O. But the savage-faced man who spurred his horse across the rolling prairie swore to himself, with many a bitter oath, that the Lazy O bunch were not yet through with him.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Danger Ahead!

"I'S sure going to be good, old hoss!"

The Rio Kid spoke to the grey mustang with the black patch, a habit he had fallen into in the old days of outlawry, when Side-Kicker had been his only companion on lonely trails.

The days of outlawry lay behind the Kid.

Few who saw the handsome young rancher riding the mustang would have figured that he had ever been an outlaw.

It was going to be good for the Rio Kid now. A new life lay before Mister Fairfax, boss of the Lazy O.

In the new life, ranching the Packsaddle country, dangers had come; but they had passed. Mule-Kick Hall, the Texas ranger, had found him out; but Mule-Kick Hall had given him his chance to lead a new life on the right

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side of the law. Buck Sidgers, the marshal of Packsaddle, was wise to his secret, but Buck was standing his friend. In the Packsaddle country no one else knew, save Barney Baker, the unscrupulous foreman who had striven to rob the new ranch boss of his ranch. And Barney, the Kid figured, could only suspect—his suspicion fed on hatred and revenge.

The Kid, as he rode back to the Lazy O in the golden Texas afternoon, was in a cheery mood. Dangers had come and gone, and now his only peril lay in Barney Baker, the wounded foreman of the Lazy O, still bandaged in the bunkhouse. And with Barney the Kid was prepared to deal.

Had the Kid been the fire-bug, the merciless gunman, that his reputation made him out to be, there would have been no danger from Barney Baker. Even a man in Packsaddle would have shot Barney for much less than Barney had done. But wild as was the reputation of the Kid, he was not the man to burn powder if he could help it.

But he was going to secure Barney's silence. Whether Barney knew, or whether he only suspected, he was not going to tell all Packsaddle what he had told Buck Sidgers.

And the Kid's cheery face became graver as he thought over that problem. Barney had to be silenced; and the Kid was not the galoot to silence him with a bullet through the heart, though few hombres in Texas would have put it past the Kid to do that very thing.

The Kid, thinking it out, figured that he would get Barney away from the Lazy O, pronto, and get him somewhere where he could not talk. He knew of a bunch of thief-Apaches in the Staked Plain, who would look after Barney for him. Or, if his enemy preferred, he would give him an even break, man to man, and gun to gun, with the Lazy O Ranch as the prize for the victor. His treacherous enemy could not justly ask better than that. Anyhow, he reckoned he could handle Barney; and with his last enemy's mouth closed Mister Fairfax would never hear of the Rio Kid again. The name of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande would live only in tales told round the camp-fire and over the bars in the cow-towns. And the Kid was only too keen to let his name and fame die out of men's memory. It was sorely against his own will that he had been driven into outlawry; and with a light heart he would throw the shadowed past behind him.

With a clatter of hoofs the Kid rode up to the ranch, lifted Side-Kicker over the gate, and rode on towards the bunkhouse. Five or six of the bunch gathered to salute him as he rode in.

The Kid dismounted, and Long Bill led Side-Kicker away to the corral. Some of the punchers looked rather curiously at Mister Fairfax as he walked into the bunkhouse. They did not believe the tale that Barney had told, but it interested them all the more in the boy rancher who had come to the Lazy O and tamed the wildest bunch in Texas.

"Say, Barney!" said the Kid, as he entered the bunkhouse.

He halted, breathing quickly.

Barney Baker's bunk was empty, and there was no sign of the foreman in the building.

The Kid, with a strange expression on his face, stepped out again. He had given Barney Baker orders to quit as soon as he was able to ride; but well he knew that Barney did not aim to leave the Lazy O if he could help it. He had had no doubt of finding him there.

The Kid glanced round at the punchers.

"Say you'uns, where's Barney?" he asked.

"Quit, boss!" answered Mexican Dave.

"Quit?" repeated the Kid.

Long Bill came back from the corral. "Barney's hit the trail, boss," he said.

"I guess this bunch made him 'hit it, sir. Say, he's been telling Buck Sidgers that you was that fire-bug from the Rio Grande, the Rio Kid. I guess it fed-up this bunch."

"It sure did!" said Shorty.

The Kid breathed a little hard.

"How long's Barney been gone?" he asked.

"Moro'n an hour, I reckon."

"And he ain't coming back?"

Long Bill grinned.

"I guess not, boss! He sure knows that if he hits the Lazy O agin, this bunch would ride him out on a rail."

"Sure!" said Shorty.

"You ain't mad with us, boss, for booting Barney off?" asked Long Bill. "We sure knowed he was playing possum, and he was able to ride long ago if he'd wanted. He's sure a pizen skunk, is Barney."

The Kid shook his head.

It was devotion to the new boss that had made the bunch turn Barney Baker off the ranch. The Kid was not likely to be angry at that. But Barney Baker was a free man now, his tongue unchecked. In a few hours all Packsaddle would know what Barney could tell. They might not believe, and more likely than not the tale would be laughed at. But there was danger in it for Mister Fairfax. It was Mister Fairfax's game never to let the Rio Kid's name be spoken, or even whispered, in connection with his own.

"I guess it's O.K., you'uns," said the Kid cheerily. "It sure was time that cuss Barney hit the trail. He can blow off his mouth all he likes at Packsaddle, and it sure won't worry me any."

The Kid walked away to the ranch-house.

Long Bill and the punchers glanced after him. They did not believe that he was the Rio Kid, as Barney Baker had averred. Yet, as in the case of Buck Sidgers, the accusation left a lingering doubt in their minds. Mister Fairfax surely had not been so surprised to hear it as might have been expected. He had not denied it, but had let the subject pass without comment. That was not exactly the way a galoot would act who was accused of being the most talked-of outlaw in all Texas. They did not believe it against him, yet they gave one another curious looks.

"There ain't nothing to it," said Long Bill slowly. "Barney was jest shouting off his mouth because he's got a big grouch agin the boss."

"You've said it," said Shorty.

"All same, he sure does ride like they say the Kid rides," said Long Bill. "Look at the way he handled Apache, the maddest broncho in Packsaddle. I member saying that nobody could ride that cayuse excepting the Rio Kid. And Mister Fairfax rode him."

"He sure did!" said a puncher. "I guess he's as good a man with a hoss as the Kid himself. But he ain't the Kid, not by a whole jugful!"

"He ain't!" agreed Long Bill. "But if he was, it was a dirty, low-down game for Barney to give him away, seeing as Barney himself had to ride from sheriffs in San Antonio country, and a heap of galoots in Packsaddle have done the same. If the boss was the

Rio Kid, fellers, here's one guy that's standing for him all the same!"

"You bet your life, Bill!" said several voices.

"But he ain't the Kid," concluded Long Bill. He believed what he said, yet there was a lack of conviction in his voice.

Mister Fairfax went into the ranch-house.

He ate his supper with his usual good appetite, and in the rich red sunset went out on the porch, to sit in the rocker and look over the wide grasslands—a view of which the Kid's eyes never tired.

But the boss of the Lazy O was not looking over his extensive property with

in Texas where the Kid had ridden as an outlaw. But seventy miles down the Pecos was White Pine, a town where a hundred galoos knew him and had vowed vengeance on him. Fifty miles to the west was another cow-town where the Kid was well known. A hundred miles away was Frio, where the Kid had been raised, and had ridden in old days as a puncher in the Double-Bar bunch.

The distances were wide; but none of them more than a hard day's ride to a man on a wiry cow-pony. Sheriffs from other quarters were loth to ride Packsaddle trails; but if they could be made to believe that the Rio Kid was ranching in Packsaddl—

duties. He was going to stay a rancher, if Fate permitted, and until the game was up, he was boss of the Lazy O. There was branding of cattle that day on the ranch, and the Kid superintended the work. The Kid was his own foreman, and the bunch had found him a more capable man at the job than Barney Baker ever had been.

The Lazy O was prospering, and if all went well, Mister Fairfax was going to be one of the richest ranchers in the section. And if all did not go well, the grey mustang, the walnut-butted guns, and the open trail remained for the Rio Kid. It was not the Kid's way to worry over what the future might hold,



the same careless satisfaction as hitherto.

His thoughts were busy.

The bunch stood by him, he knew that. They discredited the story told by the revengeful foreman, a wild enough story in itself. But it happened to be true, and there was the rub. Mister Fairfax was, in point of fact, the Rio Kid under a new name, and the truth was the truth. Had the name of the Rio Kid never been mentioned in connection with him, all would have been clear. Now that it had been mentioned, the Kid realised that it would not stop at that. A hundred little trifles would crop up to confirm what actually was the truth.

Side-Kicker had come back to him in circumstances above suspicion, yet the strong bond of affection between the mustang and his master was obvious to all observers. The new boss' age, his looks, his wonderful way with horses, his amazing skill and rapidity with his guns—all tallied with the known descriptions of the Rio Kid.

And the Rio Kid had disappeared from all knowledge only a few weeks before Mister Fairfax had moseyed into the Packsaddle country as boss of the Lazy O. Barney Baker's story might be laughed at on the ranch and in the cow-town and yet, merely because it was true, it might gain credence, and evidence might crop up in all sorts of unexpected and unlooked-for ways.

The Kid had plenty of food for thought.

If the bunch tumbled to the truth, he believed that they would still stand for him. Indeed, there were members of that wild bunch of cow-men who would have been proud to call the Rio Kid their leader. On the Lazy O he had nothing to fear. In Packsaddle, Barney's story, believed or not, could do him little harm. There were too many men in Packsaddle who had their own secrets to keep, for the cow-town to worry about another man's secrets. But that was not the end of it. Packsaddle was far from any country

There was danger in the air, and the Rio Kid knew it. De in his mind all along had been the feeling that this new life was too good to last, that once an outlaw, always an outlaw. Barney Baker, who had failed to rob him of the ranch, would not rest till he was revenged for his defeat, and Barney's mouth was wide open now.

The Kid's brow was grim. Had he only succeeded in cinching Barney Baker, and stopping his tongue— But even that, had the Kid only known it, would have been futile. For even as he sat there in the sunset watching the shadows lengthen on the plains, a dusty and weary horseman was spurring into White Pine, far down the Pecos—with news for Sheriff Nixon where the Rio Kid was to be found. The Kid made a gallant fight, but he was coming to the end of his rope.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Shot for Shot!

MISTER FAIRFAX was his usual cool and cheery self the next day, on the Lazy O.

If there was anticipation of trouble at the back or his mind, it did not show on his handsome, good-humoured face.

The Kid was a rancher now, and he attended sedulously to a rancher's

ALL THE LAND HIS OWN! "It's sure going to be good, old hoss!" said the Rio Kid, as he patted the neck of his faithful mustang and surveyed the rolling land around him. "No more outlaw for me!" (See Chapter 2.)

and things that could not be helped he put at the back of his mind.

At work among the bunch that day, the Kid was aware that he was the object of a curious interest among them. He knew, without being told, that the name of the Rio Kid was in every mind, if not on every tongue.

Barney Baker, disbelieved, despised, had been boosted off the ranch. Yet the truth, merely because it was the truth, was sinking into every mind. When Side-Kicker nuzzled his glossy muzzle under the Kid's arm, when the Kid gave an instinctive caress to the mustang, it told the truth. When a buck-jumping broncho pitched Sundance Sam over his ears, and defied every rope till the boss roped him in, the outfit remembered what they had heard of the Rio Kid's magic with the lasso.

When a rattlesnake started up from a bunch of grass, and was blown into instant extinction by a shot from the Kid's hip, the punchers gave one another curious looks. There were not three men in Texas who could have got away with that shot, and the Rio Kid was one of them.

Not a word was said, but the Lazy O men knew, and the Kid knew that they knew. It was inevitable, once the suspicion was started, conviction was bound to follow sooner or later, for there never was a hole so deep that the truth could be hidden at the bottom of it.

The Kid rode back to the ranch that night knowing that the bunch were wise to his real identity—or so near to it that it cut no ice. On neither side was the matter mentioned, but there it was.

But in the bunkhouse that night, out of hearing of Mister Fairfax, tongues were unloosed.

"He's the Kid!" said Shorty, voicing what was in the minds of all present. "That darned cuss, Barney, was on the right trail. Why, dog-gone my cats, I seen the picture of the Kid posted up in Medicine Bend, and he's as like as two peas, 'cepting that the boss sports a moustache. I'd never have thought of it, but—"

"He's the Kid!" said Long Bill. "But, Kid or not, he's the whitest man that ever struck the Lazy O, and I'm telling you all so!"

"He sure is," said Mexican Dave. "He's a square man, is Mister Fairfax, and I don't give a Continental red cent what he'd done afore he hit Packsaddle. Ain't he treated us square?"

"Sure!" said a dozen voices. "He's a man-size man, he is," said the horse-wrangler. "And what has Barney got to shout about? Didn't Barney run from San Antone after shooting up a guy? And I don't reckon that Barney gave that guy an even break, any more than he was giving Mister Fairfax."

"Dog-gone it," said Shorty. "There's a heap galoots in this bunch would hate to see sheriffs riding into Packsaddle. That pizen hound, Barney, is a dog-goned squealer, and I guess we orter strung him up instead of fanning him off'n the ranch."

"And now he's shouting it out to all Packsaddle!" growled Long Bill. "Say, you 'uns, we're standing by the boss."

"You bet your life! And I guess," said Long Bill, "that I'm asking the boss for leave in the morning, to ride into town, and I want three of you boys to ride with me. We're going to see Barney Baker and tell him to put a cinch on his tongue about the boss of the Lazy O. And we'll put him wise what to expect if he so much as chirps the name of the Rio Kid in the valley of the Pecos."

And there was a murmur of approval from the punchers.

Outlaw or not, there was no doubt that Mister Fairfax was backed up all the way by the Lazy O bunch.

When the Rio Kid turned out the next morning, four of his bunch came to the ranch-house to ask a day's leave. Long Bill, Shorty, and two others got their leave; the Kid was an easy-going boss. The four cowmen rode away on the trail for Packsaddle, and the Kid gave them no further thought. It was going to be a busy day on the ranch, and Mister Fairfax had plenty of matters to occupy his mind.

In the bright morning sunlight Long Bill and his friends rode at a gallop for the distant cow-town. It was their intention to find Barney Baker and persuade him to drop his feud with the boss of the Lazy O. And each member of the party had carefully packed a gun; and it was only too probable that the method of persuasion would include gun-play. The Lazy O bunch were a rough bunch, and that had suited Barney well, so long as he was holding the Lazy O against its rightful owners. If it did not suit him now that was his own funeral.

But Long Bill and his comrades did not ride so far as Packsaddle town that sunny morning. Five miles from the ranch they drew rein, to stare at a party of horsemen advancing on the trail from the direction of the cow-town.

"Say, I guess Packsaddle's coming to see us," grinned Shorty.

Long Bill's face became grim. "Them guys ain't Packsaddle guys," he said curtly. "I guess I seen that

galoot on the pinto afore. That's Jake Nixon, sheriff o' White Pine."

"Gee whiz!" ejaculated Shorty. The four cowmen sat their bronchos at a halt, watching the approaching party. There were a dozen or more horsemen, and at their head rode a man with a hard-set face, like bronze, on a pinto horse—Jake Nixon, sheriff. Grimly the Lazy O men watched them coming on. Seldom did a sheriff ride Packsaddle trails; and it was evidently serious business that had brought Jake Nixon outside the border of his own jurisdiction. As they drew nearer, the cowmen recognised a familiar face under one of the wide-brimmed Stetson hats.

"Barney!" shouted Mexican Dave. "That cuss Barney Baker!" said Long Bill, between his teeth. "He's sure got the sheriff of White Pine after the boss."

"They're heading for the Lazy O," said Shorty, "this here trail don't lead nowhere else. It's Mister Fairfax they want."

And that pizen skunk, Barney, along with the outfit!" growled Long Bill. "And him wanted in San Antone, the pesky polecat! Say, I guess we're going to talk to them guys!"

Each of the cowmen loosened the gun in his holster and sat his broncho, waiting for the White Pine outfit to come up. They were soon observed by the newcomers. But Sheriff Nixon and his men rode straight forward on the trail without a pause.

Long Bill hailed them as soon as they were within speaking distance.

"Mornin', Jake!"
"Mornin'!" grunted the sheriff of White Pine.

"What you doing in Packsaddle?" asked Long Bill, riding closer.

"Looking for a man," said Jake briefly.

"You aim to look for him on the Lazy O ranges?" asked the horse-wrangler.

"You've said it."
"I guess you've kinder forgot that you ain't sheriff hyer, Jake," said Long Bill. "This side of White Pine is off'n your beat, feller."

"That don't cut no ice when I'm looking for the Rio Kid," answered the White Pine sheriff. "I guess I'd get after that fire-bug if the trail led me up Main Street at Austin."

Long Bill and his comrades drew closer together. From among the White Pine men, Barney Baker eyed them with malicious triumph.

"You figure on getting the Rio Kid at the Lazy O, Jake?" asked Long Bill. He spoke to the sheriff, but his gleaming eyes were on Barney Baker.

"That's how," said Jake Nixon. He made a gesture towards Barney. "Barney hyer allows that the Rio Kid is playing rancher in Packsaddle, calling himself Mister Fairfax. I'm going to see."

"You don't want to believe that pizen skunk, Jake," said the horse-wrangler. "He's sure got a grouch agin Mister Fairfax, because he aimed to double-cross him, and slipped up on it."

"Like enough," said Jake. "I ain't banking on it, feller. I'm jest going to see Mister Fairfax; and if he ain't the Kid, O.K. If he's the Kid, I guess I'll know him at once. I know the Kid like the back of my hand."

Barney Baker gave a sneering laugh.

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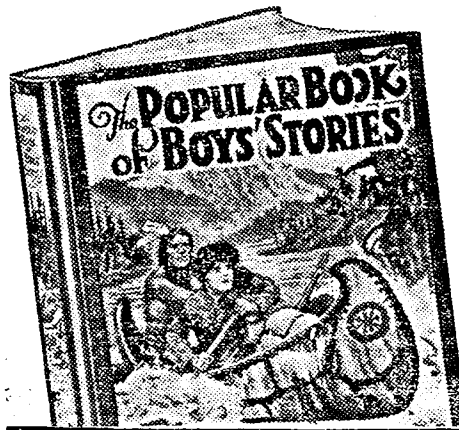
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The old Veteran recalls some very exciting internationals played between England and Scotland, in the very early days of Soccer.

WELL, lad, and what shall we have to-night?" I was standing before the big glass case in the old-timer's room, feasting my eyes on his football caps. The tassels and dates on each told its history. I had by now a pretty sound idea who my jovial host was and certainly his name was a very famous one, but I knew I should hurt and annoy him if I delved any further, so I had given up trying to get him to tell me his name himself! For I was very fond of Old Tiny!

"By jove, sir!" I cried. "You've played a few times against Scotland! Tell us about some of those matches!" "Scotland, did ye say, son! England v. Scotland! Ah, the great days I've had!"

It was my cue. Abandoning the glass case I sidled quickly into my armchair, while the famous Old Veteran stuffed a cast-iron finger into his glowing pipe and stared reflectively at the fire.

"I suppose there's nothing to touch England v. Scotland at soccer!" he mused. "Nor has there been since the first International in 1872! It's the oldest International—and the greatest! I've had some lively times against Wales—specially when Billy Meredith was on form—and some merry turn-ups against Ireland! But for ninety minutes clean hard fighting, with no quarter asked or given, you can't beat England v. Scotland!"

"Yes, I remember some great games! And some players! Steve Bloomer! What a forward he was! Twenty times he turned out for the Rose and scored twenty-eight goals. Never knew when he was licked and always played better for England than he did for his club Derby County. And that's saying something!"

"Steve had a funny habit. He always played as though he hated the sight of the other goalkeeper, and every time he'd fire in one of his swerving cannon-balls—hummers they were—you'd hear him mutter, 'Stop that, you blighter!' or 'Hold that one a minute!'"

"He scored an heroic goal one year! Scotland were leading two to one, ten minutes from time at the Crystal Palace—1901 it was! Well, son, we were fairly walloped! It was a dull, wet day, ground soaked and heavy as lead, the ball weighed a ton!"

(Continued from previous page.)

"Shucks, sheriff! The whole bunch knows he's the Kid!" he exclaimed. "They sure know he's the Kid, and they're standing for him!"

"You durned double-crossing polecat!" said Long Bill savagely. "We was coming to Packsaddle to hunt for you, Barney; and I guess you've been too spy for us. You figured that this outfit would jump on Mister Fairfax and catch him napping, you pesky coyote. I guess we'll beat you to it back to the ranch!"

At a sign from the wrangler, the Lazy O punchers wheeled their horses to ride back to the ranch.

Barney gave a yell. "Head them off, you'uns! Ride them down! Jake Nixon, if they beat us to the ranch you'll never get hold of the Kid!"

Long Bill and his comrades were already galloping. After them, in a cloud of dust, galloped the sheriff and his men. But the Lazy O were well-mounted, and they quirted their bronchos to a furious pace.

"They'll get him away!" yelled Barney. "I tell you, once the Kid's got on Side-Kicker you'll never see his heels for dust."

"Can it!" answered Jake. "We ain't burning powder—not unless we see the Kid, anyhow! We won't be long after that bunch at the ranch."

Barney spat out a curse. He drove his broncho to furious speed, but he did not gain on the hard-riding punchers. He dragged a revolver from his holster, and threw it up to fire.

Bang! The bullet chipped the Stetson on Long Bill's head as he rode.

"Hold your hosses, you fool!" roared the sheriff of White Pine. "Ain't I telling you not to burn powder?"

Barney did not heed.

Spurring his horse savagely, he dashed ahead of the White Pine outfit, his revolver blazing off shots at the galloping cow-men ahead. Long Bill gave a yell as a bullet clipped a strip of skin from his ear.

"Ride on, you'uns!" he snapped to his comrades. "Hit the ranch and put Mister Fairfax wise!"

Long Bill's gun was barking now. Bang, bang! roared the long-barrelled Colts. A bullet from Barney's revolver gashed along the wrangler's bronzed cheek, drawing blood. The next moment there was a hoarse yell from

Both sides were well cooked, when all of a sudden Steve gets the ball!

"Off he went, dribbling, charging and barging his way through the blue shirts, nearly falling over sometimes with weariness until at last somehow or other he got within range. It took him a mighty effort to pull himself together, but he did it, and—' Stop that one!' he growled, bif! Goal!"

"Poor old Steve nearly collapsed after that, but what a cheer he got!"

"Then I remember another 'fighting goal.' It was the year before the War and the game was at Stamford Bridge. Both had grand sides and after

a terrific game it looked as though neither would score. But England's centre-forward, Harry Hampton of the Villa, had his own ideas about that! Brownlie was keeping goal for Scotland and he'd saved no end of scoring shots. And at last, just on time, England made a final sweeping raid.

"Hampton got the last pass and let fly a scorcher! Well, Brownlie got to it somehow and cuddle it, but the force of that shot knocked him flat-footed! And, lad, before you could say 'knife,' and just as the ref. had his whistle to his mouth, up came Hampton like a runaway lorry, chucked himself about three yards through the air and into the back of the net went Brownlie, Hampton, one full back—and the ball!"

"Then look at that goal Scotland won by last season. It was hard luck on our lads, but it was the cleverest corner kick I've ever seen, and the way it just curled in to beat Hacking was great! Some people said it was lucky—but that's as may-be! All I know is that a great game was won by the last kick of the match practically, and lucky or not, they're the goals I like to see, whichever side scores 'em!"

"I played in a very tragic match once, too!" went on the old International. "That was in 1902 when the stand collapsed at Ibrox Park. It was a bad day for some poor fellows then, and we had a bad time playing the match while they were fetching out the injured. But it was either that or letting the rest of the crowd get out of hand—so we carried on!"

"How do the records stand, now, Tiny?" I asked.

"Played 53, won 15, lost 24, drawn 14!" answered Tiny promptly. No handbooks for him—he carried all records in his fine old head.

"England's a good way behind, then!" said I.

"Yes, they're clever footballers, the Scots!" quoth Tiny. "Their tactics are better—but their game's a bit slower. Still they haven't had it all their own way!" he smiled grimly. "We haven't won for the last two years—in fact, I try to forget the season before last at Wembley; 5—1, sufferin' cats!—but the tide'll turn, lad!"

"Scotland's got some great forwards just now and we want some that can both play—and shoot! Yes, son, it's the game of the season and the cream of football—England v. Scotland! I hope I'll see many more!"

And I hoped so, too!

Barney Baker. The gun sagged in his hand, and he reeled back in the saddle. Crash!

A riderless horse dashed over the prairie as Barney Baker crashed down into the grass.

"I guess that guy's got his!" muttered Long Bill, as he wheeled his broncho again and dashed away after his comrades.

Barney Baker, once foreman of the Lazy O, lay in the long grass. Jake Nixon drew rein as he came up to the fallen man and looked down at him. His face was grim.

"Say, Barney!" But there was no word from Barney, no motion or sign of life. Lifeless he lay in the trampled grass; and the sheriff, with a shrug of the shoulders, rode on with his men.

Barney Baker's fight for the Lazy O was over—the foreman lay dead on the prairie as the White Pine outfit rode on to the ranch.

THE END.

(Will the Lazy O outfit save their kid-boss from the approaching arm of the law? See next week's roaring Western yarn, entitled: "DRIVEN OFF HIS RANCH!")

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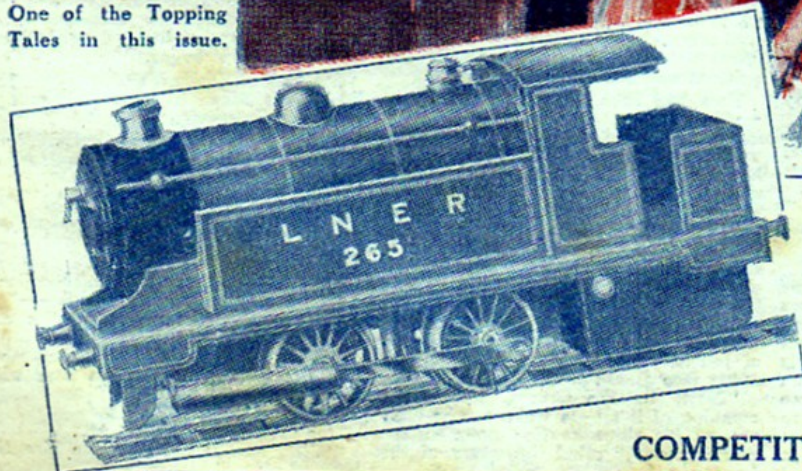
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DRIVEN OFF HIS RANCH!

By Ralph Redway



Once an outlaw, always an outlaw! It seems as if the Rio Kid can never get away from that fact. He has tried hard to thrust his past life of outlawry into the background, and start afresh as a law-abiding citizen. But the fates are against the Kid, and he finds himself being driven back once again on the hard trails of an outcast!

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Slow Falls!

THUD! Thud! Thud! The beat of galloping hoofs was no unusual sound on the Lazy O ranch. The Rio Kid heard the rapid hoof-strokes as he stood at the gate of the corral, but he did not heed them.

"Mister Fairfax," boss of the Lazy O, was a busy man that morning. Long Bill, the horse-wrangler, was on a day's leave to Packsaddle, with several of the bunch. There was to be a round-up of cattle on a distant range that day, and Mister Fairfax was picking out horses for the remuda. Mister Fairfax had almost forgotten for the moment that he had ever been known as the Rio Kid, and that Barney Baker, the foreman of the Lazy O, knew it, and had left the ranch to tell all Texas where the outlaw of the Rio Grande was to be found.

Thud! Thud! Thud! The Kid did not turn his head. Only for a few weeks had the Kid been ranching the Lazy O, but he had become so much a rancher that his past days of outlawry seemed more like a dream than a reality. The Kid asked nothing better than to be left alone to run his ranch; to ride Side-Kicker on a peaceful range, and to give the walnut-

hugged guns a long rest in the leather holsters. And if, at the back of his mind, he knew that it was not to be, he was not thinking of that now. Picking out cayuses for the remuda, the boss of the Lazy O gave his attention to the matter in hand, and gave no heed to the galloping hoof-beats approaching till one of the punchers called out:

"Say, here's Long Bill humping back."

Then the Kid turned his head. Out on the plain, approaching the ranch at a furious gallop, were four riders, strung out in a panting line. They were the four men to whom the Kid had given leave that morning to ride into Packsaddle, and they were coming back to the ranch at frantic speed.

The Kid fixed his eyes on them. Long Bill, the horse-wrangler, was riding ahead of the rest, driving on his broncho with quirt and spur. The Kid's keen eyes picked out a streak of crimson across the wrangler's bronzed cheek, where a bullet had grazed.

"Gee!" murmured the Kid. He forgot the remuda now, and the intended round-up on the range. He knew that there was something more pressing on hand.

The Lazy O ranchers gathered in a

group, staring at the approaching horsemen. Something had happened to stop Long Bill and his companions on their way to the cow-town, and there had been gun-play on the prairie. The Kid's keen eyes, looking past the furious riders, discerned bobbing Stetsons far away on the plain, and knew that the four were pursued. More than a dozen riders, he figured, were coming on at a distance behind the quartet.

The Kid's face set hard.

Ever since Barney Baker had lit out from the ranch the Kid had looked for trouble. He knew now that it had come.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Long Bill came thundering up on a foaming broncho. He dragged in his steed near the corral, so sharply that the animal almost rolled on its haunches, and leaped down.

"They're coming!" he gasped.

The Kid looked at him coolly.

"Say, what's the excitement?" he drawled. "Who's coming?"

"Jake Nixon, the sheriff of White Pine and his posse!" panted Long Bill.

"Sho!"

The Kid stood very still.

He had figured that it was to come, and now it had come. The game of Mister Fairfax, the boss of the Lazy O, was played out, and it was time for the Rio Kid to hit the trail once more. He had expected it, he had known that it must come, yet now it

had come it was a heavy blow.

For once the colour wavered in the cheeks of the boy outlaw. There was no fear in his heart, fear was unknown to the Kid. It was not that! It was the end of his dream of a new life, a peaceful and law-abiding life on his own ranch; that was what hit the Kid.

There was a burst of exclamations from the Lazy O punchers standing round their boss.

"Jake Nixon?"

"What'll he want at the Lazy O?"

"What's his game here? This ain't White Pine country! Jake Nixon ain't no business in Packsaddle."

The Kid did not speak. His eyes were on the distant Stetsons bobbing over the grass.

Long Bill's companions came panting up and dismounted. There was a buzz of excited voices round the silent boss of the Lazy O.

"Say, boss!" exclaimed Long Bill. "I guess you know what it means! Say, this here bunch is standing for you."

The Kid looked at him with a faint smile.

Every man on the Lazy O knew, or guessed, who the boss really was. They had laughed at Barney Baker when he told them, yet the fact had dawned on their minds. The Lazy O bunch

did not need the coming of the sheriff of White Pine to put them wise.

"Barney Baker was with that outfit!" said the wrangler, jerking his thumb towards the distant riders. "Say, boss, Barney's been to White Pine, or sent word there, and Jake Nixon is wise to you. But Barney won't see the rookus!" added the wrangler grimly.

"What's come to Barney?" asked the Kid quietly.

Long Bill tapped the gash on his cheek.

"Barney pulled his gun," he said. "I guess he didn't want us to come back and put you wise, boss. I guess he spilled a lot of lead—before he got his!"

"He got his?" repeated the Kid.

"You bet! I reckon there ain't anything left of Barney, 'cept for the buzzards," said Long Bill. "I got him fair and square."

"Barney's dead?" exclaimed a dozen voices.

"I should smile," answered Long Bill. "He pulled first, and I guess his lead went close." He touched the gash again. "You-all won't see Barney Baker any more. He's gone up."

The Kid hardly heeded. Whether Barney lived or died cut no ice now. He had told what he knew, and that he had been believed was proved by the fact that the sheriff of White Pine was on the trail. It was with the White Pine outfit that Mister Fairfax had to deal.

The Kid looked round at the bunch.

He had come to the Lazy O only a few short weeks ago as the new boss, disliked and defied by the wildest bunch in Packsaddle. He had tamed that wild bunch, and made good at the ranch. They had learned to respect him at first, and then to like him, and now he— Every look, every word, showed that the bunch were standing for him. There was a gun in every hand, and grim looks were cast towards the distant riders. They knew that he was the Rio Kid, as well as if he had told them so, they knew that there was a reward of a thousand dollars on his head. But they stood for him.

"We're standing for you, boss," said Long Bill. "Say, sir, I ain't put it to you afore, but I guess we want the cards on the table now. Barney Baker allowed that you was the Rio Kid, sir—and I guess the sheriff thinks the same, or he wouldn't be here."

"Barney Baker was giving you the straight goods," said the Kid evenly, "I guess I'm the man they want."

"The Rio Kid!" said Shorty, with a deep breath.

They had guessed it; they had known it; but it gave them a thrill to hear it from the boss' own lips.

"Sure," said the Kid quietly. "And I'll tell you'uns that the Rio Kid ain't the all-fired scallywag that folks allow. I guess I bought this ranch fair and square, with dollars I made in the Arizona gold mines, and I guess you'uns have found me a square man."

"You bet!"

"You've said it, Mister Fairfax." "I reckoned it was too good to last," said the Kid, with a sigh. "I guessed it was coming to me—and it's sure come. But it's been good while it lasted, and I ain't got no kick coming. I'll be powerful sorry to leave all you boys—we was getting on fine. But I reckon it's me for the trail."

"Forget it!" snapped Long Bill. "You ain't hitting the trail any, boss! You're freezing on to this ranch and this bunch."

"Why, we won't let you go, sir!" exclaimed Long Bill. "We know a white man when we see one; and we're standing for you. Shucks! There's more'n one guy in this bunch that hit Packsaddle because other parts of Texas was unhealthy for him. We don't want no sheriffs cavortin' around hyer."

The Kid stood silent.

He had picked the Packsaddle section to locate when he began his new life, because it was a section where sheriffs did not love to ride. There was little law in Packsaddle, save the law of the Colt.

The Kid had figured that even if the worst came, there was a chance for him in a country like Packsaddle. The town marshal was his friend; and the sheriff down at Pecos Bend had long since learned that Packsaddle was best left alone. A White Pine outfit had no right to ride Packsaddle trails. The Kid looked over the bunch. There were twenty good men at hand, and a dozen or more out on the ranges.

A gleam came into his eyes.

The ranch was his own, bought with dollars hard won. The bunch stood for him. If there was a ghost of a chance of holding on, instead of riding once more an outlaw trail, it was worth while.

"You hear me shout!" exclaimed the wrangler. "I tell you, boss, we ain't letting you ride. This bunch is standing for you! Say, half the guys in Packsaddle have run from sheriffs up and down Texas. I guess Jake Nixon has bit off more'n he can chew this time. This bunch is going to show him that he can't get away with it."

"You've said it!" chuckled Shorty.

"Stand for it, boss, and this bunch will back your play till the cows come home!" said Long Bill eagerly. "Why, dog-gone my cats, didn't Barney Baker hold this ranch for years agin the owners, and the sheriffs never worried him any. Sheriffs don't go in Packsaddle. You ain't hitting the trail, boss; you are sure freezing on to the Lazy O!"

The Kid nodded.

"I sure am!" he said.

"That's the music!" said Long Bill, with satisfaction, and there was a shout of approval from the bunch.

The die was cast!

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Face to Face!

JAKE NIXON'S eyes, deep-set under shaggy brows, gleamed as he rode up to the ranch-house. Behind the sheriff of White Pine rode more than a dozen men, armed to the teeth.

Trampling hoofs rang before the porch of the Lazy O. On the porch stood the handsome figure of Mister Fairfax, boss of the ranch, and round about him were a score of men, and every man was packing a gun.

It was upon Mister Fairfax that Jake's eyes were fixed as he drew rein before the house.

He had doubted whether Barney Baker had told him the truth. He had ridden from White Pine on the chance. But now that he saw the Rio Kid, he knew. The little moustache that changed the Kid's looks did not deceive a man who knew his face as well as he know his own. Dark and grim grew the sheriff's visage. Only a few months ago the Rio Kid had been very nearly cinched in White Pine; and he had fought his way out of the town, run in

and once more his phenomenal luck had held good, and he had made the grade.

He had left a bullet in Jake's leg to remind him of the Rio Kid—and Jake had not forgotten. Every time he limped on his game leg Jake cursed the Rio Kid, and longed for a chance to cinch the fire-bug of the Rio Grande. And now his chance had come, at long last.

Barney Baker lay on the prairie, the prey of buzzard and coyote, but his revenge was in the hands of the sheriff of White Pine.

The Kid looked down coolly on the group of horsemen. He raised his Stetson with mocking politeness to the sheriff.

"Say, Jake, you're sure a long ways from White Pine!" he greeted.

Jake's eyes glinted at him.

"I'm come for you, Kid!" he said.

The Kid raised his eyebrows.

"I guess you're speaking to Mister Fairfax, boss of the Lazy O ranch, Jake," he answered gently.

"I'm sure speaking to the Rio Kid, the fire-bug that's wanted all over Texas!" answered Nixon grimly.

"You reckon?" asked the Kid.

Jake gave a gruff laugh.

"Aw, come off!" he said. "You figure that I don't know you, Kid? I guess your picture is posted up in White Pine, and every galoot in this outfit is wise to you. You've growed a moustache since you shot-up White Pine, but that don't cut no ice. You're the Kid!"

"I guess I ain't answering to any name but Fairfax," said the boss of the Lazy O. "Say, if this here is a friendly visit, you all are sure welcome on this ranch!"

"We're after you, Kid!"

There was a growl from the Lazy O punchers.

"Forget it!" growled Long Bill.

"I guess you'uns want to hit the trail," said Shorty, "and you want to hit it pronto! This ranch ain't healthy for sheriffs!"

"Say, Jake," said the Rio Kid softly, "you're sure off'n your beat feller. White Pine writs don't run in Packsaddle!"

"They sure don't!" said Long Bill.

"There's a town marshal to Packsaddle, and you can sure leave it to him if you got an idea that the Rio Kid's around," said the boss of the Lazy O, in the same gentle tone.

Jake gave a snort.

"I guess you got the marshal of Packsaddle in your pocket!" he jeered. "Packsaddle's fuller of fire-bugs that hev run from the law than a Mexican dog is of fleas!"

"That needn't worry White Pine!" said the Kid. "There's a sheriff down to Pecos Bend, if you ain't satisfied with our marshal. You hit Pecos Bend and put it up to the sheriff of Pecos County!"

Another snort from Jake.

"I guess I'm wise to that guy," he said. "The sheriff of Pecos County don't horn into Packsaddle any; I guess he's sure afared to ride within ten miles of that burg!"

The Kid laughed.

"I'm teaching you the law, Jake," he answered. "You ain't nary any right to ride over the county border; but in Packsaddle you ain't anybody but Jake Nixon, an ornery ugly guy with a game leg! You want to ride off'n this ranch without giving trouble!"

The sheriff of White Pine gritted his

teeth. If the point of law was doubtful, there was one thing that was not doubtful; Jake was not letting up on the elusive Kid now that he had him face to face.

The Kid's face was cool and smiling, but his heart was heavy. He did not want gun-play on the Lazy O. He wanted to be left in peace, to be given his chance of leading a new and peaceful life. Left alone from outside, he could yet make the grade. The marshal of Packsaddle was his friend; the sheriff of Pecos County knew that his days would not be long if he meddled with the refugees from the law who congregated in Packsaddle.

Barney Baker had known it, too, when he dragged in the White Pine sheriff, who had a personal feud with the Rio Kid. If the White Pine outfit rode away in peace the Kid saw a chance of a clear trail ahead.

But there was little chance of that. Right or wrong, within the law or outside it, Jake Nixon meant business.

There was a short silence, and the horsemen from White Pine sat their saddles with grim faces, gun in hand—and in the Lazy O bunch every hand grasped a Colt. The struggle, if it came, would be a deadly one.

Jake Nixon broke the silence. "Chewing the rag doesn't cut no ice, Kid!" he said. "I'm here for you, and I guess you're going back with us to White Pine!"

"You got another guess coming!" said the Kid.

"You want to step down off'n that porch and give yourself up to the law!" said Jake.

The Kid laughed. "I guess I'm here for you, dead or alive, Kid!" said the sheriff of White Pine hoarsely. "That's your choice!"

"Forget it!" said the Kid. Jake's hand was on his gun. All eyes were upon him and the Kid.

"Don't!" said the Kid softly. "If you handle your hardware, Jake, there will sure be bad trouble."

"You giving up?"

"Not by a jugful."

"Dead or alive, kid—"

"Forget it!" said the Kid.

The sheriff of White Pine said no more. His gun came from its holster. In a flash the Kid's gun was levelled at the hard, grim, bearded man from White Pine.

"Drop it, Jake!"

The sheriff's revolver was half raised. He glared at the long-barrelled Colt that looked him in the face. Round

him his men handled their guns—and the Lazy O punchers stood finger on trigger. There was a breathless pause as the sheriff checked his rising hand. "Ride, hombre, ride!" said the Kid quietly.

Jake Nixon set his teeth. "You or me, Kid!"

His gun came up. But the Rio Kid fired first, and the sheriff of White Pine went backwards in his saddle, and crashed to the earth, his bullet whizzing away harmlessly over the roof of the ranch-house as he fell.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The End of His Rope.

THE roar of a score of Colts followed the fall of the White Pine sheriff.

Men were firing on all sides. The die was cast now, with a vengeance. Jake Nixon lay by the trampling hoofs of his horse; and his men were firing—and the Lazy O bunch were not slow to respond. Guns flashed and roared, and streaming smoke filled the air. Horses neighed and squealed and trampled wildly as the whizzing lead flew.

But the advantage was with the Lazy O bunch. The fire was wild from the men on the backs of the excited, cavorting horses—and they were in the minority.

For a minute or two it lasted, and then the White Pine outfit were riding for the plains.

They dashed away from the ranch-house, in a storm of whizzing bullets. Five or six of them clung to their horses; and one of them had pitched from his broncho, and did not stir again.

Clatter, clatter, clatter rang the hoofbeats as the outfit careered away.

"Let up, you'uns!" rapped out the Kid.

The bunch would have rained bullets on the fleeing outfit, and but for the Kid's sharp order few of the men from White Pine would have escaped the fire.

But at the Kid's orders the punchers ceased at once to burn powder.

"I guess they got all they want!" grinned Long Bill, as he lowered his smoking revolver.

"You've said it!" chuckled Shorty.

"They was sure asking for it," said Mexican Dave. "They can tell the guys in White Pine that Packsaddle trails ain't healthy for sheriffs!"

The White Pine outfit went career-

ing down the trail, to halt at a safe distance from the ranch. Out of effective pistol-range, they pulled in their horses, evidently unwilling to retreat farther, but at a loss to know what move to make. They were outnumbered by the Lazy O bunch, and only their rapid retreat had saved them from being riddled with bullets. But they sat in their saddles, looking back at the ranch, with grim and savage faces, gun in hand.

The Rio Kid glanced round at the punchers.

Several of them had been hit, but no man of the Lazy O had gone down. The firing had been fierce, but it had been wild, and it had not lasted long.

Near the gate on the trail lay a White Pine man, motionless. And before the porch lay the sheriff, groaning.

The Kid stepped to him.

Jake Nixon glared at the boy outlaw, and made a motion with his gun-hand. The Kid stooped and jerked the revolver from his grasp, and tossed it away.

"I reckon you done with that, Jake," he remarked.

"You've beat me to it, Kid!" muttered Nixon. "Dog-gone you, you've beat me to it!"

"I reckon!" assented the Kid.

"I guess you won't get away with it none!" muttered the sheriff of White Pine. "This ain't the end, Kid."

The Kid made no answer.

"You got me," breathed Jake. "But when they hear of this at White Pine you'll sure get your ticket for soup, dog-gone you, you durned firebug!"

"You sure do shoot off your mouth a whole lot, Jake," answered the Kid coolly. "I guess you want to save your breath, feller."

"Dog-gone you—"

"Can it!" said the Kid curtly. "I guess if I wasn't a dog-gone gink I'd sure put a bullet through your cabecza now, and White Pine would want a new sheriff."

"I ain't asking you to let up!" snarled Jake. "Shoot, you all-fired scallywag, and be durned!"

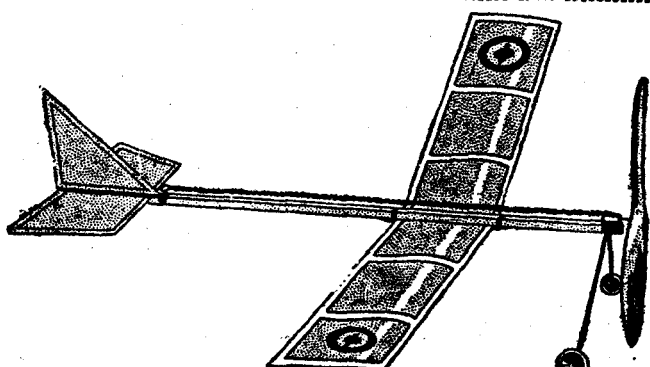
The Rio Kid dropped his gun into the holster.

"Say, boss," called out Long Bill. "Them guys ain't hitting the trail. I guess we want to boot them off'n this hyer ranch!"

"You've said it," agreed the Kid.

"Git your cayuses."

There was a rush to the corral. The Lazy O bunch were eager to come to conclusions with the White Pine outfit.



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STANDING BY THE KID! "You or me, Kid!" said Jake Nixon. His gun came up. But the Rio Kid fired first, and the sheriff of White Pine went backwards in his saddle. The next moment the roar of a score of Colts followed the fall of the sheriff, and men were firing on all sides. (See Chapter 2.)

The Kid dropped on his knee beside the sheriff, and examined his wound. It was serious enough; the bullet had passed clear through the broad chest. But Jake was not a dead man yet.

"I guess you ain't a gone coon, Jake," said the Kid. "I reckon I'll fix you up after I clear your guys off'n this ranch."

"I ain't asking—"

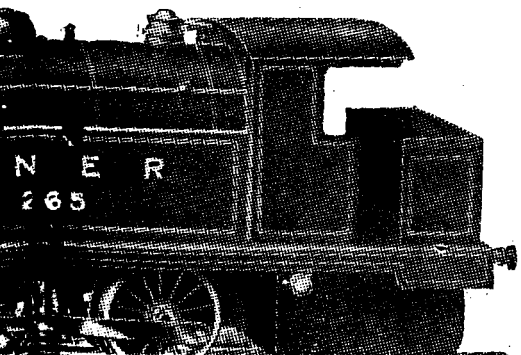
"Aw, can it!" interrupted the Kid.

He called to Diego, and with the chore man's help, carried the sheriff into the ranch.

There Jake was placed on the Kid's own bed, and the Kid bound up his wound.

The sheriff, almost fainting with loss of blood, eyed him grimly and savagely as he did so.

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"What's this game, Kid?" he muttered. "I'm telling you I'm after your scalp, and if you let up on me I ain't letting up on you, not by long chalks!"

The Kid left him without replying. Outside the ranch-house he mounted Side-Kicker. The Lazy O bunch were on their bronchos now, eager to be led against the outfit halted on the plain.

"I guess White Pine guys won't be honing to ride Packsaddle trails, arter we're through with that crowd," said Long Bill.

"They sure will not!" said Shorty.

"Hit the trail!" said the Kid.

He rode down the trail, followed by the bunch, heading direct for the White Pine outfit.

There was a spattering of shots from the White Pine men, and the Lazy O riders fired in response, but the distance was too great, so far, for effective shooting.

"I guess they ain't standing to it!" said Long Bill.

The horse-wrangler was right.

With more than a score of punchers riding down on them, the dozen men from White Pine figured that it was not good enough. There was a further spattering of shots; but they turned their horses and rode away across the prairie.

"They're beating it!" grinned Shorty.

"Give them a send-off!" roared Long Bill.

The Lazy O bunch put spurs to their bronchos and dashed in pursuit. The White Pine outfit were soon at the gallop.

after them; and from the riders ahead came return fire; but the lead whizzed wide. The fight was over, and Jake Nixon's men were in full retreat.

For several miles the Lazy O bunch followed them across the prairie, till the Kid gave the word at last to return to the ranch. The sheriff's men were gone; the trouble, for the moment, was over.

The bunch rode back to the ranch in a mood of uproarious triumph and glee.

They had beaten off the White Pine outfit; and they figured that White Pine would leave Packsaddle alone after that lesson. And if they came again the bunch were ready for gunplay.

But the Kid's face was grave when he turned Side-Kicker into the corral, and went back to the ranch-house.

Jake Nixon had said that it was not the end; and the Rio Kid knew that it could not be.

Before sundown that day the whole section would be talking of the fracas; the whole valley of the Pecos would know that Mister Fairfax, of the Lazy O ranch, was the Rio Kid.

The secret was out, and the game was up.

There had been a chance, a faint chance, the Kid figured, if Jake and his men had gone in peace. But the shooting put paid to that. A man had been killed at the Lazy O. Half the White Pine outfit had ridden away sorely wounded. It could not end there.

The Kid went to the room where the sheriff of White Pine lay in his band-

ages. He looked down gloomily on the wounded man, whose white face told of nothing but bitter animosity.

"You got me, dog-gone you!" Jake muttered. "But you're at the end of your rope hyer, Kid, and I'm telling you so."

"I guess I'm wise to that, Jake," answered the Kid quietly. "Gol-darn you, you couldn't stand pat and let a galoot alone."

"Not in your lifetime," said Jake, between his teeth. "Put a bullet through me if you want, you durned fire-bug! I guess you'll have half Texas buzzing round you like hornets in three days from now."

"Sure!" said the Kid.
 "Your game's up!" snarled Jake.
 "I reckon," assented the Kid quietly, "I've done all a guy could to quit the outlaw trail; but I reckon I've got another guess coming. When the news of this rookus spreads, I guess I'll have the Texas Rangers coming for me."

"You sure will!" said Jake savagely. "And your durned bunch won't stand long agin the Rangers."

"I guess I'd stand to it," said the Kid. "But I ain't getting the bunch shot up on my account. No, sir. I reckoned I'd get off the outlaw trail, and run a ranch; but there ain't nothing to it. I guess I knowed all along, at the back of my mind, that there wasn't nothing to it." The Kid sighed. "The game's up here, and it's me for the plains and the chaparral."

"And me lying here shot up, while you get away," muttered Jake.

The Kid smiled faintly.
 "You're durned lucky to be lying here, Jake, instead of getting planted," he said. "I guess I'm sending you

away in the chuck-wagon, Jake, and when you're mended, if you want the Rio Kid, you'll want to hunt for him in the chaparral, or the sierra. The Rio Kid's done with ranching. And I guess there's heap plenty galoots in Texas will be sorry he was driven to the outlaw trail agin."

Under the sunset that day the chuck-wagon rolled away from the Lazy O, with the wounded sheriff of White Pine lying in it on a heap of blankets.

In the Lazy O bunkhouse there was rejoicing and hilarity. But while the bunch celebrated their victory the Kid was riding Side-Kicker over the ranges with a clouded, thoughtful face, and an ache in his heart. "Mister Fairfax" was taking a silent farewell of the Lazy O Ranch.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Last of the Lazy O!

"THE Rio Kid!"

"It's sure the Kid!"

"Gee-whiz!"

Men crowded to stare as a horseman rode into the street of Pecos Bend.

The Kid rode on his way, unheeding.

No hand was raised against him; no man reached for a gun. But all Pecos Bend crowded to stare at Mister Fairfax, owner of the Lazy O Ranch, now known to be the outlaw of the Rio Grande.

It was the biggest sensation Pecos Bend had ever known as the outlaw rancher rode down the street, and stopped at the door of Lawyer Lucas' office.

There the Kid dismounted, and threw Side-Kicker's reins over a post. He paused in the doorway of the lawyer's office, to glance at the buzzing crowd, with a faintly-amused smile on his lips.

"The Rio Kid!"

The well-known name passed from mouth to mouth. Every eye was fixed on the handsome, sunburnt face.

The Kid looked over the buzzing throng, coolly, quietly, and then stepped into the lawyer's office.

Lawyer Lucas rose from his rocker, an apprehensive look on his sharp face as he stared at his visitor.

The Kid smiled.

"You don't want to get scared, feller," he said lightly. "It ain't the Rio Kid that's come to see you, it's Mister Fairfax, of the Lazy O. You get me?"

"I get you, Mister Fairfax," said the Pecos Bend lawyer. "But the whole section's saying that you're the Rio Kid."

"I guess they got it right," drawled the Kid.

"They say that word's been sent to the Texas Rangers to ride for the Lazy O," said Lucas, eyeing him curiously.

"Sure!" said the Kid. "But the Rangers won't find Mister Fairfax at the Lazy O. But I guess I got no time to waste, Mister Lucas. I'm hero on business. You sold me the Lazy O Ranch, feller."

"That's so—not knowing that you was the Rio Kid—"

"Cut that out," said the Kid. "You sold me the Lazy O, and the ranch is mine, fair and square. But I guess that ranch won't be much use to me when I'm dodging the Rangers in the chaparral, feller."

"You thinking of selling, Mister Fairfax?" asked the lawyer. "I guess you won't have time to put it through before—" He paused.

"Before the Rangers get me," grinned the Kid. "I guess I ain't thinking of selling that ranch, feller. I'm giving it away, and you're going to draw up the papers right and legal."

The lawyer stared.

"Jest at present," went on the Kid. "I ain't the Rio Kid. I'm Mister Fairfax, the owner of the Lazy O. I ain't the Rio Kid till I'm proved to be that dog-gone fire-bug in a court of law. Ain't that right?"

"Quite!"


"The Lazy O bunch have stood for me," said the Kid. "I guess I had some trouble with that bunch when I hit the ranch; but they're good boys, and they've stood for me like white men. I'm letting up at the Lazy O, because I won't get that bunch shot up by the Rangers standing for me. I got to hit the trail. And I'm handing over the ranch to the bunch."

"Sho!" said the Pecos Bend lawyer.

"You want to draw up them papers for Mister Fairfax to sign," said the Kid. "I got a list of the names here—every man in the bunch—and they get the ranch on equal shares. Long Bill's appointed foreman. I guess he's a good man, and the bunch will work with him O.K. That ranch is going to belong to the bunch that run it. You get me?"

"You paid forty thousand dollars for that ranch, Mister Fairfax," said the Pecos Bend lawyer.

"Sure! And I reckon them dollars is gone up," said the Kid. "But the bunch is sure a good bunch, and they stood for me, and I'm handing them the ranch. You want to draw up them papers right and legal, Mister Lucas,



SWITCHING OVER

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while I'm still Mister Fairfax. I reckon they won't be able to give the bunch any trouble after I'm gone. All Packsaddle will stand for them. Now you want to get busy."

The Rio Kid remained a long time in the lawyer's office that morning. Outside the building a constantly-increasing crowd hummed and buzzed, staring at the grey mustang hitched to the post, and repeating the name of the Rio Kid. When the Kid left at last the deed was duly drawn up, signed, and witnessed, and the Lazy O Ranch had been transferred with due legality to the members of the Lazy O bunch in equal shares.

There was a roar as the Kid stepped from the lawyer's office. Men crowded and jostled to see him as he vaulted into the saddle of the grey mustang. The Kid pushed out into the street. On the outskirts of the crowd some were handling guns; and the Kid's clear,

cool glance swept over the swarming street.

"Say, you'uns," he drawled, "I ain't come a-shooting this time, but if there's any galoot here honing for trouble, I ain't the guy to say no."

He rode slowly down the street, the buzzing crowd making way for him. No hand was raised, and the Rio Kid rode out of Pecos Bend in peace.

When the Texas Rangers hit the Lazy O Ranch looking for Mister Fairfax, Mister Fairfax was not there. Mister Fairfax had ceased to exist, and the Rio Kid had come to life in his place. And the Rio Kid was far away.

The Lazy O Ranch that had changed hands so often, had changed hands once again, and now it belonged to the Lazy O bunch.

There was deep groaning in the bunk-house. The bunch would have stood for the Kid to hold the Lazy O against all Texas. And even that magnificent parting gift from the boss did not console the bunch for the loss of Mister Fairfax.

Far away from Packsaddle a rider in goatskin chaps, with a band of silver nuggets round his Stetson, and two long-barrelled, walnut-butted guns in his holsters, rode a trail in the chaparral. The Rio Kid, rancher no longer, once more the outlaw of the Rio Grande.

THE END.

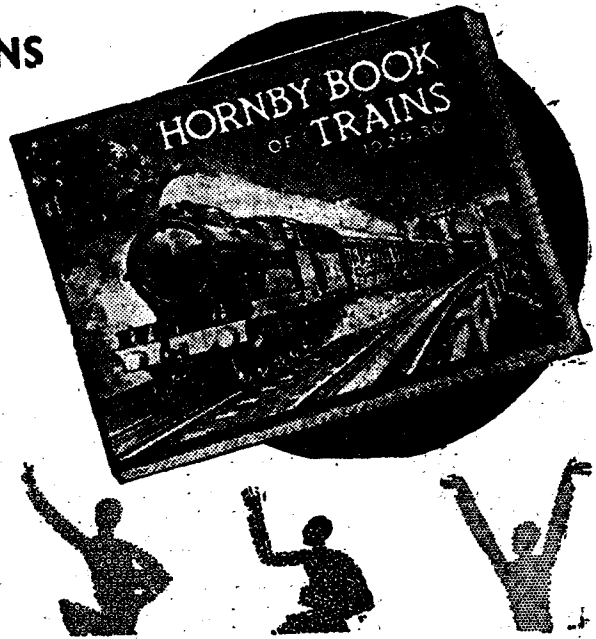
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