

A QUICK-ACTION YARN OF THE WEST!

# BLACK GEORGE!

By  
RALPH REDWAY.

Like a black, menacing shadow, the road-agent stands by the trail. As the coach rattles up, the contents and passengers are rifled by this new terror, and then, as mysteriously as he has come, Black George disappears—into the unknown!

## THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Road Agent!

THE Rio Kid awakened, as he was accustomed to wake, without a motion, and without a sound. He lay perfectly still, rolled in his blanket and slicker, listening. The grey mustang, by whose side the Kid lay, did not stir. Side-Kicker was as well trained in the ways of a hunted life as the boy outlaw himself. Only a gleam of intelligent eyes showed that the mustang, too, had awakened at the sound of a tramping horse in the thickets.

The Kid listened—and wondered.

There was a tangle of thickets round him. The Kid had picked his camp with care. Post-oaks and tangled juniper, mingled with evil-smelling greasewood, made an almost impenetrable screen round the Kid's solitary camp. It was cold weather in the Kicking Mule country, but he had lighted no fire; no trickle of smoke above the thickets betrayed his resting-place. Yet the tramping horse, unseen as yet, was heading direct for the spot where the Kid lay by his mustang.

For a full minute the Kid lay and listened; and the steady tramp of the horse, the crackling of disturbed under-woods, grew nearer and clearer. The rider was approaching slowly—but he was approaching. And the Kid sat up at last, still without a sound, and dropped a hand on the walnut butt of a six-gun.

If some guy had spotted his camp, and was heading for it, the Kid was ready for him when he came. And if it was by chance that the horseman came, still it was necessary for the boy outlaw to be on his guard. The Kid was breaking new country in the Kicking Mule section; but in every part of Texas he had more foes than friends. When there was a reward of a thousand dollars on a galoot's head, a galoot needed to keep his gun handy.

The Kid's camp lay a hundred yards or more from the well-worn stage-trail that ran to the cow-town of Kicking Mule. From the trail the ground rose in easy slopes, to a low range of hills, thickly wooded. It was from the high ground that the tramping horse came, and it was likely that the rider was

coming down from the hill, aiming to reach the stage-trail that ran through the valley bottom. But if so, chance was leading him close to the Kid's camp.

Nearer and clearer came the tramping hoofs, the crackling of twigs, the jingle of stirrup and bridle.

Every moment now the Kid looked to see the horseman break into sight. His gun was ready to rise to a level the moment he appeared.

Tramp! Tramp!

The Kid smiled.

It was not to his camp that the unseen rider was coming. He was passing the Kid's camp.

So close did he pass that the swaying twigs brushed the Kid, and through the bush he had a glimpse of a black horse, and of a rider wrapped in a baggy Mexican serape.

The tramping passed on.

Tramping of hoofs, crackle of twigs, jingle of bridle and stirrup grew fainter as the rider of the black horse pushed on down the slope towards the trail.

He was gone.

The Rio Kid's hand relinquished the walnut-butted gun.

The horseman had passed on, ignorant of the Kid's camp in the thickets, never dreaming how closely he had brushed by the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande.

The Kid wondered idly who the galoot might have been. Some man from the cow-town of Kicking Mule, probably, who had taken a short cut across the wooded hill instead of following the trail that wound round the base. It did not matter to the Kid. And, anyway, the galoot was gone; the sound of him was dying away down the slope towards the trail. The Kid had ridden long and hard that morning, and he



needed his midday rest; and now that the horseman had passed he prepared to settle down to resume his interrupted slumber. Only, he waited, with the caution that was second nature to him, for all sound of the horseman to die away.

The sounds ceased—abruptly.

And the Kid, instead of reeling comfortably in his blankets and slicker, and closing his eyes, sat up and took notice.

The horseman had halted.

The Kid's ear, that nothing could deceive, told him that. The tramping of the black horse had grown fainter as the unseen man went on towards the trail, and the Kid had expected it to die away in the distance, fainter and fainter till it was gone. Instead of which, the tramping, the crackling, the jingle, ceased all of a sudden, at a distance, the Kid reckoned, of a hundred yards or so.

That meant that the horseman had halted at the stage-trail.

Quietly the Kid rose to his feet, dropped his blankets, and drew a six-gun from its leather holster.

There was a glint in the Kid's eyes.

If this was some foe, who had spotted his camp in passing and gone on, thinking to throw dust in his eyes, intending to return by stealth and take him by surprise, the Kid was ready to deal with him.

Side-Kicker raised his head, but at a sign from the Kid laid down quietly again.

On foot, the Kid moved down the hill, the way the rider of the black horse had gone; and he made no sound as he went. Carefully as an Apache or a Yaqui stealing on a foe, the Kid parted the branches and the creepers, stepping slowly, stepping carefully, giving no warning of his movements. He was going to know what that galoot's game was, and put paid to it, if need were.

There was no sound from the stranger. If he was moving in the thickets he was moving as cautiously and silently as the Kid.

Towards the stage-trail the thickets thinned, and through them the Kid had glimpses of the open trail; and suddenly he glimpsed the black horse and its rider.

The boy outlaw stopped, and, keeping in cover, watched the man.

The figure in the folded serape sat the black horse. He had not dismounted, he had not crept back through the thickets. The Kid's suspicion had been unfounded.

Evidently, as the Kid had at first supposed, the man was unaware of anyone's presence on the lonely hillside. The Kid returned his gun to its holster.

But he still watched—perplexed. The rider of the black horse was not aware of the Kid. But why was he there, and what was his game? Half-hidden by the post-oaks and pecans at the side of the trail, the man sat his horse, motionless, evidently waiting and watching. His back was to the Kid, and his face unseen. All the Kid could see of him was the thick serape, wrapped like a cloak round him, the riding-boots that emerged below it, and the Stetson hat above it. Motionless the horseman sat in the saddle, watching the trail, like a statue.

Minutes passed, and the horseman did not stir.

The Kid wondered.

The man was watching and waiting—for somebody. Not for a friend, that was certain. He was keeping in cover of the trees as he watched, carefully keeping out of sight of anyone approaching from either direction on the open trail. It was fairly clear that he was in ambush. If he was looking for some expected enemy, and there was going to be gun-play, it was no business of the Kid's, and the boy outlaw had no hunch to horn in. The Kid was debating in his mind whether to depart as silently as he had come and take no further heed of a matter that he now saw did not concern him personally when a sound from the distance caught his ears.

It was the distant, echoing sound of wheels and harness, coming up the valley trail from the direction of Juniper. It meant that the stage from Juniper to Kicking Mule was approaching.

The horseman made a sudden movement.

From a slit in the folded serape his arm emerged, and a six-gun glistened in his hand.

The Kid grinned.

He understood now.

The man he was watching was a road-agent, a hold-up man, and he was waiting on the trail for the Kicking Mule coach.

There could be no mistake about it,

and the Kid called himself a gink for not guessing it earlier.

For a moment the Kid's hand stole to his gun.

A hold-up on the trail was about to take place, and the Kid was powerfully tempted to horn in and prevent it.

But a bitter smile crossed his face, and he shrugged his shoulders at the thought. It was not for a hunted outlaw, a guy upon whose head was a reward of a thousand dollars, to do the work of sheriffs and rangers. It was no business of the Kid's. They had made him an outlaw, in spite of himself, and it was not for an outlaw to stand in defence of law.

But the Kid did not go.

He remained where he was, silent, alert. He was rather curious about this galoot who was aiming to hold up a stage single-handed. He reckoned that the galoot had plenty of gall, for there might be half a dozen passengers on the stage, and in the Kicking Mule country every man packed a gun.

The horseman moved, drawing a little nearer to the open trail as the clatter of the approaching stage rang louder. And as he did so, the watching Kid had a view of his face.

He barely suppressed an exclamation. He had figured that the man would be masked, but there was no mask on the face of the horseman. In the sunlight that glinted down through the trees the Kid, from his cover, stared at the rider's face—stared at the black skin, thick lips, and flattened nose of a full-blooded negro.

"Gee-whiz!" the Kid whispered under his breath.

He stared blankly.

The Kid, in his time, had struck many a hold-up man, of many and various races, but this was the first time he had struck a "coon" in the hold-up business.

The horseman, utterly unconscious of the astonished puncher watching him, moved out into the trail as the stage came clattering up.

"Halt!"

The Kid heard a startled cry from the stage-driver.

"Black George," by gum!"

The stage was dragged to a halt so sharply that the horses stumbled. The Kid was a stranger in the Kicking Mule country, but he reckoned that Black George was well-known there, and that Black George was a name of fear to the Kicking Mule galoots. The black horseman rode towards the halted stage, and the Rio Kid remained an interested onlooker—in cover.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### The Hold-Up!

THE stage was at a standstill.

From within came two or three startled voices, calling to the driver. Jerry Cook, the driver, called back tersely:

"It's Black George! I guess you guys want to put your hands up pronto!"

The black horseman rode nearer to the stage.

Startled faces looked out at him.

Wrapped in his Mexican serape, with his Stetson hat pulled well down on his head, the trail-rider showed only his black face, and not all of that, for the edge of the serape came over his chin, and the hat covered him down to the eyes.

But enough was to be seen of his face to show that it was the face of a negro—black as the ace of spades, gnarled and wrinkled and grim. The eyebrows were so thick and heavy as almost to hide

the eyes. It was a savage and ferocious face, almost inhuman in its ferocity.

"Light down!"

Black George rapped out the words.

The door of the vehicle was flung open, and the passengers alighted in the trail.

There were four of them—a fat store-keeper of Kicking Mule, a Chinese laundry-man, a "drummer" with a case of samples, and a man with a bronzed face, who wore "store" clothes and a Derby hat.

The horseman eyed them as they lined up in the trail, with their hands above their heads.

"That the whole caboodle, Jerry?" he asked.

"Yep."

The six-gun in the road-agent's hand was raised, and it seemed to each of the four that the muzzle threatened him.

Three of the passengers showed their terror plainly.

The drummer was white as chalk, the storekeeper's fat knees knocked together, and the Chinaman's slanting eyes were widely distended.

But the fourth man seemed cool and self-possessed, and he was watching the black rider quietly.

But he, like the others, had put up his hands.

Black George was well known for a great distance round the cow-town of Kicking Mule for his swift and deadly shooting, and on a dozen occasions, at least, he had shot up victims who had attempted resistance. It was not healthy to touch a gun when Black George called halt.

"Pony up, you 'uns!" said the black rider. "Drop your stuff in the trail, and I guess if you keep anything back it will be the last thing you'll do in this world!"

Three of the passengers hastened to obey, lowering their hands for the purpose. The road-agent's gun swayed from one face to another, his eyes under the bushy, over-hanging brows gleaming over it. But the man with the bronzed face seemed to hesitate.

Black George's eyes glinted at him.

He followed the example of the others, after a second's hesitation. Pockets were emptied into a little heap in the trail.

"You, Chink!" rapped out Black George.

The Chinaman eyed him in terror.

"Pick up that stuff and stack it in this grip!" Black George indicated a little leather sack strapped to his saddle.

The laundry-man obeyed.

"Hop into that hearse, you!"

The Chinaman jumped into the stage again.

"Now you, Silas Shook," said Black George, addressing the storekeeper, "I guess you can pony up more than that! You want me to believe you only got fifty dollars in your rags?"

"I guess that's every cent——"

Bang!

The six-gun roared, and the store-keeper gave a yell and a jump as the bullet clipped a strip of skin from his head.

"That's a warning, Mister Shook!" said Black George. "The next goes through your think-box! Pony up!"

With a ghastly face, the Kicking Mule storekeeper fumbled in his pockets and produced a roll of two hundred dollars. He dropped it into the sack at Black George's saddle.

"That's better!" said the road-agent. "Next time you meet me on the trail, Mister Shook, don't you try any gum-game with me, or the next hair will

be running your store at Kicking Mule! You get me?"

The storekeeper's teeth chattered.

"I've sure shot galoots for less'n that! Get in, and chew on it, you gink!"

Silas Shook clambered trembling into the stage.

"You next!" snarled the horseman.

The drummer followed the storekeeper in.

"Stand back, you!"

Black George made a motion with his revolver as the man in the Derby hat would have approached the vehicle.

"Say, feller, I've sure handed out all my dust," said the passenger. "You can search me."

"Likely enough," said Black George. "But I guess it ain't only your dust that I want from you."

The bronze-faced man eyed him, and a tense look came over his face. But the road-agent's revolver was looking him full in the face, and if he had thought of reaching for a hidden weapon he gave up the idea.

"Say, you through, George?" asked Jerry Cook. "I got to get this here shebang to Kicking Mule on time, you want to know."

"Shut your head, Jerry Cook!" snapped Black George. "I guess you'll wait till I'm through, if I keep you till sundown!"

The driver grinned.

"It's your say-so, Black George," he answered. "I sure ain't arguing with you about it a whole lot. Take your time."

"Say, you!" The black road-agent's eyes glistened at the man in the Derby hat. "What you call yourself?"

"James Johnson!"

"Blazes is full of such Johnsons!" snarled the horseman. "What you doing in this section?"

"Buying cattle."

"Sho! You're a cattle-buyer?"

"You've said it."

"Where you hang out?"

"San Fernando."

"You've come here from San Fernando to buy cattle?"

"Right in once."

"You aim to locate in Kicking Mule to buy them cattle?"

"Sure."

"And you ain't no business to Kicking Mule, 'cept to buy cattle?" asked the horseman, with an inflection of savage sarcasm in his voice.

"I reckon that's my business," said the man with the bronzed complexion. "I'm buying for some of the San Fernando ranches."

"And your name's Johnson?"

"Jest that."

"Ain't you ever been called suthin' else?" asked Black George. "Ain't you ever been called Lieutenant Jim Dixey, of the Texas Rangers?"

The man in the Derby hat stood quite still.

"You gol-darned, double-crossing gink!" snarled the road-agent. "You talk about buying cattle at Kicking Mule, when you've been sent for special to hunt this country for Black George. You come hyer as a cattle-buyer because if you come open, you know you won't have a chance of getting after the man you want. Say! You've met up with me sooner'n you allowed—sooner'n you wanted, I reckon. You get a good look at me now, Lieutenant Jim Dixey, and you'll know me ag'in."

The man in the Derby hat breathed hard.

"You'd have pulled on me, in the stage, and chanced it, if you'd knowed I was wise to you?" jeered the black rider. "I'd have riddled the hearse with lead if you had, and put paid to the

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whole caboodle. But if you'd knowed I was wise to you, you'd have chanced it."

"How'd you know?" asked the bronzed man quietly. "I ain't denying it, seeing you know. But how'd you get wise to it that I was sent for to pick up your trail in this section?"

The horseman laughed savagely.

"I guess I'm wise to move'n the guys at Kicking Mule reckon," he jeered. "I got you down fine, you gink! Get into that hearse, and be durned to you!"

The Ranger stepped into the stage and took his seat.

The horseman, sitting his saddle close beside the vehicle, followed his movements with the revolver muzzle. The Ranger's bronzed face betrayed nothing, but all knew that he was watchful for a chance to draw a gun. But it was instant death, and he knew it, and he did not make the attempt.

Jerry Cook gathered up his reins.

"You through?" he asked.

"I'm through," said Black George. "Tell them in Kicking Mule that they'll want a better guy than this to get Black George."

"I'll sure hand that message to Seth Starbuck, the town marshal, when we get in," said Jerry Cook; and he cracked his whip.

The black horseman stared in at the window at the passengers, his revolver still threatening them. He rode beside the stage as Jerry Cook started his team.

"You, Jim Dixey!" he said. "You're going to Kicking Mule in this hearse. When you get there I guess the galoots will be wise to it that they want a better man to pick up Black George. I guess they can send you home in a pine packet, and ask for a better man."

He fired at the last word.

There was a sharp cry, following the roar of the six-gun, and a dead man rolled on the floor of the vehicle.

A yell of terror broke from the other passengers as they started away from the falling body of the Ranger.

Jerry Cook uttered a startled oath, and dragged in his starting team.

"Thunder! What—"

"Take him to Kicking Mule—what's left of him!" shouted Black George; and he gave his horse the spur and dashed away down the trail.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

#### The Rio Kid Horns In!

"GEE-WHIZ!"

The Rio Kid stood transfixed, in the thickets by the trail.

The hoofs of the black horse clattered in the distance. Jerry Cook was holding in his team. From the interior of the stage came the startled cries of the passengers.

For several seconds the Kid was motionless.

The hold-up had passed, under his eyes, and he had looked on and listened to the talk, never dreaming of the tragedy that was to follow.

When the horseman had announced his knowledge of the Ranger's identity, the Kid's hand had sought a gun. The hold-up was nothing to him, but he would not see a man shot under his eyes, and for a moment, then, he had suspected that to be the road-agent's intention. But when the black rider allowed the Ranger to get back into the stage, the Kid supposed that the affair was at an end, and he was turning away when the roar of the robber's Colt was followed by the death-cry of the man he had ruthlessly shot.

It was almost unbelievable to the Kid. He had seen much reckless and ruthless shooting in his time, but this was the limit in the Kid's experience.

He stood still, amazed, and then, with a blaze in his eyes, he leaped out into the trail.

A gun was in his hand now, and had Black George been still at hand vengeance would have been swift.

But the road-agent was galloping, and he had already disappeared from sight down the winding trail at the base of the hill.

"The dog-goned scallywag!" panted the Kid.

He ran towards the stage.

"Say, is that Ranger guy sure shot up?" he called out.



"I reckon!" answered Jerry Cook, staring at him. "Say, where you jump from, stranger?"

The Kid, without replying, looked into the coach.

Three terrified faces were turned towards him; but his gaze was fixed on an upturned face on the floor.

Lieutenant Jim Dixey, of the Texas Rangers, lay there, still and silent, never to stir again of his own volition. He had been shot through the heart.

The Kid removed his Stetson.

"Sho!" he said. "I guess that was the durndest dog-goned game I ever struck! That scallywag knowed the guy would take a chance and reach for a gun, and he let on to be through with him, and then—"

The Kid turned away.

"Say, you puncher," said Jerry Cook, looking down at the Kid. "Where you jump from, I want to know? I never seed—"

He eyed the Kid curiously.

"You got a dead guy to carry to

Kicking Mule, hombre," said the Kid. "Say, I'm a stranger in this section, and I guess I never heard of Black George till I see him to-day. But I reckon he's some all-fired firebug from what I've seen."

"You've said it," agreed Jerry Cook. "Say, that Ranger was asking for his, if he come along here to cinch Black George. That pesky coon is wise to everything that goes on in Kicking Mule—there ain't nary a stunt that he don't get wise to. I guess he stopped this hearse special to shoot up that guy." Jerry Cook picked up his whip. "Waal,

Cook. "I guess you got gall, for a kid puncher. Say, your friends won't get to hear of you any more, if you follow Black George into the hills."

The Kid did not heed. He shook out his reins, and dashed down the trail in the direction taken by the road-agent.

Jerry Cook stared after him and whistled.

"I guess that guy don't know what's healthy for him!" he remarked; and he drove on the stage.

The Kid vanished down the trail in a few seconds.

The crashing and crackling of the thickets came quite clearly, as Black George drove his horse over the hill.

The Kid followed as fast as the heavy undergrowth allowed. Had he needed a trail to follow, that left by the black horseman was plain enough for a blind man to pick up. But he did not need sign to guide him, with the crashing of the black horse audible to his ears.

"The dog-goned skunk!" the Kid muttered. "The pesky, ornery, all-fired scallywag! Shooting up a guy that a-way; it sure does get my goat! I guess I ain't quitting till that dog-goned lobo-wolf has got his!"

The Kid pressed on. A hold-up on the trail was no business of the boy-outlaw's; it was the business of sheriffs and rangers. But the dastardly shooting of the Ranger in the stage was another matter. It got the Kid's goat, as he said. Rangers were no friends of the Kid's. The man who had been shot up would have been as keen to take the Kid's trail as Black George's. But that cut no ice with the Kid. That savage, merciless shooting got his goat; and, to his eyes, the black horseman was a wild beast, and the sooner he was wiped out the better. And the Kid was pursuing him with the fixed intention of wiping him out as ruthlessly as he had wiped out the Ranger.

A bullet tearing through the leaves and twigs warned the Kid that the road-agent was wise to his pursuit.

The Kid smiled grimly. Shooting in that tangled thicket could only be at random, though his keen eyes were watchful for a chance at the black rider ahead.

Crack, crack! The Kid rode on, regardless of the flying lead. The crackling in the underwood told that Black George was riding on again.

Ere long, the Kid figured, he would sight him. The belt of thickets extended up the hillside, but on the upland the woodland thinned, as the soil grew more rocky. Once through the woods he would call the black rider to a grim account. Deadly as was Black George's reputation in the Kicking Mule country, the Kid reckoned that he was as

good a man with a gun as any hombre in Texas. He was only eager to get a sight of the man in the serape.

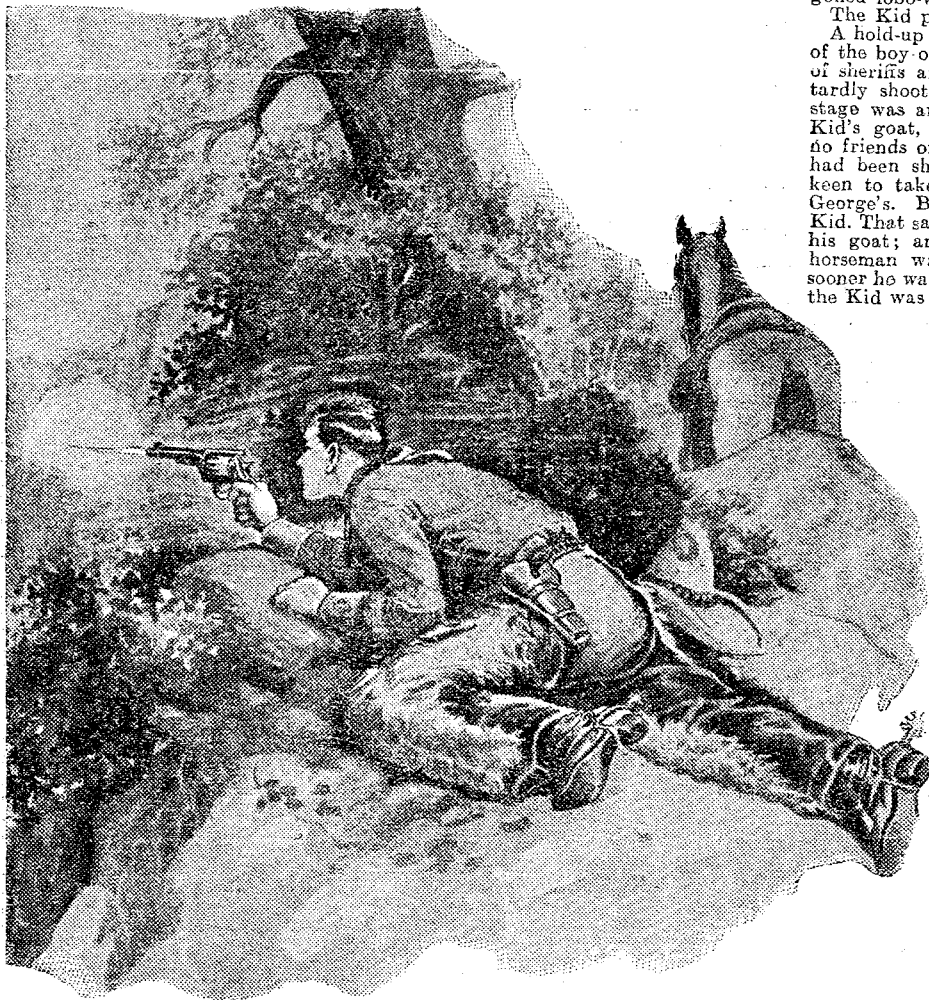
"Sho!" ejaculated the Kid suddenly. He dragged in his mustang, almost on the edge of a deep, wide barranca that split the hillside.

It extended right and left across the Kid's path, and yawned wide and deep in front of him, and it was clear that Black George had leaped across it to ride on his way.

The thickets grew to the very edge of the chasm. On the opposite side the thick undergrowth, mingled with pecans and post-oaks, recommenced.

"Whoa, Side-Kicker!" said the Kid. He dropped from the saddle, and drew his horse back into thicker cover. The roar of a six-gun from across the barranca came a moment later.

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Keeping in cover, the Kid watched the opposite side of the chasm. His own gun roared in response to a stirring in the thickets, and there was a yell from the unseen road-agent.

I reckon I got to make the grade, all the same. I aim to get this hearse into town on time. You want a lift, puncher?"

The Kid shook his head. "None! I'm going after the road-agent."

The Kid gave a clear whistle, and Side-Kicker came plunging through the thickets to the trail.

Jerry Cook opened his eyes wide. "You aiming to trail Black George?" he ejaculated.

"Sure!" "Let up on it, puncher," said Jerry. "You stay where you're safe! Black George wouldn't make more'n one bite at you, kid."

"I guess I'll give him the chance." The Rio Kid swung himself into the saddle.

"You mean it?" exclaimed Jerry

At a gallop, he passed round the bend that had hidden the road-agent, and disappeared from the sight of the stage-driver and his passengers.

The Rio Kid's face was hard set, his eyes gleaming, and a walnut-butted gun was in his grasp. His eyes searched the trail ahead for the black rider.

Black George was only a few minutes ahead of him, and the Kid did not figure that he would be going all out, for the hold-up man had no suspicion, as yet, that there was pursuit behind him.

But the black rider had already left the trail, turning into the rough thickets that clothed the hillside. The Kid had a glimpse of swaying branches, and of a Stetson hat that appeared and disappeared.

He turned from the trail, and rode up the rugged slope of the hillside, the way the hold-up man had gone.

The Kid had guessed that the road-agent, knowing that he was pursued, would stop at such a favourable spot to deal with his pursuer. And he had been right. Had Side-Kicker taken the leap, the ruffian, in the thickets on the other side of the barranca, would have riddled the Kid with lead as he leaped.

Thrice the six-gun roared across the chasm, the lead tearing leaves and twigs around the Rio Kid.

Keeping in cover, the Kid watched the opposite side of the chasm. His own gun roared in response, at a stirring in the thickets, and there was a yell from the unseen road-agent. The lead had gone close.

"Say, Side-Kicker, old hoss, I guess this puts paid to us!" murmured the Rio Kid.

The Kid was reckless enough, and danger had no terrors for him, but he was not the man to throw away his life. To leap the barranca, while the road-agent was watching on the other side, was death. But to go along the side of the chasm, seeking another crossing, was to lose his man. The fugitive, if he sought escape, would be gone, long before the Kid could cross in safety and get round to him. And Black George, though likely enough he did not fear to meet a single puncher in conflict, was not likely to lose more time than he could help. When the stage got into Kicking Mule, with the murdered Ranger, the country would be up, and

the black rider would be hunted far and wide. Minutes would be precious to Black George then.

The Kid soon made up his mind.

Keeping in cover, he led Side-Kicker away, threading the wood along the barranca, to seek a crossing at a distance. He knew that the ears of the halted road-agent would pick up the sounds he made, and that Black George would guess his intention easily enough. In a few minutes, he figured, the rascal would be in the saddle again, riding. But his trail would be left for the Kid, and there was no Apache or Comanche in Texas keener at picking up a trail than the Rio Kid.

And that trail the boy-puncher would follow, whithersoever it led him, to Black George's death or his own.

#### THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

##### A Mystery!

"LEVANTED!" grunted the Rio Kid.

He had expected it.

The road-agent had long gone when the Kid reached the spot where he had stopped on the farther side of the barranca.

The Kid had followed the rift a quarter of a mile, and leaped his mustang across it, and then worked back on the farther side. He could not

afford to act in haste, for it was possible that Black George was still there, deep in cover, guessing his intention, and waiting for him. And it was not the Kid's idea to let the matter end with a bullet through his heart from cover.

Cautiously he worked his way through dense thickets, on foot, his mustang following him. He picked up the spot at last where the road-agent had stopped. Black George was gone—the trail of his horse leading away up the woody hillside.

"I guess he was winged," said the Kid, as he examined the traces left by the road-agent.

It was evident that the Kid's bullet across the barranca had gone close, for he picked up several spots of blood on the herbage where the black outlaw had crouched in cover. He had not been hard hit, but the lead had touched him and drawn blood.

The Kid mounted the grey mustang, after a careful examination of the spot, and followed the trail that lay plain to the eye through the tangled thickets.

He went cautiously enough, wary of an ambush; though he reckoned that the road-agent was not wasting time. By this time the stage would have reached Kicking Mule; and it was likely that a score of riders would pour out of the cow-town to hunt for the

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LIKE a lot of extremely muddy and giant moles, the men of "A" Company, of a certain regiment numbered early up on the roll of the First Hundred Thousand to volunteer for active service with Britain's Old Conquerors in the early days of the Great War, wallowed breathlessly but happily in an excessively flooded front-line trench somewhere in Flanders.

Breathlessly, because they had just staggered over endless miles of treacherous duckboards to relieve the Tommies who had done duty in that same trench for the previous seven days. Happily, because they had finished with those duckboards for a similar period—duckboards which, in the awful darkness of a Flanders night, would roll suddenly under your feet and flop you sideways into bottomless liquid mud.

Another reason for their happiness was the fact that this was New Year's Eve.

But scarcely have they settled in their appointed stations at the firing-step in each trench traverse than there comes word that something really is afoot. A raid on the enemy trenches!

Headquarters passed it on to various High Functionaries until it came to the ears of the General. Gradually the order to carry out this Christmas Eve raid dribbled down to the battalion's colonel. He passed the order on to the Major and the Adjutant. The Adjutant told the Captain. The Captain told a Lieutenant of "A" Company, who told a sergeant, who straightway proceeded to pour the message into the ears of six Privates.

"The General wants a bloomin' captive. We've gotter go birds'-nesting," said the sergeant with a grin. "General wants a real live Jerry—and we've gotter fetch him!"

So at midnight, as New Year's Day was coming in, there crept over the parapet from the British fighting line one Lieutenant,

one sergeant, and six Tommies. Like enormous rats they crept out into No Man's Land on their stomachs, flattening themselves incredibly whenever a Verey Light shot up from the enemy trench—fifty yards distant—and remaining utterly immobile till that tell-tale soaring flare had spent itself.

Twenty-five yards they crawled, spread out in line an arm's length apart. Now they were up against something at which even the bravest of fighting men always shuddered. Especially in darkness such as smothered this New Year's Eve. It was barbed wire—miles and miles of it, twisted and tangled and splayed about on corkscrew iron supports, and many feet in depth.

The raiding party had to cut a passage through it, with big wire-cutters with which each of the eight was armed, additional to the lieutenant's revolver and the short club and bombs (the latter safely pocketed) with which all were provided.

But on the face of each—officer, non-com. and private—was the set grin of the British warrior put to the test. The smile that won't come off! Somehow they fumbled with their massive cutters, and strand by strand the savage, spiked wire parted. Then it flipped about, searching like a live thing for living flesh to lacerate.

With the art they had long since learned, they avoided the flailing ends, and after hours, it seemed, of working on their stomachs, the procession enemywards recommenced—this time in single file, the officer leading. Then they spread out once more, safely through the barbed wire gap, and wriggle by wriggle the enemy parapet was reached.

Each gripped his club and held his breath, waiting for the spring from the lieutenant which should be the signal for a united leap down into Jerry's trench. Only one enemy head was visible above the parapet, and that not-too-sharp-eyed sentry was yards to the right.

But the little band of raiders, flying into the trench, discovered otherwise; the freestep was lined with drowsy figures in field-grey.

Instantly the night was punctured by shouts and shots and sounds of heavy blows. But for a short half-minute only. The British were not there to do battle. The General wanted one live German only—and the information of the coming attack which that German could impart.

As swiftly as they arrived the eight departed. Only this time they were nine, for in their hurrying midst was a scared captive. Shots whistled after the retreating stooping figures, but the luck of New Year's Eve held, and beyond torn trousers and tunics in the passage of the cut barbed wire there were no British casualties.

Back in the trench the captive was despatched under safe escort General-wards, the raiding party had their tot of rum, the lieutenant went off to report to the captain, and the battalion settled down to prepare for the reciprocal attack which was bound to come with the dawn.

before the vacation ended. They felt that they could quite like Uncle Peter—so long as he was at a safe distance.

But coming in one day from a ramble they found Uncle Peter down, propped in innumerable cushions, before a terrific fire. He was speaking to his sister and brother-in-law when the juniors looked rather timidly in.

"A fine lad—a fine lad, Mabel! Lovell, you ought to be proud of that boy of yours. Cheeky—well, I like a lad to be able to speak up for himself. Why, here is the boy! Arthur, you young rascal, come here!"

Arthur Edward came rather gingerly. His father gave him a smile, his mother beamed on him; Uncle Peter glared at him.

"Do you know that you saved my life?" he boomed.

"Did I?" gasped Lovell. "Sorry! I—I mean, I'm jolly glad! I—I hope you're better, Uncle Peter."

"Never better in my life!" snorted Uncle Peter. "That ass of a doctor says I'm not to smoke cigars for a week at least. I'll show him! Give me a light. No, on second thoughts you needn't give me a light. Give me your fist, my boy. You're a cheeky young rascal, but you're the right stuff—the right stuff, and your uncle's proud of you!"

And Mr. Wilmington demonstrated his changed feelings by giving Lovell a grip that made him wriggle.

The last few days of the vacation were calm and bright at Lovell Lodge. When the time came to return to Rookwood Arthur Lovell was quite sorry to part with his Uncle Peter, a state of affairs that he certainly could never have foreseen. By luck and pluck he had succeeded, at long last, in placating Uncle Peter!

THE END.

(You'll find thrills, laughs, and surprises in next Tuesday's rousing long complete story of Jimmy Silver & Co., entitled: "UP AGAINST HIS FORM MASTER!" by Owen Conquest. Don't miss it!)

## BLACK GEORGE!

(Continued from page 6.)

ruthless slayer. Black George was not in a position to waste a lot of time, the Kid figured. Still, he was watchful and wary as a lynx as he rode on the outlaw's trail.

To the Kid's surprise the trail led, after a short distance, not farther up the hill, but slantwise across the hillside, and then downward.

"Sho!" ejaculated the Kid.

It looked as if the outlaw was aiming to ride back to the stage-trail, and that puzzled the Kid.

He had figured that Black George was heading for some retreat, some hiding-place in the depths of the hills.

But that evidently was not the case. From the direction the trail was taking, it looked as if it would strike the stage-trail about a mile from the spot where the hold-up had taken place.

The Kid, puzzled, followed on.

The trail of the black horse led him past the end of the barranca, and onward down the hill. It stopped, at last, on the bank of a creek that flowed down from the uplands.

The black rider had ridden into the creek; the Kid rode through it with the water up to his stirrups, and found no trace on the other side of the road-agent having landed.

Up the creek there was no riding; the watercourse was too steep. The Kid rode down in the water, and his keen eyes scanned the banks as he rode. The road-agent had followed the stream, he knew that, perhaps with the intention of throwing a pursuer off his track. A simple device like that was not likely to stop the Rio Kid. He followed the shallow stream downward, and a few minutes later picked up sign where a rider had left the water and ridden on towards the stage-trail.

The Kid followed the sign.

A quarter of an hour later he emerged into the open stage-trail that wound along the base of the hill.

The tracks of the horse he had followed led into the stage-trail, and on in the direction of Kicking Mule.

The Kid's eyes grew wide.

The stage-trail was well travelled; ruts of wheels and hoof-marks of horses and cattle were thick. But among them the Kid's eyes picked beyond doubt the trail of Black George's horse.

And that trail led on towards Kicking Mule.

The Kid followed, sorely perplexed. "Dog-gone my cats!" ejaculated the puzzled Kid. "It sure looks as if that darned galoot rode right into Kicking Mule! If I ain't going blind, and I reckon I ain't, this here is the trail of his cayuse, and it's leading right into town. Dog-gone my boots!"

Close to the cow-town, where the earth was trampled by innumerable hoofs, the track was lost at last; it was impossible for even the Kid's searching eye to pick out the particular trail of Black George's cayuse among so many.

He halted, his brow deeply wrinkled in perplexed thought.

He had figured on tracking the black outlaw to some retreat in the hills, or some hidden den in the chaparral. But the trail had led him to the cow-town of Kicking Mule; and unless the Kid's eyes had deceived him it was into the cow-town that Black George had hidden, after that long and winding circuit among the woods on the hillside. Yet that surely was impossible; for a glimpse of the black outlaw would have caused every gun in Kicking Mule to leap from its holster. Yet the Kid had not been deceived by his eyes—and the trail of the outlaw's horse had not led.

"Jumpin' Jehosophat!" ejaculated the Kid at last. "It beats me; it sure beats me to one fuzzle! I don't get it—I surely don't! That guy's got me guessing!"

And, in sheer perplexity, the Kid gave up the problem for the moment, and rode on into Kicking Mule.

THE END.

("THE MARSHAL OF KICKING MULE!" is the title of next week's rousing long Western yarn.)

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THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW, IN THE WARS AGAIN!

# THE MARSHAL

OF

# KICKING MULE

BY

Ralph Redway.

Crack! Crack! . . . . But the "Kid" was the slickest on the draw.

## THE FIRST CHAPTER.

### The Kid at Kicking Mule!

THE Rio Kid rode into the cow-town of Kicking Mule, under the setting sun, humming a cowboy song as he rode. Men who glanced at him on the street saw a handsome young puncher, with the dust of the trail on his chaps, mounted on a mustang—a sight too common at Kicking Mule to draw a second glance. In Kicking Mule, as in every other cow-town in Texas, they had heard of the Rio Kid; but the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had never been seen there before; and the Kid figured that the chances were that no guy in the burg knew his looks. Anyhow he was taking the chance.

But he was not taking more chances than he could help. The band of silver nuggets was gone from his hat; the silver spurs were blacked over; and the grey mustang, as well known as his rider, had been given brown "stockings" on his forelegs, and brown patches on his head and his flanks, which made him look like a pinto. So unless some guy at Kicking Mule actually knew the Kid's handsome features, he was not likely to be spotted in that cow-town so remote from his usual trails.

Careless as he looked, like any other puncher riding in from a far range, the Kid's eyes were keenly about him, under the shade of his Stetson; and the two walnut-butted guns, low-slung in their holsters, were quite handy to his grasp if he wanted them.

But it did not seem likely that he would want them. Few heeded the young puncher, in a town crowded with cow-punchers. And the few who heeded him never dreamed that they were looking at the "firebug" whose name was a legend on the banks of the Rio Grande.

The Kid was glad of it. He had not come to Kicking Mule hunting trouble; but for quite different reasons.



There was, as he noted at once, some excitement in the cow-town; and the Kid, who had seen the hold-up of the Juniper stage on the stage-trail a few hours ago, knew the reason.

The stage was in now; it had been long in; and was standing, minus its horses, outside the timber hotel. Jerry Cook, the driver, was within the building, disposing of much-needed liquid refreshment after a long drive up a dusty trail, and relating to a buzzing crowd the tragic events of the trip. Outside a crowd had gathered round the coach, staring into it, and remarking on the tell-tale stains to be seen on its bare flooring.

The Kid slackened to a walk, as he came into the crowd, and pulled in the grey mustang close by the coach.

"Say, fellers, suthin' going on in this hyer burg?" he drawled. "You guys sure seem all het up."

Several glanced at him, and one replied:

"It's a hold-up!"

"Sho!" said the Kid.

He knew more about the hold-up than the Kicking Mule guys could know. He was fresh from the pursuit of the road-agent who had held up the stage from Juniper.

"It's Black George!" said another.

"Black George?" repeated the Kid.

"I guess you're a stranger here, if you ain't heard of Black George," said the puncher who had first spoken. "He's a nigger hold-up man—and the durndest firebug in this section. Black as the ace of spades; though his face ain't so black as his heart, I reckon. He stopped this stage and shot up a man on the trail."

"Sho!"

"Shot him up for keeps!" said the puncher. "Jerry Cook brought him in as dead as dead-wood. A Ranger lieutenant, who was coming hyer to pick up the trail of Black George; and I guess that nigger got wise to it somehow, and laid for him on the trail. Shot him up in the stage, by the great horned toad."

The Kid nodded.

He had witnessed that ruthless killing on the stage-trail; and it was for that reason that he had ridden in pursuit of the black road-agent. And the trail of the killer, strangely enough, had led him to the cow-town; a mystery that the Rio Kid was determined to fathom before he pulled out from Kicking Mule.

"And Black George ain't been cinched?" asked the Kid.

"He sure ain't! That coon has been cavorting around Kicking Mule for years, and he ain't never been cinched yet! I guess there's fifty men rode out to look for him now; but they ain't putting salt on the tail of that coon, I reckon. He's sure too cute!"

The Kid could believe that.

He had seldom been beaten on a trail; but the black hold-up man of Kicking Mule had beaten him to it. And the Kid reckoned that he was as good a man on a trail as any guy in Texas.

"Say, Mesquite!" said another puncher. "Jerry Cook allows that there was a kid puncher showed up on the trail, and went after Black George. Mighty close behind him, Jerry allows. Mebbe he got him."

Mesquite snorted.

"Not on your life," he answered. "If that kid puncher Jerry told us of got anywhere near Black George, I guess he got his, sudden. They'll find him lying about with a hole through him."

THE POPULAR.—No. 572.

"I guess not!" grinned the Kid. Mesquite stared at him.

"You guess not?" he grunted. "I've said it."

"And what do you know about it?" demanded the burly puncher gruffly. "You got a lot to spill for a kid that ain't long out of short frocks."

"Feller, I'm the kid puncher that Jerry told you about," explained the Kid. "I'm that very guy!"

"Shucks!"

The attention of the crowd was concentrated on the Rio Kid at once.

"You!" said Mesquite.

"Me!" assented the Kid.

"You went after Black George?"

"You've said it."

"Aw, can it!" grunted the big puncher. "What you giving us? I guess if you saw Black George, you'd jump into the nearest hole, an' try to pull it in after you."

There was a laugh from the crowd of cowmen, and the Kid's eyes glinted.

"I guess I'm giving you straight goods," he said. "I'll tell a man I was there and saw the hold-up, and saw that durned lobo-wolf, Black George, make a last sickness for that ranger guy. I guess I followed him up the hill; but—"

"He got away!" grinned Mesquite.

"He sure got away!" assented the Kid.

"Mebbe you didn't follow him too much in a hurry?" suggested the cow-puncher. "Mebbe you didn't look for him very hard, in case you should find him."

There was another laugh.

"And mebbe," said the Kid cheerfully, "mebbe you're an all-fired pesky bonthead, a-shooting off your mouth promiscus, because you ain't got more hoss-sense than a cross-eyed gopher."

Mesquite Bill dropped his hand to his gun.

But he did not pull the Colt.

A long bluish barrel looked him in the face, appearing in the boy rider's hand so suddenly that it seemed like magic to the astonished cow-puncher.

"Forget it, feller!" said the Kid softly.

The big puncher stared at him blankly for a moment; slowly dropping his hand from the butt of his gun.

"Say, you ain't no slouch on the draw," he said, with unwilling admiration.

"I guess I've heard that said afore!" assented the Kid. He dropped his gun into the leather holster again, and smiled. "Say, feller; I ain't come hyer a-shooting! I guess I want to get after that all-fired skunk that shot up the Ranger guy on the trail; and I want to see your marshal in this burg and put him wise to some things. I reckon I can help get a cinch on that fire-bug. Say, where does your marshal hang out?"

Mesquite Bill gave the boy puncher a long, uncertain look. Then he grinned.

"You sure are some guy on the draw," he said. "I take back what I was saying, feller; I guess I allow you're all wool and a yard wide. If you got a hunch that you can help cinch that fire-bug Black George, I reckon all Kicking Mule will be powerful glad you humped into this burg. Say, I'll sure show you along to the marshal's office."

And the Kid, walking his mustang, moved away with the big puncher, the eyes of the rest following him curiously as he went.

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## THE SECOND CHAPTER. The Cow-Town Marshal!

THE frame house and office of Seth Starbuck, town marshal of Kicking Mule, stood a hundred yards along the rugged, irregular street. The Kid walked his mustang along by the side of Mesquite Bill, who glanced at him, several times curiously. There was no enmity in his glance; the big puncher had a respect for the guy who, kid as he looked, had beaten him to the draw. And the fact that the Kid had followed the trail of Black George, that he had come to the cow-town as an enemy of the ruthless killer of the trails, was a sure passport to the esteem of any Kicking Mule galoot.

"I reckon you're a stranger in this section," the big puncher remarked as they th r e e d e d through the excited crowd in the one street of Kicking Mule.

"Yep!" said the Kid.

"How'd you happen on the trail when Black George was holding up the stage?"

"I was camping on the hill when it happened," the Kid explained. "I guess I had no hunch to horn in; but when the fire-bug shot up that Ranger guy in the hearse, I'll tell all Texas it sure got my goat, and I got after him like I was sent for. He sure is one pizen skunk!"

"You've said it," agreed Mesquite. "Me, I'd give a month's pay to draw a bead on him."

"But what you guys in this burg doing, to let that pesky polecat cavort around years on end, without fitting him with a rope necktie?" demanded the Kid.

Mesquite grunted.

"I'm telling you, that guy has been hunted like a flea on a dog," he said. "We've combed the hills for him, and rooted in the chaparral; and never picked up sign. You see, he's somehow wise to everything that goes on hyer. A hundred times or more, Seth Starbuck's led a hunt for him—and never a sign of him been seen. Nobody knows where he hides in the hills; and he gets wise to it every time there's a search."

"Friends in the town?" suggested the Kid. "Some pesky guys that stand in with him."

The puncher shook his head.

"There ain't a coon in the town," he said. "Black George is the only nigger in these parts. And I guess there ain't any white man in cahoots with the nigger."

"Nope, it don't sound likely," agreed the Kid. "But how'd he know that that Ranger guy was on the hearse? The guy was coming here claiming to be a cattle buyer, under another name;

but the road-agent was wise to him all the same."

"You got me guessing," said Mesquite. "It's got all Kicking Mule guessing. How Black George gets wise to things, nobody knows; but he does every time. Why, that Ranger was coming secret—some of the ranchers got together and fixed it. Seth Starbuck allowed that he was as good a man as any Ranger; but they put it over him, and it was fixed for the Ranger to come here, quiet, making out to be a cattle-buyer, to look round and pick up sign. There was only four men in the secret—my boss, Colonel Sanderson, two more ranchers, and the town marshal."

"And Black George?" said the Kid.



The Rio Kid fired from his hip, in the second as the marshal's gun left its hood. But it was the marshal who fell back; his gun knocked clean out of his hand.

"Sure—but how he got wise to it gets me guessing. Nobody in Kicking Mule knowed, till Jerry Cook dove in the stage, with the Ranger guy deader'n deadwood inside. Then it came out. But what nobody in the town knowed was no secret to Black George! My boss, the colonel, was here, when the stage dove in; and he jest tore his hair when he saw the guy dead inside, propped up on a seat, and the other passengers looking scared to a frazzle. The colonel sure loosed off some language."

Mesquite grinned reminiscently. Apparently the colonel's language had been powerful medicine.

"He sure did talk some!" said Mesquite. "But Seth Starbuck will have the



butt-end of the laugh, I reckon; he allowed that a Ranger guy was no good for Black George; and he sure hit the mark. Here's the shebang!"

The Kid slipped from the saddle, and hitched Side-Kicker at the rail outside the marshal's office.

"Say, feller," Mesquite touched him on the elbow, "you want to talk turkey to Starbuck."

"How come?"

"You want to know, the marshal's been after Black George for burro's years," explained Mesquite. "He's sure a whole lot sore when guys ask him why he ain't cinched that fire-bug yet. He got a grouch when the colonel and his friends fixed it up to fetch that

"Say, marshal, hyer's a galoot wants to chew the rag with you," said Mesquite. "He allows he can help cinch that fire-bug Black George."

The marshal of Kicking Mule fixed his eyes on the Kid.

It seemed to the Kid that recognition flashed into the keen, searching eyes that scanned his face; recognition and hostility.

The Kid slid a hand gently and unostentatiously towards a gun.

So far as he knew, the marshal of Kicking Mule was a total stranger to him. But more guys had seen the Rio Kid than the Rio Kid had seen.

If the marshal knew him, for what he was, the Kid had ridden into deadly danger in entering Kicking Mule; and as likely as not, had to fight his way out, gun in hand.

But he waited quietly, his face expressing nothing. If it came to gun-play, the Kid was ready; but he was averse from gun-play if it could be helped.

For several long seconds the marshal scanned his sunburnt face. But if he recognised the Kid, he gave no further sign, after that one startled flash of his eyes.

The Kid breathed more easily.

He did not want trouble at Kicking Mule. He wanted to take a hand in hunting down the ruthless killer of the trails, and riding Texas of a merciless assassin. That he was an outlaw himself, cut no ice with the Kid. For the time, at least, he was standing for the law, and it would have knocked his plans to pieces had he been recognised as the outlaw of the Rio Grande.

The marshal, after that long look, gave Mesquite Bill a curt nod, and turned back to the man to whom he had been speaking.

"Wait!" he said curtly.

"Sure!" assented Mesquite amiably.

The marshal, taking no further heed of the newcomers, went on talking to the man in chaps and spurs. It was a puncher to whom he was giving directions concerning the hunt that was going on in the hills for Black George.

The Kid stood aside quietly, and watched the marshal, while he waited for him to get through.

Mesquite had told him that Seth Starbuck was no gentle cooing dove; and the Kid allowed that Mesquite was right.

For a town marshal, the Kid figured that Starbuck was the toughest-looking guy he had ever struck.

His hard, cold, grim face, his hard,

icy eyes, told of a type that the Kid knew well, and had often encountered; the gunman type.

Starbuck might be a town-marshal now, in a rough cow-town; but the Kid reckoned that he had been a gunman in his time.

But in a town like Kicking Mule, a marshal who was not quick on the draw, and did not know how to handle a gun, would not have been a whole lot of use. He looked tough, and he was tough; but he was just the galoot to keep some sort of order, when the town was crowded by wild riders in from the ranges. The Kid allowed that the Kicking Mule guys had known what they were about when they elected Seth Starbuck to his present position. He looked, too, as good a man as could be wanted, to get on the trail of the desperate outlaw whose long list of hold-ups and killings made his name a terror to the section. The wonder was, to the Kid's mind, that he had not succeeded in cinching the black outlaw, who had defied the whole section for a series of years.

The marshal dismissed the man in chaps at last, and the latter left the office, mounted his broncho, and rode away clattering down the street. Starbuck turned towards Mesquite and the Kid.

"I ain't got a lot of time for chewing the rag," he said ungraciously. "I guess I got my hands full, with Black George's latest break."

"I allow you have, marshal!" said Mesquite placatingly.

Starbuck frowned.

"I guess I'm doing all a galoot can do," he said. "I ain't a darned detective, that I know of. Search me! Colonel Sanderson allowed that a Ranger officer would handle Black George, if he could be got here secret. And what's come of it?"

"Not a whole lot!" said Mesquite.

"Not a thing!" snapped Starbuck. "When I come in from Post-Oak, I found the stage in, with the Ranger dead aboard. Your boss give me the rough edge of his tongue. Thunder! I guess I came near pulling a gun on Colonel Sanderson, Mesquite! Wasn't it his stunt to get the Ranger guy here, and wasn't I agin it? Who's going to blame me if the guy gets himself shot up coming here? Say!"

"It sure wasn't your funeral, marshal," said Mesquite soothingly. "The colonel blows off his mouth a lot, when he's got his mad up; but he sure respects you a whole lot, marshal. He sure knows you're the man to get Black George, if he's ever got."

"It sure makes a hombre sore," said Starbuck. "If the town wants a new marshal, I'm ready to resign. But I ain't no darned conjurer to hand them Black George like a rabbit out of a hat! No, sir!"

He turned to the Kid.

"Who's this guy, and what does he want?" he snapped. "I've told you I'm a busy man."

"I guess I don't know his call-by—" Mesquite turned inquiringly to the Rio Kid.

"Two-gun Carson fits me!" murmured the Kid, his eyes on the marshal's hard face.

He was satisfied now that the marshal did not know him as the Rio Kid; that the man never dreamt that he was anything but what he looked, and indeed was—a cow-puncher. Yet that flash of hostile recognition in Seth Starbuck's eyes, at first sight of him, remained in the Kid's memory and puzzled him. The marshal did not know that he was



same  
ster,  
his

Ranger guy hyer—he reckoned it was one agin him. He sure ain't no gentle cooing dove, the marshal ain't; and he's the quickest man on the draw in this section. You don't want to get him edge-wise."

The Kid smiled.

"I'll sure talk to him like I was a Dutch uncle," he said.

And he followed the puncher into the open doorway of the office of the town marshal of Kicking Mule.

It was a bare room, sparsely furnished. At a bench that served as a desk, a man of powerful frame was seated. He was speaking to a man in spurs and chaps, whose dusty horse was hitched outside.

the Rio Kid; but he had seen him before somewhere.

"Waal, what you got to spill, Two-gun Carson?" grunted the marshal.

"I guess I got something to spill about Black George."

"Shoot!"

"This hyer guy was on the trail when that coon held up the stage from Juniper, marshal," interjected Mesquite. "He's the kid puncher that Jerry let on about, who got after Black George and followed him into the hills."

"I guess he's sure lucky to be here to chew the rag about it, then," grunted Starbuck. "He ain't going to tell me that he got Black George?"

"Nope!" said the Kid.

"Well, spill what you got to unload, pronto."

"I followed that guy's trail," explained the Kid, "and it sure beat me to a frazzle, for it led me—you won't guess where, hombre."

"Up into the sierra?"

"Nope!"

"Where, then?" snapped the marshal impatiently.

"Back to the stage-trail," said the Kid.

"And there you lost it?"

"I sure did not!"

Starbuck started, and his eyes fixed on the Kid, hard.

"What then?" he asked.

"I followed that black outlaw's hoss hoof-prints," said the Kid deliberately, "and they sure led me right into Kicking Mule. Marshal, if you want to find Black George, you want to look for him right here in this cow-town!"

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

#### Sharp Shooting!

SILENCE followed the Rio Kid's words.

Mesquite Bill stared at him, his mouth agape with astonishment.

The expression on the marshal's face was hard to define.

There was surprise in it—obviously, the Kid's words had startled him. But there was something more than surprise—something that the Kid, keen as he was, could not quite get.

In the silence, the deep-drawn breath of the marshal of Kicking Mule was heard. He had risen to his feet, and was staring across the desk at the Kid, with a stare that seemed as if it would penetrate through the cool, handsome face, to the thoughts behind.

Mesquite Bill broke the silence.

"Sho!" he ejaculated.

"I'm giving you the straight stuff!" said the Kid earnestly. "There ain't nary a doubt about it. That nigger doubled among the chaparral on the hill, after shooting up the Ranger guy in the stage; and then he hit the stage-trail agin, and rode for this town. He sure did."

The marshal burst into a jeering laugh. There was a ring in that laugh, a ring that was cracked and false, that made the Kid look at him sharply.

"What you giving us?" sneered Starbuck. "You aim to make us believe that a buck nigger rode into this town without a guy noticing him. I'm telling you, there ain't a black coon in Kicking Mule; and if one showed up hyer, every guy in town would be round him to see whether he was Black George or not. Forget it, puncher."

"You sure have got it wrong, feller," said Mesquite Bill, his astonished face breaking into a grin. "That sure is some tall story."

"I guess I've got eyes," said the Kid. "I'll tell all Texas that I followed that buck nigger's trail foot by

foot and inch by inch; and never lost it till I was the length of a dozen riatas from this burg. The tracks was too thick jest outside the town, to follow it farther. But that galoot rode into Kicking Mule, unless he turned off in full sight of the town—and why should he ride close to Kicking Mule and then turn off? No, sir! He rode into this town."

The marshal glanced at the open doorway, bright in the red sunset.

"It ain't dark yet," he said.

"It ain't!" assented the Kid.

"You allow that the nigger rode into the town in the daylight?"

"Yep!"

"Under the eyes of all Kicking Mule!" said the marshal.

"There ain't no other way about it, hombre. That's jest what that guy Black George did."

The marshal laughed again, gruffly, contemptuously.

"Ask up and down Kicking Mule, whether any guy has seen a nigger riding into town," he said. "You find a guy that's seen one, and bring him along to me! I'll sure be glad to see him."

The Kid stood silent.

He was nonplussed, himself.

In a town where there were no negroes, any black man riding in would surely have gained immediate attention; especially with the cow-town throbbing with excitement over the latest outrage by the black road-agent. No black man could have entered Kicking Mule that day, without being immediately observed, and closely questioned. That, certainly, had not happened. Any guy who had seen a negro on the street, that day, would have told all Kicking Mule.

Yet the trail had not lied.

If the Kid's eyes had deceived him in the matter of the trail of the black horse, it was the first time they ever had deceived him.

"It sure ain't possible, Carson!" said Mesquite Bill. "You sure was mistaken about that cayuse's trail."

"Mistaken!" snapped the marshal scornfully. "It ain't a mistake—it's a darned lie! This kid puncher is jest shooting off his mouth promiscus. Too much tanglefoot since he struck town, I reckon!"

"I guess I don't worry the tangle-foot a whole lot, marshal," said the Kid quietly, "and I ain't used to a galoot giving me the lie!"

"You'll sure get used to it, if you spin fool yarns that-a-way in Kicking Mule!" sneered the marshal. "You come here on my busy day and waste my time with a tall story like that!"

"I come here because you're marshal of Kicking Mule, and I want to help cinch that buck that shot up the Ranger lieutenant," said the Kid. "I guess it was my call to put you wise to what I know about the firebug."

"You don't know a thing about that firebug!" said the marshal deliberately. "You jest come here shooting off your mouth with a fool yarn, to make yourself look a little bigger'n you are. You want to get the town rubbering at you, I reckon; and that's your holt. Take your fool yarn away and tell it to some bonehead who'll swallow it."

"You sure was mistaken, puncher," said Mesquite anxiously. "You mixed up Black George's trail with some other guy's."

"I sure did not!" said the Kid quietly. "When I mix up a cayuse's trail with another cayuse's, feller, I'll sure give up cattle-punching and buy me a store and sell canned beans. I'll tell the world that black horse came into Kicking Mule; and I'd know its tracks

again, if I picked them up on the street or in any guy's yard."

"Can it!" snapped the marshal. His eyes gleamed at the Kid, and his hand was very near his gun. "Mesquite, hyer, allows that you're mistaken. I say it's a darned lie!"

The Kid's eyes gleamed, and he breathed hard.

The marshal, who looked so much more like a gun-man than a town marshal, was hunting trouble. Mesquite could see that Seth Starbuck was forcing on a quarrel, a quarrel that might lead to gun-play, and he touched the Kid's arm.

"Let's git!" he said. "The marshal ain't banking on your yarn now, and you're sure wasting his time. Beat it, feller—"

"Beat it, while you've got whole bones to beat it with!" jeered Starbuck. "I ain't banking on that fool yarn a whole lot. But I'll sure tell you what I figure. Black George gets wise to a lot of things that go on in this town. I've figured for a long time that he's in cahoots with some darned, dirty, double-crossing scallywag that puts him wise. You come here and tell me a darned lie, and I'll say that it looks as if you was playing Black George's game."

"Thunder!" ejaculated Mesquite. He gave the Kid a startled look.

"That's what it looks like to me!" said the marshal. "It looks as if you was the dirty skunk that's in cahoots with Black George. And if you don't like that, you gold-darned lying scallywag, pull your gun, durn you!"

It was trouble; and it came suddenly. But it did not come too suddenly for the Kid, who was watching Starbuck like a cat.

With the last word the marshal grasped his gun, and it leaped from the holster.

The Kid fired from the hip in the same second.

The roar of the Colt filled the marshal's office with sound. A yell from the Kicking Mule marshal sounded louder still as he staggered back behind the bench.

His gun crashed to the floor, shattered by the Kid's bullet. His right hand hung numb. For the moment the marshal believed that the hand, as well as the gun, had been shattered, so sharp and numbing was the shock.

The Kid's smoking Colt was levelled the next moment.

"Put 'em up!" he snapped.

The eyes gleaming over the levelled barrel enforced obedience. Seth Starbuck, with a face convulsed with rage, lifted his hands above his head.

Mesquite stared on, dumbfounded.

He had seen some sharp shooting in his time, but never anything so swift as this. Seth Starbuck, the quickest man on the draw in Kicking Mule, had been beaten to it by the kid puncher. The cow-man gaped with amazement. Starbuck stood with his hands up, covered by the Kid's gun; and Mesquite could hardly believe his eyes as he saw it.

"Waal, carry me hum to die!" he gasped.

The Kid made a step towards the enraged marshal.

"You darned pizen polecat!" he said quietly. "I guess I'd have given you yours for keeps, only I reckon I never figured on coming hyer to shoot up the town marshal. You got your mad up, I reckon, because that buck, Black George, snaps his fingers at you, and the whole town figures that you can't handle your job. And I'll say that the town's right—you can't! I guess—"

could cut a better marshal than you out of a grosewood stump. Sarch me!"

"Git out of this town!" gasped the marshal, husky with rage. "Git out of Kicking Mule while you're alive, puncher!"

The Kid laughed contemptuously. "I ain't getting a whole lot," he answered. "I guess I've took up the trail of that murdering villain, Black George, and I'm freezing on to that trail till the rope's round his dirty neck. You git me? I'm fixed in Kicking Mule till I get Black George!"

"Say, I'm standing for you, feller!" said Mesquite. "You want a side-pardner on that trail, and you only got to call on Mesquite Bill, of the Bar-One."

"That goes," said the Kid, with a nod. "I'll sure be glad of a friend in town while I'm hunting for that con scallywag. As for you, Mister Starbuck, you aimed to shoot me up, and you've slipped on it. You try the gun game agin, hombre, and you git yours, hombre, marshal or no marshal. Why, dog-gone you, I eat your sort alive, with the boots on."

Mesquite grinned, and the marshal of Kicking Mule panted with rage. It was the first time that Starbuck had been beaten to the draw and held up with his hands in the air.

The report of the Colt had drawn several onlookers to the spot. Half a dozen faces looked in at the open doorway, staring blankly at the surprising sight of the marshal standing with his hands up, covered by a puncher's gun.

Starbuck writhed with rage. The scene would be reported all over the town in an hour, and it was a severe blow to his prestige.

"Git!" he muttered. "You beat it, puncher—durn you! Git out of my office!"

"I'll sure do that, feller," said the Kid coolly. "You go your way to cinch Black George, marshal, and I'll go mine. If you don't want my help I ain't figuring on boosting it at you.

There's heap plenty galcoots in this burg will be powerful glad to lend me a hand if you won't, and I'm telling the world that I'm here to cinch that firebug who shot up the Ranger guy, and I ain't quitting till I git him."

"You're talking now!" said Mesquite. The Kid lowered his gun and stepped back to the doorway, his eyes still on the marshal of Kicking Mule. Starbuck's gun lay shattered on the floor, but the Kid figured that he likely had another weapon handy, if he had a chance to reach it. More than likely, there was a revolver ready behind his desk, out of sight.

And the Kid would not have put it past him to shoot a guy in the back. The fierce glitter in the marshal's eyes told that he was only waiting for a chance.

"Git!" said the marshal, between his teeth.

"Sure!" The punchers at the doorway stepped back to make respectful room for the Kid. The boy puncher lounged out carelessly into the street and holstered his gun.

Within, Seth Starbuck lowered his upraised hands, now that he was no longer covered by the puncher's weapon. His hard face was white with rage, his eyes burning. Never, since Seth Starbuck had first struck Kicking Mule, had he been beaten at gun-play till now. He groped under his desk for a loaded Colt that lay on a shelf there; but his right hand was still numbed, and he transferred the weapon to his left.

With a crouching step—the step of the typical gun-man—he crossed his office to the doorway and looked out into the street, dusty, and glowing under the setting sun.

A score of men had gathered at the spot, and there was a backward rush to get out of the line of fire as the marshal's white and furious face appeared in the doorway.

"Bang!" Before the marshal's Colt could single

out the boy puncher, who stood by the hitched mustang, the Kid's gun was in his hand, and its roar awoke the echoes.

The burly form of Seth Starbuck pitched forward into the street. The gun in his left hand clattered into the dust, and the marshal of Kicking Mule lay prone.

"By the great horned toad!" gasped Mesquite Bill. "The marshal's got his!"

The Kid laughed. "Not by a jugful!" he said coolly. "I guess that galoot is worth a whole lot of dead men, feller. He will sure have a pain in his cabezu when he sits up and takes notice again."

The Kid lopped Side-Kicker's reins over his arm and walked the mustang away down the street towards the hotel. An excited crowd followed him, only two or three remaining with the fallen marshal.

Five minutes later Seth Starbuck opened his eyes and stirred. He sat up dazedly, his hand to his head. His fingers came away wet and red from his hair. He stared round stupidly and caught several grinning glances. With an effort he dragged himself to his feet.

"Creased!" he muttered. The marshal of Kicking Mule gave a savage glare round at the grinning faces, staggered into his office, and slammed the door. At the timber hotel the Kid was the centre of an excited and admiring crowd. In the marshal's office a man with a bandaged head gritted his teeth and dwelt on savage thoughts of vengeance.

The Kid had located in Kicking Mule to get Black George; but the mysterious road agent was not likely to be a more bitter and vengeful enemy to the boy puncher than the marshal of Kicking Mule.

THE END.

(Things are going to be hot for the Kid—but he doesn't worry any. Don't miss next week's roaring Western yarn, entitled: "THE RIO KID'S ENEMY!")

## THE VANISHED MILLIONAIRE!

(Continued from page 12.)

Locke fired, and the heavy bullet tore through flask and hand at once, and the contents of the flask splashed over the man's face and head, and ran in rivulets down his arm.

For an instant he stood as though he couldn't realise what had happened. Then suddenly he began to scream, and, with his uninjured hand, tried to wipe the stuff from his face and sound eye, and all the time he screamed like a cat in pain. He stumbled forward, and finally blundered through the opium den and out into the passage.

Locke's face was white and grim, and Jack felt physically sick.

"Help me!" said Locke curtly. "Take his heels!"

Together they tore off the ropes that bound Sir James, and lifted him off the mattress, and laid him on the floor in an angle of the room out of range.

Locke held a small flask of brandy to his lips.

"Drink this," he said. "It's all right, we're friends."

Then faintly from above there came sounds of an uproar. Shouts and screams, and then suddenly the door leading into the den opened, and Mansfield sprang through.

He looked round him like a hunted animal. There was murder in his eyes. "Locke, by James!" yelled Mansfield, and fired. The bullet cracked past

Locke's head, and struck the wall behind. Then Locke fired, and the man fell, with a groan, and lay still.

Even as he touched the ground a second figure came through the door. It was Mark Renton.

Jack saw the gleam of steel, but that was all, for the next moment Jack's gun spat, and Renton staggered against the wall, flopped forward queerly, and slumped down in a heap.

"What's that?" cried Locke suddenly. There came the sound of shouts, mingled with heavy blows, from the passage leading up the stairs to Ah Ling's chop-shop.

"Is it—?" began Jack.

Locke nodded.

"The police? Yes, it sounds as though they are here."

The police it was. A man in blue came lumbering down the steps into the opium den, and he started at the sight of the two detectives and the wounded men, and also at the sight of the Chinese dopes in their bunks.

"Who the blazes—?"

"It's all right, constable. I am Ferrers Locke, the detective. I think you know me. This is a surprise to you, what?" said Locke. "But no more than it is to me. Tell me how you had knowledge of this place, and our intentions here?"

"We hadn't any knowledge, as a matter of fact," he explained. "But we have been detailed to keep a close watch on this place, and when I saw a fellow coming out, yelling like a fiend,

and then heard shots, and a bit of an uproar, I thought there was murder being done. So I blew my whistle, hurried in here, and, with a few chaps, we have fairly set the place on fire."

"What a bit of luck!" murmured Jack Drake, wiping the perspiration from his face.

"It is indeed a bit of luck, as you say, Jack," said Locke. "Have you made any captures upstairs, constable?"

"Yes; a chap who came in with that fellow over there a few moment's ago."

And the constable pointed to Renton.

"Logan!" muttered Locke. "That's fine!"

Then he turned towards the little room leading off the den.

"Phone the Yard, constable, for Inspector Bellow!" he ordered. "And send for the ambulance. We've got someone here who must be moved at once." And he stooped over the form of the missing millionaire.

Three weeks later, when Sir James had recovered, Locke received from him a long letter of thanks and a cheque for an amount that almost took his breath away. The man who had vanished had not forgotten.

THE END.

(Next week's DETECTIVE THRILLER is entitled: "THE AMPUR CARPET!" and contains another batch of exciting adventures and amazing situations.)

PACKED WITH QUICK ACTION, SHARP SHOOTING, AND RED-HOT ADVENTURE IN THE WEST!

# THE RIO KID'S ENEMY!

By Ralph Redway.

There's a two-gun, sharp-shooting guy waiting in hiding for the Rio Kid's blood!

## THE FIRST CHAPTER. Crowding the Kid!

"**S**AY, bub!" Mesquite Bill, the long-limbed foreman of the Bar-One Ranch, lounged across the big room of the Golden Mule Hotel, and stopped at the table where the Rio Kid was eating his supper.

There was a shade of anxiety on the burly cowman's rugged, bearded face. The Kid looked up, smiling.

There was a big crowd in the timber hotel of Kicking Mule, and the attention of most of them was concentrated on the handsome young puncher who sat at the trestle table.

The Rio Kid had struck Kicking Mule only that day; but he was already the most talked-of guy in the cow-town.

The puncher who had made an attempt to trail down Black George, the red-agent, and who had had a shooting affray with the marshal of Kicking Mule, could not fail to attract attention.

The Rio Kid was, in fact, the cynosure of all eyes just at present.

Not that so much publicity pleased the Kid. Kicking Mule was far from the Rio Grande and the Pecos, where the Kid was best known; but there was always a chance of recognition if he got too much attention. And the sensation the Kid had made in the cow-town would certainly have been increased had any galoot recognised him as the outlaw of the Rio Grande.

"Say, bub, you want to watch out," said Mesquite Bill, as he stopped at the Kid's table.

"How come?" asked the Kid.

"I guess the marshal is coming."

"Sho!" said the Kid indifferently.

His glance passed the burly cowman towards the wide doorway, outside which a naphtha lamp flared into the night.

Four or five figures moved outside the doorway, and among them the Kid's keen eye picked out Seth Starbuck, the marshal of Kicking Mule.

The marshal had a bandaged head under his Stetson hat, and a black and bitter expression on his hard face.

"Looking for this coon?" asked the Kid cheerfully.

"Sure."

"That Seth Starbuck is sure one hog," said the Kid. "He don't know when he's had enough."

"I guess," said Mesquite, "that you're the first guy that's ever beaten Starbuck at gun-play. You sure ought to have put that bullet through his cabeza, instead of jest creasing him like a steer, hombre."

The Kid laughed.

"Oh, shucks!" he said. "I came hyer to run down that firebug, Black George, not to shoot up the town marshal. I'm sure a peaceable galoot when I'm let be."

"The marshal ain't the guy to take it

lying down," said Mesquite, "and he's got three of his deputies with him; and I reckon he's going to run you into the calaboose, feller."

"I reckon not!" said the Kid.

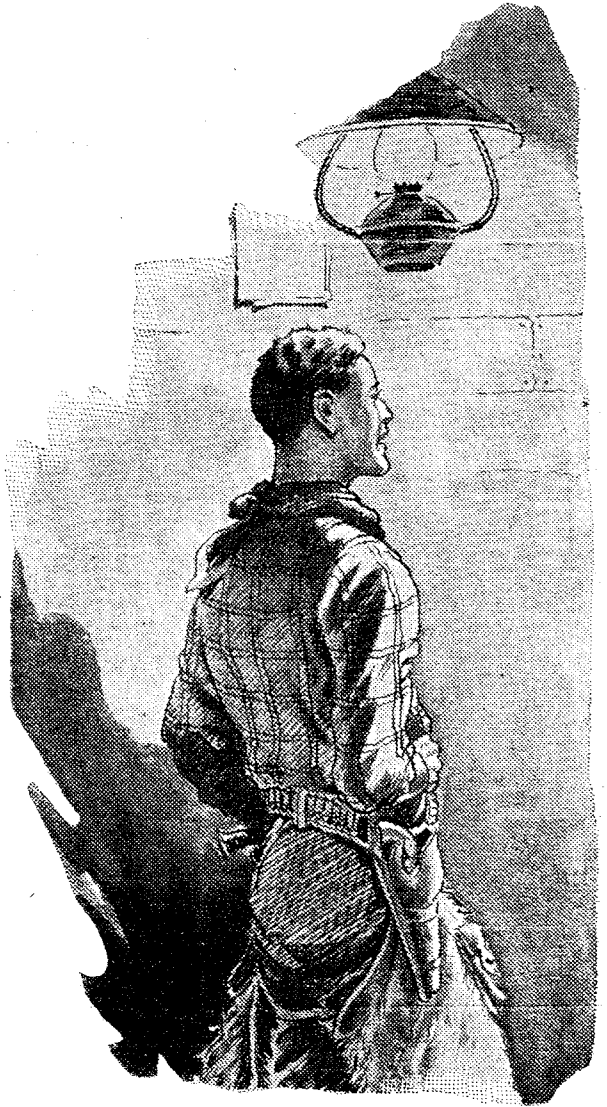
He laid down knife and fork and rose to his feet. The Kid had not finished his supper yet; but there was more pressing business than supper on hand. He hitched his holsters a little forward, to bring the walnut-butted guns nearer to his hands. It was evident that he was going to want them.

Why the marshal of Kicking Mule had forced a quarrel on him and forced him into gun-play, the Kid did not know, and he wondered a lot. The man was a bully and a gunman; about the toughest town marshal that the Kid had ever struck in any part of Texas. Still, it was strange enough that even a reckless gunman, who was also a town marshal, should have forced trouble on a guy who had come to help him run down the road-agent who was the terror of the Kicking Mule country.

Whatever Starbuck's reason was, there was no doubt about the fact. He had tried to shoot up the boy puncher and failed disastrously, and now he was coming to look for more trouble. The Kid would have been glad to steer clear of trouble in the cow-town, but he was ready to give the marshal all he wanted.

Starbuck came tramping into the big room, with his three deputies behind him. They came directly towards the Rio Kid, and the crowd opened to let them pass, and to keep out of the line of fire if shooting started.

The marshal was not touching a gun. He had already learned how swift the Kid was on the draw, and he had apparently fallen back on his official position as upholder of the law in Kicking Mule for dealing with the puncher who had beaten him at gunplay.



"Say, marshal," Mesquite Bill broke in before Starbuck could speak. "Say, you don't want to get your mad up. This hyer galoot is sure a white man from the toes up, and you got to allow that you pulled on him first in that little rookus at your office."

"Mind your own business, Mesquite!" growled the marshal.

He stepped past the big cowman, and fixed his eyes on the Kid.

The Kid smiled gently.

He was watching the marshal and his men like a cat, ready to draw and fire at the first sign of attack.

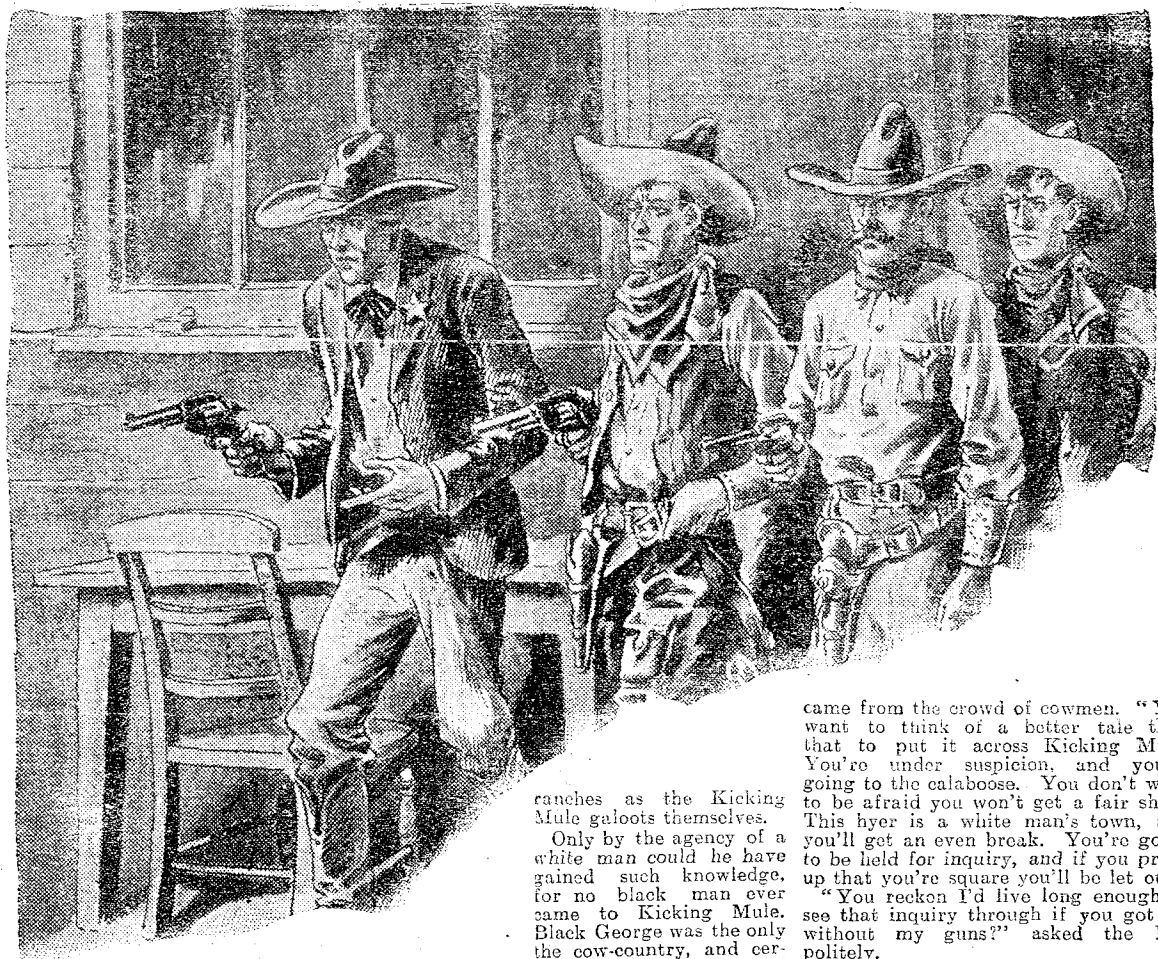
"Evening, marshal," he said politely. "You looking for a guy about my size?"

"You're wanted!" said Starbuck.

"Well, here I am, marshal."

"You'll hand over your guns—by the barrels, and hoof it along to the calaboose," said the marshal. "You're arrested."

"What's the charge?" asked the Kid. "You howling because you came out at



the little end of the horn, when you tried to get away with gunplay and slipped up on it?"

"You're arrested on suspicion," said Starbuck.

The Kid felt a momentary chill. If this hard-faced, gun-slinging lobo-wolf of a town marshal had got wise to it that he was the Rio Kid—the outlaw on whose head was a reward of a thousand dollars—

But he was relieved the next moment. To Starbuck's eyes, as to all other eyes in Kicking Mule, he was only what he looked—a boy puncher, who was uncommonly slick with his guns.

"You're a stranger hyer, and you hump into town with a tale of trailing Black George, the road-agent," said Starbuck. "Waal, I've suspicioned for a long time that that nigger trail-thief has got some side-pardner who's a white man and puts him wise to things. And I guess it looks powerful like you was that side-pardner."

There was a murmur from the crowd of cowmen, and many keen and suspicious eyes were turned on the Kid.

It had long been suspected in Kicking Mule that Black George, the mysterious negro who had haunted the trails for years, and had more robberies and murders to his credit than he had fingers and toes, had some confederate who gave him information.

It was certain that Black George seemed always wise to any attempt that was made to hunt him down; that he knew in advance when any valuable plunder was on the trails; that he had as much knowledge of the business of the cow-town and the surrounding

ranches as the Kicking Mule galoots themselves.

Only by the agency of a white man could he have gained such knowledge, for no black man ever came to Kicking Mule. Black George was the only the cow-country, and certainly "coon" in that section of ranches as the Kicking Mule galoots themselves.

The Kid's eyes glittered.

The marshal, in throwing this suspicion on the Kid, had taken up a stronger position than he could have obtained by gun-play. He had already failed at gun-play, and now he was playing a safer and surer card.

A silence followed his words.

It was broken by Mesquite Bill.

"Marshal, I guess you're after the wrong cayuse," said the foreman of Bar-One. "This hyer kid puncher turned up on the trail when Black George was holding up the stage, and went after the road-agent—and Jerry Cook can tell you so."

"Sure!" said the stage-driver. "That's straight, marshal. He went after the road-agent, and I reckoned he was going to his own funeral."

Starbuck laughed scoffingly.

"I guess that was eyewash," he said. "He fooled you easy."

"Aw, forget it," said the Kid. "I did trail that firebug, Black George, and he got away; but I sure followed his trail, and it led me right into this hyer town, like I told you, marshal."

"You won't get any guy here to believe that Black George rode into Kicking Mule in the daylight," said Starbuck derisively. "If he did, who's seen him?"

"It's got me beat," said the Kid. "But that hoss' trail wasn't telling no lies! He sure rode into Kicking Mule."

"Aw, can it!" said the marshal impatiently, while a murmur of incredulity

came from the crowd of cowmen. "You want to think of a better tale than that to put it across Kicking Mule. You're under suspicion, and you're going to the calaboose. You don't want to be afraid you won't get a fair show. This hyer is a white man's town, and you'll get an even break. You're going to be held for inquiry, and if you prove up that you're square you'll be let out."

"You reckon I'd live long enough to see that inquiry through if you got me without my guns?" asked the Kid politely.

"We've got law in this town," said the marshal, scowling.

"I guess I ain't banking a whole lot on the law, with you for the only law officer," grinned the Kid. "I sure do opine that once I gave up my hardware somebody's gun would go off accidental-like, and I should get mine sudden! I surely do reckon so, marshal; and I guess I'm freezing on to these guns like they was glued to me!"

The marshal drew a deep breath.

"You ain't surrendering to the law?" he demanded.

"Not this evening!" smiled the Kid.

"Then I call on all the men of Kicking Mule to help seize you in the name of the law!" exclaimed Seth Starbuck, "and if you reckon your guns will help you agin all this town, you're welcome to take the chance."

The marshal looked round on the crowd—more than two score of cowmen from the surrounding ranches.

"Boys, you hear me yaup? I accuse that puncher of being in cahoots with Black George, who shot up the ranger lieutenant on the Juniper trail to-day. He's my prisoner, and I call on every guy present to help arrest him."

There was a stirring in the crowd, and a buzz of many voices. The Kid's face set like iron, and his hands crept to his guns. At the same moment a tall man in a Stetson hat entered the Golden Mule with a jingle of spurs, and Mesquite Bill shouted:

"Hyer comes the boss! Marshal, I guess the boss of the Bar-One will have suthin' to say about this!"

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

## The Marshal's Defeat!

COLONEL SANDERSON, boss of the Bar-One Ranch, glanced at the buzzing crowd gathered by the long trestle table, on the other side of which the Rio Kid stood, his hands on his guns.

He came swiftly over to the scene. The boss of the Bar-One was a tall man, with a bronzed face, rugged features, and a grizzled beard. The Bar-One was the biggest ranch in the Kicking Mule country, and the colonel a man of weight in the cow-town. Six or seven of the cowmen in the crowd belonged to his outfit, as well as Mesquite Bill.

"Say, you-uns, what's the rookus here?" asked Sanderson, in a deep voice, looking from face to face and frowning a little at the marshal and his deputies.

Whether the crowd had aimed to back up the marshal's call was a little uncertain, but if so they stood off as the boss of the Bar-One chipped in.

"You got no call to horn in hyer, Sanderson," said Seth Starbuck. "I guess I'm arresting a suspicious character, as town marshal, and toting him along to the calaboose. That's all."

"Who's the guy?" asked the rancher, with a glance at the handsome, sun-burnt face of the Rio Kid.

"I guess he calls himself Two-gun Carson; I'll say he's likely got as many names as he has toes," sneered the marshal.

The Kid smiled.

"I reckon a galoot's name don't matter a whole lot, s'long's a galoot's a white man," he said amiably.

"Mesquite, ain't that the guy that went after Black George on the trail, after the ranger was shot up?" asked the rancher.

"You've said it, sir."

The rancher's rather stern and grim face lighted, and he stepped towards the Kid and stretched out a hand across the trestle table.

"Shake!" he said.

"See here, Sanderson——" shouted the marshal.

Colonel Sanderson, unheeding, shook hands with the Rio Kid, who gave him the shake willingly enough. Then he turned to the marshal.

"Forget it, Starbuck," he said tersely. "If you're aiming to arrest suspicious characters, I guess you want to get after Black George, not after the guy who took a hand agin him."

"I should smile!" said Mesquite Bill.

The action and words of the rancher decided the matter for the Kicking Mule crowd. The Bar-One punchers moved forward, but it was to gather round their boss, with the evident intention of backing him in any trouble with the town marshal. The rest of the crowd receded a little.

Starbuck gritted his teeth.

"I'll tell a man that guy is in cahoots with Black George, and he's come hyer as the road-agent's spy in the town!" he snarled.

"What you got to back that up?" demanded the rancher. "We're all wise to it that Black George has got a spy in the town, seeing that a nigger can't horn in without being spotted to once. But what you got to back up putting it on this puncher?"

"He came in with a lie about trailing the road-agent, and started a rookus at my office," said the marshal sullenly. "I ain't saying he's guilty; I'm saying he's going to be held on suspicion, giving us time to inquire. That's the idea."

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"Aw, can it!" drawled the Kid. "You started the rookus, and slipped up on it, and never remembered that you was marshal till you found that you couldn't get away with it with your gun."

"An' that's the frozen truth," said Mesquite.

Some of the crowd laughed, and the marshal scowled savagely.

"You going to rope in every stranger that rides into town, on suspicion of being in cahoots with Black George, marshal?" asked the rancher contemptuously. "Forget it! If you want to get busy, get after Black George. That firebug has been cavorting around Kicking Mule all the while you've been town marshal, and I guess that ain't less'n four years. He shot up a man on the trail to-day; and it's your call to be after him, not roping in a stranger that looks a square man."

"The boss is sure talking now!" grinned Mesquite Bill. "Why ain't you roping in Black George, marshal, if you want to get busy?"

Seth Starbuck rapped out an oath.

"I guess the way to get Black George is to get hold of his side-pardner and make him squeal!" he said. "That puncher can tell us, if he likes, where the road-agent hides in the hills."

"Not by a jugful!" said the Kid.

"Guff!" snapped the rancher. "I've heard how you started trouble with that puncher, Starbuck; and you're sure using your office as marshal to get back on him because you slipped up on gun-play. I'll tell you, any man that is after Black George is my friend, and I'm standing for him."

"I guess I'm marshal of this town, and I'm arresting that hombre!" said Seth Starbuck, between his teeth. "You can't horn in here, rancher!"

"I guess I can horn in a few, and then some more!" retorted Sanderson. "You ain't no great shakes of a marshal, Starbuck, seeing that you can't handle Black George. I've told you so before, and I tell you so again. Some of us sent for the ranger, because you couldn't handle your job. The ranger's got shot up, and you're the galoot to get the man that did it. Get him before you talk so much."

"I'm taking that man, and I call on all the galoots present to help if he draws his guns!" said the marshal.

"Bar-One boys, stand by your boss!" rapped out the colonel.

"You bet!"

"Now, Seth Starbuck, there's a bunch you've got to walk over before you lay a paw on that puncher," said the rancher determinedly. "I guess you better think again."

The marshal's eyes blazed with rage.

There had never been any love lost between the ruffianly marshal of Kicking Mule and the boss of the Bar-One. And his failure to rope in the black road-agent who had ridden the trails for years round Kicking Mule had got the goat of the rancher, and caused him to treat Starbuck with open contempt. But for the fact that he was a big rancher, with a numerous and devoted outfit, Sanderson would have found trouble before with the marshal. Now it looked as if the ill-feeling between the two was coming to a head.

"I'm taking that man!" said Starbuck, in a choking voice.

"Get on with it, then," said the rancher coolly. "My bunch and I are standing for him, you want to know."

"You standing agin the law?" hissed Starbuck.

"Shucks for the law!" snapped the rancher. "You ain't toting that guy to the calaboose to get up a lynch crowd to string him up when he's handed over his guns, I guess I know your game,

Starbuck. You got a grouch agin him, and you don't believe he's in cahoots with Black George any more'n I do."

"Ain't he sure spilling a whole jugful?" chuckled Mesquite.

The marshal's hand slid to his gun. In his rage he seemed determined to start trouble.

But the three deputies behind him, accustomed as they were to backing up his play, were flinching now. Colonel



Sanderson was too big a man in Kicking Mule to be defied; and his half-dozen punchers had their guns drawn now—Mesquite a gun in either hand. Had the trouble started, the marshal and his men had no chance. The marshal's only chance was that the crowd would back him; and one glance at them showed that they had no idea of entering into a wild affray with the Bar-One boss and his bunch.

Enraged as he was, the marshal of Kicking Mule realized that there was nothing to it. His hand left his gun.

It was well for him, for the Rio Kid was watching him like a cat. The marshal would not have lived long enough to use his gun if he had drawn it.

"Forget it, marshal, and get to your job—which is roping in Black George," said the rancher.

"I guess that hombre will keep!" said Starbuck. "You and your bunch won't be around all the time to stand for him, dog-gone you!"

"You've said it," agreed the rancher. "I came into town to-day to meet the ranger, and I'm riding out to-night." He turned to the Kid. "Say, puncher, this town won't be healthy for you; Starbuck here has got it in his pocket. If you ain't got business in Kicking Mule, it'll be healthy for you to get on your cayuse to-night and hit the trail."

"I've got business," said the Kid. "I'll hit this town to pick up sign on

Black George, and I ain't hitting any old trail till I've cinched that dog-goned firebug!"

"You're talking now," said the rancher. "But how come you figure you'll pick up sign on Black George in the town?"

"I sure followed his boss' trail from the hills, and it led me plumb into Kicking Mule," answered the Kid.

"That's the story he pitched me at my office!" jeered the marshal. "I'll say it's a plumb lie."

The rancher looked puzzled.

"You're sure missing your guess, puncher," he said. "Black George never rode into this town. I guess he'd have been shot to pieces as soon as he showed his face hyer."

"I don't rightly get on to it," said the Kid. "But the trail led me into Kicking Mule, and there ain't no

Black George's side-pardner," he said. "Colonel, I'll say you're a dog-goned bonthead to stand for that cuss; but I ain't gunning after you and your bunch. That durned scallywag will keep!"

And with a sign to his men to follow, the marshal strode out of the Golden Mule.

His deputies followed him, and they disappeared. The marshal of Kicking Mule had scored a defeat, for the first time since he had been marshal of the cow-town. That, as every man in the building knew, was not the end of it. Starbuck was not the guy to take defeat lying down, and his next move was likely to be prompt, and fatal to the boy puncher who had defied him.

The Kid did not seem alarmed, however. He sat down to finish his interrupted supper, and Colonel Sanderson dropped into a seat opposite him. The

"Seth Starbuck's sure madder'n a hornet, with that firebug Black George defying him, and the whole town wanting to know why he don't rope the coon in," he said. "He's a bad man to cross, puncher, and you want to keep your eyes peeled."

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

"You looking for a job in this country? I sure got room for a good man on the Bar-One!" said the rancher.

"I'm looking for Black George, rancher. It sure got my goat the way he shot up that ranger guy; and I guess I ain't punching cows till I got that dog-goned scallywag."

"That's talking!" agreed the rancher. "But I guess you'll live longer to trail Black George if you come on my ranch, than if you freeze on to this town. The marshal sure will get you sooner or later; and it'll be easy for him to raise a lynch crowd with a tale about Black George."

The Kid nodded thoughtfully. Now that the marshal of Kicking Mule was his deadly enemy, the Kid realised clearly enough that the cow-town was likely to prove a deathtrap to him. Starbuck had made a cunning move in accusing the Kid of being the road-agent's confederate, and a lynch crowd was not likely to listen to reason.

"You're sure talking hoss-sense, rancher," said the Kid, after a pause. "I'll sign on to your outfit and glad, and I guess you'll find that I can earn my corn on a ranch. But you'll give me time to get after that firebug and take it off the pay."

"Every man on the Bar-One will back you in getting after Black George, from the boss to the ranch cook," said Colonel Sanderson. "Say, it's a cinch, and you'll get your cayuse and ride out to the ranch with me at ten. That suit you?"

"Suits me fine," said the Kid.

And he finished his supper, rather pleased with the prospect before him. Fate had made the Kid an outlaw; he was a puncher at heart, and his heart was light at the prospect of mingling once more with a bunch of punchers in the bunkhouse of a ranch.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Shot on the Trail!

**U**NDER the bright stars of Texas the Rio Kid saddled up Side-Kicker at ten o'clock.

Colonel Sanderson's horse was brought round to the front by a stableman. The rancher came out and joined the Kid. In the doorway stood Mesquite Bill and the other Bar-One punchers, to see their boss off. Their leave was not up till the following day.

The Kid's eyes swept the rugged, irregular street of Kicking Mule. He would not have been surprised at gun-play under the stars; and he did not look for an even break from Seth Starbuck.

But there was no sign of hostility, and



As the two horsemen entered the clearing, there came a roar of a six-gun, mingled with a cry from Colonel Sanderson as he reeled back in his saddle. "Black George!" panted the Kid.

mistake about that. It was the trail of Black George's cayuse all the way."

"Mebbe he changed hosses with another galoot in the hills," suggested Mesquite.

"Mebbe," assented the Kid; "and if it was that-a-way, it was the trail of his side-pardner that I followed into town."

The marshal of Kicking Mule gave a gruff, scornful laugh.

"I'll tell the world that it's you that's

threatened "rookus" was over, and the rancher and the boy puncher were left to themselves. The rancher's keen eyes, under his grizzled brows, read the handsome, sunburnt face before him.

"I guess I'm owing you a whole heap of thanks, rancher," said the Kid. "It sure did look like a bigger trouble than I could handle on my own when you horned in."

Sanderson smiled,

the Kid mounted his mustang to ride with the rancher to the Bar-One. Sanderson looked at Side-Kicker with an approving eye.

"That's sure some cayuse," he said. "You can tell the world he is, sir," said the Kid. But he felt a twinge of uneasiness as the rancher scanned the mustang. Side-Kicker was painted with brown stockings—the Kid's grey mustang was almost as well known as the Kid himself—and the Kid wondered for a moment whether the rancher's keen eyes were penetrating the horse's disguise. But the rancher swung himself to the saddle of his pinto without further comment, and, with a terse good-bye to his men in the doorway, cantered down the rugged street with the boy puncher.

The way lay through the town to the open trail on the western side, and so took the riders past the marshal's frame-house and office. The Kid's eyes were very wary as he rode by the building where, earlier in the day, his shooting affray with Starbuck had taken place. He wanted no more trouble with the marshal of Kicking Mule; but he knew that the trouble must come sooner or later, and he would not have been surprised by a shot from the shadows.

But the house and the office were dark; either the marshal was gone to bed, or he was elsewhere. The horse-men rode past the building, and left the cow-town behind them.

For a distance the way lay over an open prairie, glimmering in the shine of the bright stars. The horse-men rode side by side, speaking little; each busy with his thoughts. Black George, the road-agent, was the subject of their thoughts. The Kid was determined not to quit the Kicking Mule country till he had rounded up the black trail-thief. He had taken that resolution when the merciless ruffian shot up the ranger on the Juniper trail; but he was realising more clearly now the magnitude of the task he had set himself. And that task, difficult as it was, was made more so by the bitter enmity of the man who represented the law in the Kicking Mule country.

Sanderson's thoughts were running on the same subject. The mysterious black robber had defied the law so long that Sanderson, with several other ranchers, had taken the matter into their own hands, passing over the head of the marshal. They had sent for the Texas ranger lieutenant to take up the matter, only to learn that he had been shot dead on the trail by the black road-agent. How had Black George learned of his coming? That was a problem that the rancher tried in vain to solve. It pointed to a confederate of the trail-thief in Kicking Mule; yet it was not easy to see how the spy had got wise to a secret known only to four men—three ranchers and the marshal.

"I guess that black scallywag ain't getting away with it," said the rancher, breaking the silence suddenly. "I guess I'll move all Texas but what I'll see him strung up to a limb. Starbuck's no good to handle him, and I've told him so. I'll sure get a better man here than Starbuck. I reckon it's time Kicking Mule got a new marshal, and I guess plenty guys will back me in turning Starbuck down."

"He sure is some slouch of a marshal," agreed the Kid.

"I've told him what to look for," said the rancher grimly. "He knows that I'm against him now, and I've got influence enough in this section to see him run out of his office. Kicking Mule

is sure going to have a new town marshal before long."

He relapsed again into thought, and rode on in silence.

From the open prairie in the starlight the trail ran through a belt of post-oaks and pecans, where the shadows lay thick. Here and there, among the smaller trees, a giant cottonwood reared its mighty branches.

The trail was scarcely marked, and deep in shadow. Far away on the rim of the prairie was the glimmering crescent of the rising moon. But as yet there was only a glimmer of moonlight.

But the rancher knew well the trail he had ridden scores of times, and he rode on at a steady trot, the Kid a little behind.

From the darkness of the branches the riders emerged into a clearing, where the starlight and a glimmer of the moon fell more brightly.

At the same moment they sighted a horseman ahead of them on the trail.

He sat his horse motionless under a tree on the opposite side of the clearing, deep in shadow, facing them as they came.

But through the branches over him starlight filtered, and gleamed on a black negro face half-hidden by a Stetson hat.

The rider, wrapped in the ample folds of a Mexican serape, was hidden; only his black face showing, with the eyes gleaming under thick, overhanging brows.

As the two horse-men emerged into the clearing, and even as their eyes fell on him, the right hand of the black rider shot up from the folds of his serape with a six-gun in it.

Bang! Mingled with the roar of the six-gun came a cry from Colonel Sanderson, as he reeled back in his saddle.

The Rio Kid panted.

"Black George!"

It had all passed like a flash; in less than a second after the black rider was sighted the rancher was falling from his horse, shot through the body.

But the next second the Kid's gun was in his hand, and he was shooting.

He spurred on his mustang as he fired, careless of bullets from the black horse-man, and of the bullets that tore across his cheek and nipped away cloth from his shirt.

But the road-agent, the instant he had pulled trigger on the rancher, plunged headlong into the thickets and rode hard.

A savage laugh floated back from the darkness, followed by the crashing of the black horse, as the escaping road-agent drove him rapidly through pecan and post-oak and juniper.

Swift as the Kid's shooting was, the road-agent had vanished into the blackness too soon.

His teeth gritted, his eyes burning with rage, the Kid dashed after him, pumping out shots at the fugitive.

But the pursuit, in the darkness and the tangled underbrush, was almost hopeless, and the shooting was at random. Even so, the Kid would have kept it up relentlessly, but for the thought of the rancher. Sanderson had crashed down from his horse, sorely wounded if not dead; and the Kid could not abandon him while he hunted the outlaw through the brush.

With bitter chagrin, the Kid pulled in his mustang and rode back to the trail. Faintly in the distant darkness the crashing of Black George's horse died away.

The Kid's teeth were set with rage as he rode back. It was the second time he had sighted Black George, the second

time that the mysterious trail-thief had escaped him. And he feared what he would find when he rejoined the rancher. Black George—who seemed to be wise to all that went on in Kicking Mule—had known that the rancher would be riding home by that lonely trail that night, and had lain in wait for him. No doubt he knew that Colonel Sanderson, who had taken the lead in sending for the ranger lieutenant, was his most dangerous enemy in the section, and he had aimed to shoot him up as mercilessly as he had shot up the ranger. The Kid, probably, he had taken for one of the colonel's bunch riding home with him in the shadowy gloom.

A tattoo of hoofs died away on the trail as the Kid rode back to the clearing where the rancher had fallen. The frightened horse had galloped off, leaving his master lying in the trail.

The Kid pulled in Side-Kicker and leaped to the ground. He bent anxiously over the fallen man.

"Say, rancher, you got it bad?"

There was no answer from the boss of the Bar-One. He lay still and silent, his upturned face gleaming ghastly in the glimmer of the stars.

"Carry me home to die!" muttered the Kid. "I surely guess that this guy had got his!"

The Kid, with swift and deft fingers, examined the rancher's wound. The shirt, as he opened it, was drenched with blood. The bullet had passed through the chest, and the Kid guessed that the damage was serious. The colonel was quite insensible, and seemed scarcely to breathe. But he was a strong and fit man, and the Kid figured that he had a chance to pull through, with prompt attention. Prompt attention the Kid gave him. His wild life had taught him a rough surgery, and in his slicker pack he had bandages. It was not long before the wound was skilfully bound up and the flow of blood stopped.

But still the rancher's eyes did not open and the Kid rose to his feet, his face almost haggard with anxiety and uncertainty. The colonel's horse was gone, galloping madly back down the trail to Kicking Mule. Side-Kicker stood waiting; but to lift the wounded man to the saddle and lead him back to the cow-town, was impossible—the movement would have cost the rancher his life. Only in a litter could he be moved from the spot and live—even if that would save him.

What do was a question that beat the Kid, accustomed as he was to emergencies and dealing with them. To leave the rancher where he was and gallop back to Kicking Mule for help was his first thought, but he could not leave the wounded man alone, lying insensible in the trail at the mercy of Black George if he should return to finish his work; at the mercy of the savage coyotes of the chaparral. He could not leave him—he had to stand by him. Yet help to carry him either to the cow-town or to his ranch was urgently needed; and the trail was lonely—no man was likely to be riding it till morning.

The Kid stood in doubt.

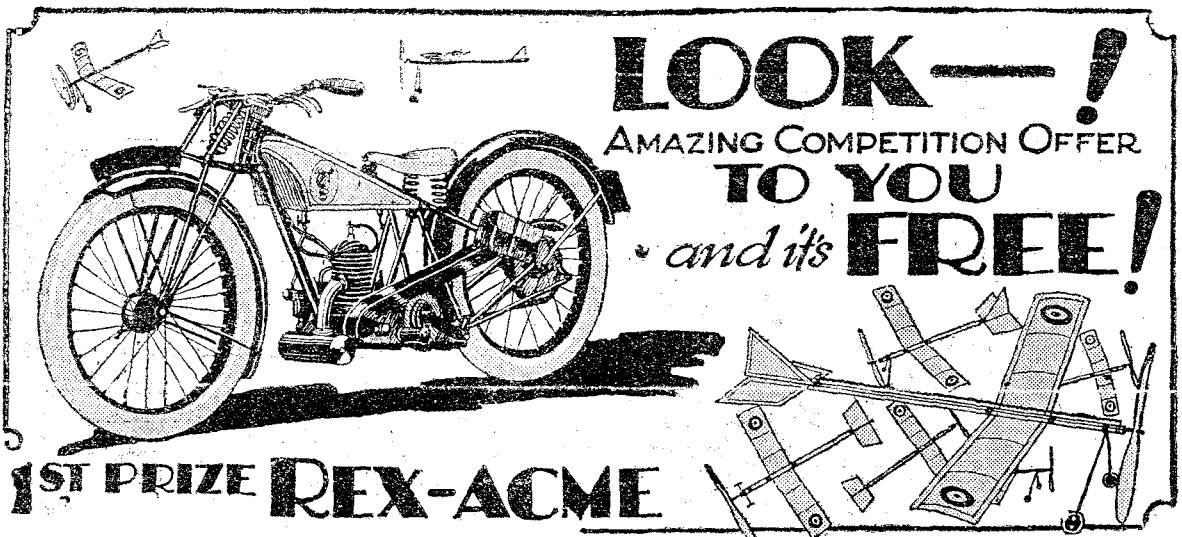
As he stood there came from the shadows of the brush the long-drawn howl of a coyote, answered at once by howls from different directions.

That settled it for the Kid. He had to remain and watch over the man who lay insensible at his feet, and long for dawn.

THE END.

(Some tight corner this, for the Kid. But he's been in worse and got away. See next week's roaring yarn of the West!)





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**MOTOR-BIKE**

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**H**ERE'S a ripping new competition for you, and one in which every fellow has an equal opportunity of winning the superb first prize—which is nothing less than a "Rex-Acme" Motor-Cycle—ready for the road. There is nothing at all to pay, and winners *must* be found for the prizes. So don't hesitate—come in and start winning **NOW!**

The contest is as simple as A. B. C. All you have to do is to solve a few easy puzzles denoting boys' Christian names, names which boys use every day in speaking to one another. Take the first puzzle, for instance—it clearly portrays its name **WILLIAM** and that name has been filled in for you. In the same way see if you can solve the seven remaining puzzles. They are all thoroughly easy, but to make the contest fair and equal for every competitor, we give you on page 13 the Full List of Names in which you can find the solution to every puzzle throughout the entire contest. So you really only have to fit the right name to each picture.

As you find the answers write them **IN INK** in the spaces provided underneath. Then cut out this set and keep it until next week, when the second set will appear. The competition will last for four weeks in all, and with the final set full directions for the sending in of your entries will be given.

**RULES (which must be strictly adhered to).**

**T**HE "Rex-Acme" Motor-Cycle will be awarded to the reader whose solution of the four sets of "Who's Who" puzzles are correct or most nearly correct—the 50 Model Aeroplanes following in order of merit.

In the event of ties the Editor reserves the right to divide the value of the prizes as he thinks best, but no competitor may receive more than one prize. The Editor's decision will be final and binding. You may send in as many attempts as you like, but only complete attempts made out **IN INK** on the "Who's Who" picture-sets, Nos. 1 to 4, inclusive, will be considered.

Only one name may be written under each picture. Entries mutilated or bearing alterations or alternative solutions will be disqualified. No correspondence will be allowed. Proof of posting will not be accepted as proof of delivery, and no responsibility can be taken for entries lost, or mislaid, or delayed in the post or otherwise.

Employees of the proprietors of the **POPULAR** and of "Modern Boy," in which the contest is also running, must not compete.

"WHOS WHO" SET I.	
1.	2.
WILLIAM	JACK
3.	4.
5.	6.
7.	8.

You can find the answers to all these Pictures in the List of Names on Page 13!

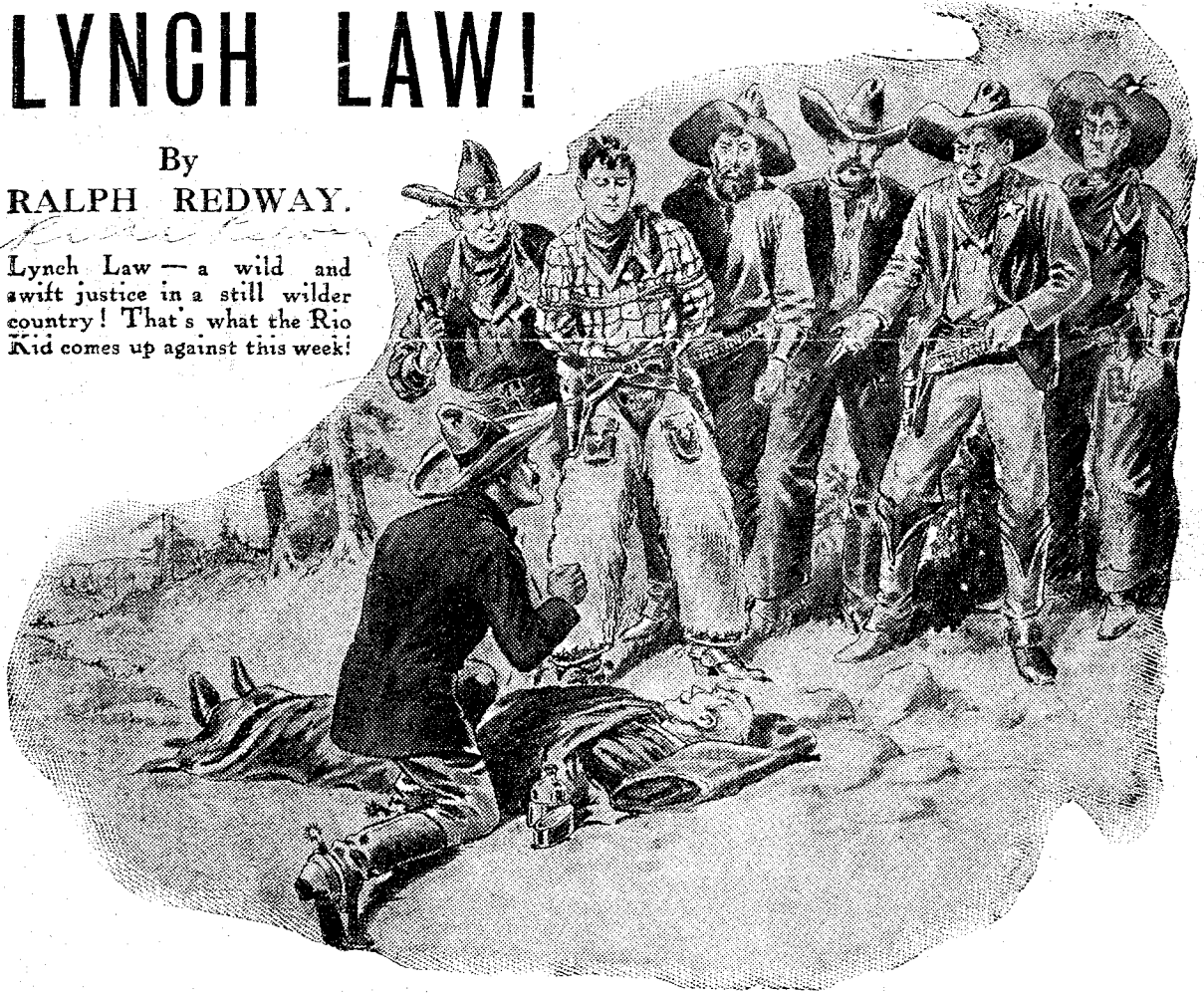
GEE, BOYS! THE RIO KID'S IN A TIGHT CORNER!

# LYNCH LAW!

By

RALPH REDWAY.

Lynch Law—a wild and swift justice in a still wilder country! That's what the Rio Kid comes up against this week!



## THE FIRST CHAPTER.

### Watching in the Night!

**T**HE flash of the six-gun in the shadows of the pecans was warning enough for the Rio Kid. He was in the grass as the bullet whizzed, and the roar of the Colt followed. The whizzing lead grazed his Stetson hat as he dropped; it was as close a call as the Kid had ever had.

Like an echo of the report, came the answering roar of the Kid's own gun, the bullet smashing through boughs and leaves. A startled yelp from his assailant told that the shot had gone near, though the Kid had had nothing but the flash of the revolver to guide his aim. There was a crackling of the brush as the enemy backed hastily into deeper cover, and for an instant, in the filtering starlight through the branches, the Kid had a glimpse of a black face, and a figure wrapped in a serape. He fired at it on the instant, but swift as was the shot, the man in the brush was swifter. He vanished into the darkness.

The Kid gritted his teeth. Twice he fired into the brush after his elusive enemy, but he knew that he was wasting his lead. He half rose, to rush in pursuit of his foe, but sank back again. He dared not leave the spot with the wounded rancher lying there, insensible and helpless and utterly defenceless if the Kid left him.

"Black George!" said the Kid, between his teeth. "That dog-goned lobo-wolf! Dog-gone my cats, I guess I'd

give all the cows in Texas, jest to draw a bead on that all-fired scallywag." Deep in the thick grass, by the side of the insensible boss of the Bar-One ranch, the Kid lay, watching and waiting.

He lay in the clearing, circled round by the thick brush—not a position the Kid would have chosen, if he could have helped it.

It was there that Colonel Sanderson, the boss of the Bar-One, had fallen from his horse when the road-agent shot him down, and there that the Kid had to remain to guard him.

Only a mile out of Kicking Mule, on the trail to the Bar-One, Black George had ambushed the rancher, but the mile might have been a hundred miles, for anything the Kid could do. He could not leave the wounded man for a minute, lest the desperado should return to finish his murderous work—as now he had tried to do.

The Kid waited, and longed for dawn. After daylight, men would be riding the trail, Mesquite Bill and the Bar-One punchers would be returning to the ranch from the cow-town. Until someone came along the trail, the Kid was chained to the spot. And the dewy shadowy brush circling round the clearing gave his enemy every chance against him. The Kid could only hug the thick grass, listen for a sound from his foe, watch for the flash of a gun, and fire at a stirring branch or a rustling twig. They were grim moments, even for the Kid, whose constant companion was danger.

A distant sound came to his ears. It was the tramping of a horse far away in the scrub.

The Kid figured that Black George had got wise to it that there was nothing doing, and had gone back to his horse and hit the trail. But he could not be sure. Earlier he had listened to the trail-thief riding away in the distance, and the desperado had crept back on foot through the brush, and very nearly cinched him. It might be the same trick over again. The Kid waited and watched like a lynx.

Silence followed the dying away of the hoof-beats.

Only a faint rustle of the wind in the branches came to the Kid's ears; and occasionally the weird howl of a coyote skulking in the brush. A rustle—and the Kid's gun roared. But it was only the snapping of a twig.

The Kid passed his hand over his forehead. There were beads of perspiration under the brim of the Stetson, though the night was cold.

"Dog-gone it!" the Kid muttered savagely.

He looked at the rancher, motionless, terribly still, in the glimmer of the stars. The moon was coming up over the prairie now, and the light grew in the clearing among the trees of the timber belt. It shone down on Sanderson's set white face. The rancher still breathed, but that was all. The Kid had done all that he could for him, the wound was skilfully and carefully

sandaged. A litter was needed to carry him back to Kicking Mule; to the care of the cow-town doctor. The Kid could only wait. Side-Kicker lay by his side in the grass, quiet though not sleeping. Under the glimmer of the moon and the stars, the Kid waited wearily, longing for dawn as he never had longed before.

Would day never come? The minutes dragged by on leaden wings. It came hopefully into the Kid's mind that help might come before dawn. The rancher's horse had galloped away when his master fell, back down the trail to Kicking Mule. If the pinto reached the cow-town, the arrival of Sanderson's horse without its rider would surely cause alarm. Seth Starbuck, the marshal, was not likely to stir himself—he was the rancher's enemy. But there were Bar-One punchers in Kicking Mule that night, and at the first hint of danger to their boss they would mount and ride. The Kid hoped.

But it was long since the runaway horse had fled, and there was no sound or sign of any man on the trail. More likely, the Kid bitterly reflected, the cayuse had wandered into the prairie, or if he had reached Kicking Mule, he had reached the sleeping town unheeded.

Would day never come?

The Kid was fatigued, but fatigue was little to him. Lying there in the grass under the moon, circled by the shadowy brush, he was a target for Black George if the road-agent returned. But there was no hint of the black robber's return. This time, it seemed, he had gone for good. That spelled safety to the Kid, but he was sorry for it. Even with the chances heavily against him, he would have been glad to get to a cinch with the terror of the cow country.

But his enemy did not come, and the long, long night faded at last into dawn. Never had the Rio Kid heard so gladly the chirrup of the cicadas.

Dawn at last, glimmering over the clearing, over the shadowy brush. The new day had come.

The Kid rose and stretched himself wearily. There was no stirring from the rancher. He lay as comfortable as the Kid could make him, in the Kid's blankets and slicker, only his faint breathing telling that he still lived. He was sunk into a deep insensibility that seemed like death—that would glide into death, if he did not get the care he needed. The Kid had saved him from being riddled with bullets by the road-agent, but he could do no more. With haggard eyes the Kid scanned the trail that wound away through the timber towards the cow-town.

Hoof-beats at last!

The Kid's face brightened at the sound.

Horsemen were coming up the trail from the cow-town.

On the winding trail the Kid heard them long before they came into sight. He heard the beat of many hoofs—not less than a dozen men were riding up the trail. The Kid watched for them to appear, and the bunch came suddenly into sight. A dozen cowmen mounted on bronchos, and at their head, Seth Starbuck, the marshal of Kicking Mule.

The Kid's brows knitted a little at the sight of the cow-town marshal.

Starbuck was his enemy, and had come off second-best in gun-play with the Kid. But he was glad, at the moment, to see even Starbuck. And the rest of the party were Kicking Mule cowmen, whom the Kid was wholly glad to see. He wondered, a little, what had brought the party there so early. But whatever it was that had brought the Kicking Mule

party there, the Kid was glad to see them.

The Kicking Mule men rode up with a clatter, and jumped down from their horses. Their faces were stern and grim.

"Say, you guys——" began the Kid.

A dozen revolvers covered him as he began to speak.

"Hands up!"

"Say——" gasped the Kid, in amazement.

"Hands up, you firebug!" said the marshal grimly. "Put 'em up, pronto, or you get yours, sudden."

And the Kid, taken at a hopeless disadvantage, put his hands above his head.

### THE SECOND CHAPTER. Lynch Law!

"KEEP 'em up!" said the marshal of Kicking Mule.

The Kid's eyes gleamed at him.

"It's your say-so, marshal," he answered, his hands over his Stetson. "But I sure guess you're wasting time. Colonel Sanderson wants help—he's hard hit——"

"Keep 'em up!"

Though the Kid's hands were over his head Seth Starbuck was wary in approaching him. The gun-play in the cow-town the day before had taught him to respect the boy puncher.

He stepped to the Kid, and drew from his holsters the two long-barrelled, walnut-butted guns. His relief was obvious when he had taken the Kid's guns from him.

He tossed them into the grass at a little distance. Then he gave the Kid a sour grin.

"I guess your teeth are drawn now, you lobo-wolf," he said. "You got to pay for shooting up Colonel Sanderson."

"What?" gasped the Kid.

"Keep him covered, you-uns," said the marshal. "Plug him if he tries to get away."

"You bet!" said one of the cowmen grimly. "He ain't getting away after shooting up the whitest man in Kicking Mule."

"You're sure missing your guess," said the Kid blankly. "Why, you durned pesky bonehead——"

"Can it!" interrupted the marshal. "You've sure told some tall stories in Kicking Mule; but you ain't getting away with this. You allow you never shot up the colonel when we've found you standing over his body."

"Dog-gone you," said the Kid fiercely. "I never shot up the colonel, and he'll tell you so when he comes to."

"That's a safe bet," said the marshal, scoffingly. "He don't look likely to come to."

"There ain't a lot of need for chew-



ing the rag," said one of the party. "We got a rope here."

The Kid breathed hard.

His glance turned on the insensible rancher. One word from Colonel Sanderson would clear him and save him. But the rancher was sunk in unconsciousness, and gave no sign of returning life.

The Rio Kid realized that he was in a bad corner.

Starbuck was his bitter foe, though the Kid could hardly guess the reason for his implacable enmity. Starbuck, he was aware, would stop at nothing to put the rope round his neck if he could get it there. But the others were Texas cowmen—the men that the Kid liked and could trust—men who would never have stood for foul play. They would have given him the hand of friendship if they had known how matters stood. But they did not know, and the marshal was turning the situation to his own ends.

There was gloating triumph in his face as he looked at the Kid. He had failed at gun-play; he had been defied as marshal. But now the game was in his hands.

"I guess we got this cuss where we want him," said the marshal. "You get your riata San Antonio."

"You bet!" said the cowboy. "I'll tell the world—" began the Kid.

One of the party, who looked like a rancher, interrupted him fiercely. He pointed to the still form of Colonel Sanderson.

"I guess you don't know me, you lobo-wolf," he said bitterly. "Carter of the Joshua-A Ranch—and Colonel Sanderson's best friend. Dog-gone you, I'd walk all over Texas afoot to get the man that shot him up. You figure you're getting away when we've caught you with his body? Forget it, you durned gun-slinger."

the nearest tree that'll take your weight."

"We're wasting time," said the marshal of Kicking Mule. "Grab the pesky fire-bug and put that rope round his neck."

A quiver ran through the Rio Kid. He was powerless—covered by levelled six-guns, as Carter and another man stepped forward to unjoin his arms. San Antonio opened out the loop of the lasso for his neck.

The Kid cast a despairing look at Colonel Sanderson. But there was no help to be hoped for from that quarter. He had only himself to rely on, in the tightest corner of his life.

"You got me, fellers," he said. His

away, I reckon!" snapped the Joshua-A rancher contemptuously.

"We're wasting time!" snapped the marshal of Kicking Mule. "There's a cotton-wood back on the trail—hump him along to it."

"Give a galoot a chance for his-life, Mister Carter," said the Kid steadily. "You're a white man, and you don't want to hang an innocent man, jest to please that lobo-wolf of a marshal. Give me three minutes, sir—that ain't asking a whole lot."

Carter made an impatient gesture. "What you got to say?" he snarled. "Starbuck brought us after you, and we've got you. You was seen last night riding out of town with the colonel, and Starbuck believed that you was a durned spy in cahoots with Black George, and he allowed that you wasn't to be trusted. He told me so, but I figured that Sanderson knowed what he was about. But when he called me up this morning to tell me that the colonel's horse had been found on Main Street, without his rider, and with blood on the saddle, I reckoned he had got you down right."

"He sure had," said San Antonio. "What's the good of chewing the rag? String him up."

"Gents," said the Kid earnestly. "I never shot up the colonel, and he'll tell you so as soon as he can speak. If I hadn't been with him I guess he would be gone up. It was Black George, the road-agent, who shot him up."

"Your side-partner!" jeered the marshal.

"That's a dog-goned lie," said the Kid. "I ain't never had nothing to do with Black George 'cept to burn powder on him. He laid for the colonel on the trail last night, and shot him up, and I been watching all night to stall him off. He came back once and tried ag'in. I'm telling you, if I hadn't been with the colonel that lobo-wolf would have filled him full of lead."

Carter's lip curled. "Is that all, afore you go up?" he snapped.

"It ain't all," said the Kid. "Look at the guy with your eyes, if you've got any, durn you! Ain't he bandaged up and made comfortable in my blankets and slicker? You figure that after shooting a guy up I'd bandage him and stand by him all night, till you come along and cinch me? Is that hoss-sense?"

There was a murmur among the Kicking Mule cowmen, and Carter of the Joshua-A looked puzzled.

The wounded rancher was bandaged: it was evident that he had been given every care

that could be given in a rough-and-ready way.

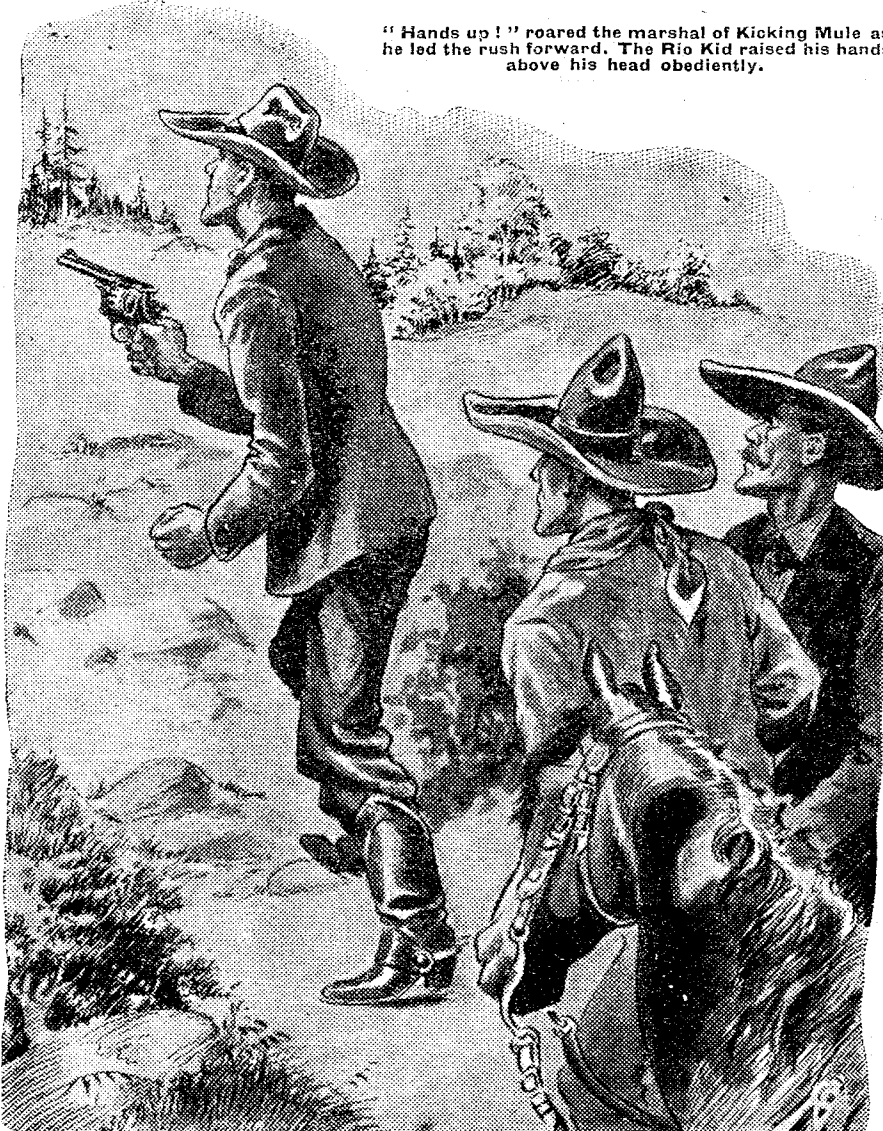
Seth Starbuck gritted his teeth. "That cuts no ice!" he snarled.

"Now, then, get on with that rope, boys!"

But a flicker of doubt crossed the hard, vengeful face of Carter of the Joshua-A. Bitter as he was at the sight of his fellow-rancher stretched in his blood on the earth, the sense of justice was strong in the Joshua-A cattle-owner,

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"Hands up!" roared the marshal of Kicking Mule as he led the rush forward. The Rio Kid raised his hands above his head obediently.



The Kid met the rancher's fierce eyes steadily.

"You're sure roping in the wrong cayuse, Mister Carter," he said quietly. "You look a square man, and I guess all these guys are square men, leaving out that bushwhacker Starbuck, who's got it ag'in me that he tried gun-play on me and slipped up on it. Give a galoot a square deal!"

"You'll get a square deal," said Carter grimly. "And the square deal you'll get is a rope, and the branch of

voice was cool and steady. "You got lots of time to string me up if you want; but if you're square men you'll let a man speak before you hang him."

"What you got to say, when we find you standing over the man you've murdered?" sneered Carter.

"That guy ain't dead, by a long way. Say, fellers, just give him time to come round and he'll sure tell you that I ain't the hombre that shot him up."

"You'd like time, to make your get-

and his fierce desire for vengeance did not wholly blind him.

"Hold in your horses a spell, Seth," he said. "We're sure going to hang Sanderson's murderer; but—"

"We sure are, Carter, and we're wasting time," said the marshal gruffly. "Let the guy speak," said Carter quietly, but with a determination that halted the blistering marshal. "We got heap plenty time to hang him. My old pard Sanderson sure is bandaged up, and if this puncher did it, it looks like there might be a doubt."

"Who else would have done it?" said the Kid. "I'll tell a man, sir, the colonel was shot up by Black George, and I bandaged him, and if I hadn't watched all night by him that murdering coon would have finished him dead to rights."

Some of the cowmen seemed to share the rancher's doubt now. San Antonio, with the rope in his hand ready for the Kid's neck, paused. The grasp of sinewy hands was still on the Kid; but for the moment, at least, the execution was stayed.

"You letting that young lobo-wolf pull the wool over your eyes?" said the marshal of Kicking Mule, in a grating voice. "He says that the colonel will clear him when he speaks, but you can see that poor Sanderson will never speak agin. That scallywag put his lead where he wanted it, he sure did."

"And why you reckon he bandaged him, marshal?" asked Carter.

"Ain't it plain enough for a cross-eyed buzzard?" said the marshal impatiently. "He was known to have left the town with Sanderson, and if Sanderson was found shot up, what'd we think? Waal, he bandaged him and aimed to get off with a story of helping him after he was shot up by Black George? That's how he was going to get clear—figuring that Kicking Mule galoots were boneheads enough to believe him." The marshal laughed, scoffing. "By the great horned toad, he looks like getting away with it, too, fur as you guys go."

"That's it!" said San Antonio, with an oath. "The marshal's right, fellers. String him up."

"I'm telling you——" said the Kid earnestly.

"You can tell the world all the durned lies you think of," said Carter savagely. "Dog-gone my boots if I wasn't half-believing you, you red-handed lobo-wolf! You got that galoot down fine, Seth; and we're wasting time, jest as you allowed. String him up!"

Sinewy hands dragged the Kid away towards a tall cottonwood that grew by the trail, close on the edge of the clearing.

With a face white with rage, his eyes burning, the Kid struggled; but in the grasp of so many hands his struggles were useless.

Fiercely he resisted, but he was dragged along, his spurs tearing up the grass as he went.

Under a branch of the cottonwood that extended over the trail the angry crowd of cowmen halted with their prisoners.

San Antonio threw the end of the rope over the branch and pulled it taut; the noose at the other end round the Kid's throat.

"Hang on, you 'uns!" said San Antonio.

Five or six pairs of hands grasped the lasso. The Kid stood firm as a rock; his face white, set, fearless, his eyes gleaming at the gloating face of the marshal of Kicking Mule.

"Up with him!"

Hands dragged on the rope. At the

same moment there came a thunder of horses' hoofs on the trail, and a bunch of cowboys dashed into sight from the direction of Kicking Mule. The Kid's despairing eyes swept round, and blazed as he recognised Mesquite Bill and the punchers of the Bar-One Ranch. One of the punchers was leading a riderless horse on a rope—the pinto that had carried Colonel Sanderson the night before. With his last breath, ere the drag of the rope choked it, the Kid shouted:

"Help here, fellers! Mesquite Bill, horn in and help——"

The dragging rope choked him. But as the grasping hands pulled, and the Kid's feet were leaving the ground, Mesquite Bill dashed up and drove right into the group of cowmen holding on to the rope. The charge of the broncho knocked them right and left, and the rope, released, slithered over the branch, and the Rio Kid dropped on the earth.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

#### A Close call for the Kid!

THERE was a roar of rage from the lynchers.

Four or five of them were sprawling in the grass, hurled over by the charging broncho. Others jumped swiftly out of the way of the lashing hoofs.

Guns were drawn on all sides.

Mesquite Bill, his rugged, bearded face red with rage, leaped from his broncho and jumped to the Rio Kid. The Kid had sat up, his hands clawing at the choking rope about his neck. Mesquite stood over him, a six-gun in either hand, glaring at the opposing party. The Bar-One punchers had pulled in their horses and dismounted, and every man in the bunch had a gun in his hand to back up the foreman.

"You durned, dog-goned skunks!" roared Mesquite Bill. "You figure you're going to string up this hombre, jest to please that all-fired lobo-wolf Seth Starbuck? Forget it! You got to walk over my gun afore you do."

"That won't take us long, Mesquite!" shouted Starbuck. "Stand away, you bonehead, or we'll shoot you up and hang him arter!"

"Shoot, and be durned!" retorted Mesquite. "There's seven men hyer that can handle a Colt, and by the great horned toad, you ain't touching that kid puncher while we can burn powder! Say, you Mister Carter, I'm sure s'prised at you—a white man like you, playing the game of that dog-goned, gun-slinging marshal this-away!"

There was a roar of angry voices; loudest of all the fierce voice of the marshal of Kicking Mule.

"Stand back, you Bar-One boneheads! By the Rockies, we'll wipe you-all right out if you horn in hyer!"

"We're sure hornin' in!" roared Mesquite. "That kid puncher is O.K., and I'm telling you. He belongs to the Bar-One—the boss signed him on last night; and you figure that the Bar-One outfit are going to let you string him up because you couldn't beat him at gun-play. Not in your life-time!"

The marshal was white with rage. His gun was in his hand; but even the desperate and reckless marshal, hesitated to begin an affray that would have cost so many lives. His party outnumbered the Bar-One bunch two to one; but Mesquite and his men were well known to be good at gun-fighting, and they were grimly determined. Had he been sure of a backing from his own party the marshal might have chanced it; but the Kicking Mule men, keen as they were to lynch the man they believed

had shot up Colonel Sanderson, had no hunch for gun-fighting with Sanderson's outfit. Carter of the Joshua-A struck down the marshal's gun-arm as he half-raised it.

"Let up, marshal," he said. "This ain't a matter for gun-play. I guess these galoots will be as plumb glad to string up that cuss as you are when they know the truth."

"That's so," admitted the marshal. There were angry looks from the men who had been knocked over by Mesquite's charging broncho. But guns were lowered; no one but the marshal was anxious for blood to be shed.

"We're all friends here," said Carter. "Put up your gun, Mesquite—you ain't any need for shooting-irons!"

"Let that durned lobo-wolf put up his gun first!" said Mesquite, with a glare at the marshal. "I ain't trusting that dog-goned polecat worth a continental red cent!"

"Put up your gun, Seth."

"We're hanging that puncher!" said the marshal, between his teeth. "Not by a jugful you ain't!" retorted Mesquite. "The boss stood by him at Kicking Mule when you was on his trail, and I guess the boss would stand by him now if he was here. We're standing for him, durn you!"

The marshal dropped his gun into the holster. Carter of the Joshua-A was determined that there should be no gun-play, and the cowmen backed him. Most of them belonged to Carter's outfit.

"We're hanging him," said Carter, "and I guess you'll want to pull on the rope, Mesquite, when you know what he's done."

Mesquite gave an unbelieving snort. "What's he done, then?" he demanded. "Give it a name, Carter. You're a man a guy can trust; which he can't that lobo-wolf Starbuck."

"Your boss has been shot up, and there stands the man that did it!" answered Carter, with a gesture towards the Kid, who was on his feet now amid the Bar-One bunch.

There was a general exclamation from the Bar-One men. They stared at the Joshua-A rancher, and stared at the Kid.

"He lies a dozen yards away from here, and we found that guy with his body! Now what do you say?" said Carter grimly. "We're hanging him for shooting up your boss, Colonel Sanderson, my old pard for twenty years, and you're not the man to stop us, Mesquite, now you know."

There was a brief pause. "By the great horned toad," said Mesquite Bill, "if that guy has shot up our boss, we'll hang him and riddle him with lead! You allow that the colonel's dead?"

"He ain't dead, but near it! He can't speak—he lies at death's door!" said Carter sternly. "If he could speak, he'd name his murderer—and that's the guy he would name."

"Not by a jugful," said the Kid quietly. "Mesquite, you want to believe that these guys are making a mistake. Black George shot up your boss last night, and I drove the durned skunk off, or he'd have riddled him and made it last sickness."

Mesquite stared at him. The Bar-One punchers eyed him dubiously.

"We knowed suthin' had happened to the boss," said Mesquite soberly. "His cayuse came back to Kicking Mule without him, with blood on his trappings. We've brought him along with us. We knowed there had been trouble, but——"

"You know now who shot him up," said Seth Starbuck. "I guess Sander-

son's bunch ain't the men to let the murderer escape. Say!"

"You've said it, marshal," said several of the Bar-One punchers together. There was evidently a change in their feelings now that they knew of what the Kid was accused.

Starbuck was cool again now. The sudden interruption had disconcerted him; but there was no need for gun-play. The Bar-One punchers would be the first to grasp the rope to hang the man who had shot their boss.

"What's the puncher got to say?" said Mesquite Bill slowly. "I know the boss liked him, and signed him on to our outfit. I reckon he trusted him, and rode out alone on the trail at night, and the boss ain't nobody's fool. If this guy shot up the boss, we got him safe; but we ain't hanging him on the word of Seth Starbuck."

"I got this to say," said the Kid. "That skunk Starbuck is after my life; but I'd trust every other guy here. Make me a prisoner, tie me hand and foot, if you like, and wait till Colonel Sanderson can speak. Then, if he says that I'm the guy that shot him, hang me as high as you like. If I'd done that dirty work, you couldn't hang me too high."

"That's talking!" said Mesquite Bill. "It's sure a whole mouthful!" agreed one of the Bar-One punchers. "Give the guy a square deal."

"And give him a chance to get away!" snarled the marshal. "I tell you, the colonel is plugged for keeps, and there ain't a chance in a hundred that he'll ever speak again!"

"That's a plumb lie, too," said the Kid coolly. "Look at your boss with your own eyes, Mesquite, afore you listen to that durned skunk!"

"I sure will!" said Mesquite. He glanced round at the lowering faces of Carter and his men. "Say, fellers, that's straight talk. Let's see the boss and see for ourselves. There's heap plenty time to hang this puncher if he's the right man; but, by the great horned toad, you ain't hanging him for nothing."

"You're sure a big bonehead, Bill," said Carter. "But there ain't going to be gun-play among friends. Bring that guy along safe, and have your own way!"

"I guess I'll tie his hands and make sure!" said Starbuck.

"Forget it!" rapped Mesquite. "I guess you'll keep your distance, Seth Starbuck. We're taking care of this guy—likewise Carter and his fellers. We sure ain't letting him absquatulate till we know the truth!"

The marshal's hand sought his gun again, and again Carter, of the Joshua-A, interposed.

"Let up, marshal! I tell you there ain't going to be gun-play among friends on account of a dog-goned murderer! Mesquite is my old pard's foreman, and he has a right to be satisfied."

"I ain't saying no to that!" growled the marshal. "So long's the guy don't make his get-away, I ain't got no kick coming."

"Come, then!" said the rancher. He moved back towards the clearing where Colonel Sanderson lay, followed by his men. The Kid, in the midst of the Bar-One crowd, followed. The marshal strode sullenly along with the cowmen.

In a few minutes they reached the spot where the boss of the Bar-One lay bandaged in the Kid's blankets.

Mesquite's jaw set grimly as he stood and looked down on his boss. His brow was black as night.

"By thunder!" he said, through his gritting teeth. "The guy that did that is going to hang! By the holy smoke, I—"

"Black George is the man!" said the Kid quietly.

"That's your say-so!" answered Mesquite roughly. "We got to get at the truth. And, after all, you're a stranger here, and the marshal allowed from the first that you was in cahoots with Black George. I never stood for that. But now—"

He broke off, and there was a murmur from his comrades. The sight of their boss, lying senseless, with his face white as chalk, had stirred the Bar-One crowd to deep rage. In that mood, as the Kid realised, they were apt to fall in with the belief of Carter and his crowd. What had convinced one crowd was likely to convince the other; and, as Mesquite had said, the Kid was a stranger to them, though he had made friends with them and their boss at Kicking Mule.

The Kid breathed hard, reading aright the triumphant gleam in Starbuck's eyes. The marshal's vengeance was delayed—but it was only delayed!

"Fellers!" said the Kid. "Your boss is hard hit, but he's worth a heap of dead men yet! You want to get him on a litter and carry him into camp for the doc. If he don't clear me when he speaks, hang me as high as you like, as I said afore."

"That's talking!" said Mesquite Bill slowly. His mind was evidently swaying in doubt.

"Talking be durned!" said the marshal. "There's been too much talk! I guess I'm marshal of Kicking Mule, and stand for the law, and here's Mister Carter and his bunch standing for me. What more do you Bar-One guys want, when you see your boss, that was always a white man to you, lying shot to pieces, and his murderer in your hands?"

"Talking won't buy you anything," said Carter, of the Joshua-A. "We got the man, and he's going to hang. Chew on that, you Bar-One boys! You know me—Tom Carter, a square man, I guess, and your boss' friend for twenty years. Ain't my word good enough for you?"

Mesquite did not speak. But one of the Bar-One punchers answered:

"We know you, Mister Carter, we sure do, and what you say goes!" And the Bar-One crowd moved back a little.

There was a deep silence for some moments. It was broken by a faint sound—a moan from the man who lay in the blankets on the grass.

Mesquite started.

"He's coming to!" he ejaculated.

"Boys, the boss'll be able to speak, and that guy will keep till he's put us wise."

Starbuck set his teeth hard. The eyes of the fallen man opened slowly, and stared wildly round him. They gazed dimly at the crowd of surrounding faces. Then, as they rested on the sober, set face of the Rio Kid, the rancher smiled faintly.

Carter dropped on his knees beside the wounded man. He placed a flask to Sanderson's lips.

A gulp of liquor brought a faint flush of colour to the wounded man's face. He tried to speak.

But only a scarcely audible murmur came from his lips. The Kid's face was tense. A word would save him; but the rancher seemed unable to utter a word.

Seth Starbuck's harsh voice broke in upon the deep silence.

"He can't speak—leave him alone!"

Leave the galoot alone, I say! You don't want to worry a dying man!"

"Silence!" rapped out Carter. He bent lower.

"Sanderson, old-timer, we've got the man we reckon shot you up. If you can speak, give us his name."

The colonel made an effort. But no words came. It was torture to the Kid as he waited.

"Sanderson"—Carter's voice was low and clear—"do you see the man among us who shot you up? Nod your head if you do."

The haggard eyes turned from face to face. Then the head was slowly shaken from side to side.

The Kid breathed more freely.

"Let me speak!" he said. He bent a little over the rancher. "Sir, these guys figured that I was the man who shot you up. Was it Black George, the coon road-agent, that plugged you, sir?"

The rancher tried again to speak, and failed. But the heavy head nodded a slow assent.

"Did I stand by you, sir, and drive the firebug off?"

Another nod.

"That goes!" said Carter, of the Joshua-A. "We sure roped in the wrong cayuse, boys!"

The rancher rose to his feet. He held out his hand to the Kid.

"I ain't blaming myself a whole lot, for you know how it looked," he said.

"But I allow you're square, and I'm plumb sorry. Shake!"

The Kid shook gladly enough. He looked round on friendly faces. The men who, a few minutes before, would have strung him up to the branch of the cottonwood were all his friends now. They knew now that it was Black George who had shot up the rancher, and that the Kid had stood by him, and feeling had changed completely round.

With the exception of the marshal of Kicking Mule! Seth Starbuck's hard face was set with rage. His eyes burned at the Kid, who had, at the last moment, escaped his vengeance. His hand lingered near his gun, as if he felt the temptation to draw and shoot him dead in his tracks where he stood. But even the ruffianly marshal of Kicking Mule could not venture to pull his gun, in the midst of a crowd, on an unarmed man, whose innocence had been proved.

Mesquite Bill clapped the Kid on the shoulder.

"The boss stands for you," he said. "and that's good enough for this crowd, I reckon. I knowed you was straight, and I'm sure plumb glad that we horned in, feller."

The Kid smiled.

"You sure ain't so glad as this baby!" he answered. "I don't want to have a closer call than that, hombre. Say, there never was a galoot in Texas so all-fired pleased to see you afore."

The marshal of Kicking Mule, with a bitter oath, leaped on his horse, and spurred away towards the cow-town. The Kid gazed after him as he rode, with a strange look in his eyes, and strange thoughts in his mind. Like a flash of illumination it had come to the Kid that there was a reason for the marshal's ruthless feud, and that if he followed the trail of Black George, the road-agent, it was likely to lead him very near the marshal of Kicking Mule.

THE END.

(The mystery surrounding Black George, the road-agent, gets thicker and thicker. You'll find all the thrills you want in next week's roaring Western yarn.)

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# THE MYSTERY OF THE MARSHAL!

By Ralph Redway.

There's a ruthless road-agent terrorising the trails around Kicking Mule, and the Rio Kid's determined to track him down!

### THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Face at the Window!

THE Rio Kid looked happy. There were five or six punchers gathered round the stove in the bunkhouse of the Bar-One ranch. One or two sprawled on the bunks. All of them were smoking, and the atmosphere was decidedly thick. Outside, a cold wind swept the ranges of the Bar-One; but in the bunkhouse it was warm and hazy, not to say stuffy. Mesquite had flung the window open wide, and the glimmer of the oil-lamp shone out into the night.

Rough enough were the Kid's surroundings—rough and ready. There was no luxury in the Bar-One bunkhouse, and not too much in the way of comfort. But the Kid's face was bright.

Rough as the bunkhouse was, and rough the company gathered therein, it was like home to the Kid.

After long wanderings by lonely and dangerous trails, the Kid was a member of a cowpunching bunch again. The tobacco-laden atmosphere, the smell of damp leather warming at the stove, did not trouble the Kid.

The Kid was not smoking—seldom or never he touched even a cigarette. But he liked the old familiar smell of the bunkhouse, that brought back to his mind days long ago at the old Double-Bar, in Frio.

The Kid had been many days now at the Bar-One, cordially welcomed by all the bunch—as good a bunch, the Kid reckoned, as he had ever struck in Texas.

The guy who had stood by the boss, Colonel Sanderson, when he was shot-up by Black George, was sure of the esteem of the Bar-One punchers. They were glad to have the Kid in the outfit, and there was not a man in it who was not his friend.

True, they did not know him for what he was. Eyes would have opened wide on the Bar-One had it been whispered there that the new puncher was the Rio Kid, the outlaw of the Rio Grande.

Whether the name he gave was his own nobody knew or cared; there were plenty of galoots in the Kicking Mule country who did not carry the name they were born with. And it was not on the Kid's conscience that he could not put them wise to his true identity.



He had never wanted to be an outlaw; but Fate had been too strong for him. They welcomed him as a puncher, and a puncher the Kid really was, and wanted to be.

Sitting on the edge of his bunk, with a cheery smile on his face, the Kid joined in the talk—talk of cows and feed, and water supply—the "shop" of a ranch. His gun-belt, with the two walnut-butted guns, hung on a nail over his bunk; his Stetson was pushed to the back of his handsome head; the Kid was taking his ease after a day on the range. And as he talked, he was thinking of more than he talked of.

The Kid had horned into the Kicking Mule country to "get" Black George, the road-agent. He had had no thought of remaining after he had got that terror of the cow country—if ever he did get him. But now it was in his mind that he might find something like a home on the Bar-One, among these punchers who were men after his own heart.

Not a man in the Kicking Mule country knew him, or dreamed of guessing who he was—not even Seth Starbuck, the marshal, who would have given much to have such a handle

against the boy puncher who had defeated him in gun-play.

The Kid smiled at that thought. The marshal of Kicking Mule was his enemy, for reasons of his own, and had gone to the length of attempting to fix on the Kid a charge of being in cahoots with Black George.

He could have brought a much more perilous charge, had he known the facts. But he did not know, and did not dream of it; to his eyes the Kid was what he looked—a young puncher, and nothing more.

Yuba Dick, the horse-wrangler of the Bar-One, came in at the door of the bunkhouse, and the punchers looked round at him. Yuba strode over to the stove to warm himself.

"Say, the boss is sure mending," said the wrangler. "I been up to the house and seen him. He's sure on the mend." "That's talking!" said Mesquite Bill. The foreman of the Bar-One knocked out his pipe on the stove, and refilled it, jamming in the thick tobacco with a horny thumb. "I'll sure be plumb glad when the boss is up again; and I guess the first thing the boss'll



do is to get after that skunk Black George!"

"And he sent a message for Two-gun!" said Yuba.

"Me!" said the Kid.

"Yep! He wants you to hop in the morning, and see him, feller. He's sure mad with the marshal for aiming to make out that it was you shot him up. Gophers! And that skunk Starbuck nearly got you strung up for it!"

"I guess he would have got away with it if Mesquite here hadn't horned in on time!" said the Kid. "That guy Starbuck sure is anxious to fix me up for a funeral."

"I reckon he won't stay marshal of Kicking Mule much longer," said Mesquite. "The boss is plumb tired of him not getting that fire-bug Black George. The boss, and Carter of the Joshua-A, and Hanson of the Sundown are the biggest ranchers in this country; and I guess they can put paid to the marshal when they get going. He's fed them up, and they're sure going to make him quit."

The Kid's brow was thoughtful.

"That fire-bug Black George has been cavorting around Kicking Mule for years on end, I hear," he remarked.

"Four years," said Mesquite.

"And how long's Starbuck been marshal?"

"Jest the same; or near. He hit Kicking Mule four years ago, and had trouble with the guy who was marshal then—and the marshal was planted afterwards. Starbuck got elected in his place. He sure is a whole hoss with a gun."

"And all the time he's been marshal Black George has been cavorting around," said Yuba, "and he ain't never got that coon! Heap plenty times he's called up the boys to go hunting that fire-bug; but George always got wise to it, somehow, and stood clear."

"Don't he get wise to everything that goes on in Kicking Mule?" said Mesquite, with a grunt. "Look at the way he stopped the stage on the Juniper trail, and shot-up the Ranger who was coming to pick up sign of him. Nobody knowed the Ranger guy was coming, outside four men; but George got wise to it."

"Who was the four?" asked the Kid. "The boss here, and Carter of the Joshua-A, and Hanson of the Sundown fixed it up for the Ranger to come," said Mesquite. "They let the marshal know, and he sure had a grouch at being passed over that-a-way; but the ranchers stood for it, all the same, and let him have his grouch. But I guess he was right when he allowed that the Ranger wouldn't get Black George—that's how it turned out."

The Kid was about to speak again; but the words never left his lips.

Framed in the open window, a black face looked into the bunkhouse, and a revolver was levelled.

It was aimed at the Rio Kid, as he sat on the edge of his bunk.

One glimpse the Kid had of the face of Black George before the six-gun roared.

Well he knew that savage face, black as the ace of spades, with thick lips, flattened nose, and heavy overhanging eyebrows that almost hid the glittering eyes.

He moved swiftly.

Swift as he was, the bullet that whizzed across the bunkhouse missed by only a fraction of an inch; it grazed the Kid's sunburnt cheek as it passed.

"Great gophers!" roared Mesquite, in astonishment and rage. "Black George, by thunder!"

THE POPULAR.—No. 575.

He leaped across to his gun-belt that was hanging on the wall. The Kid made a rush for the door, grabbing a gun from his belt over the bunk with lightning swiftness.

But the black face at the window had vanished instantly.

As the Kid rushed out of the bunkhouse he caught a momentary glimpse of a shadowy figure vanishing in darkness, and fired after it.

But the fleeing figure was gone, and a moment later, the beat of horse's hoofs rang through the night.

Mesquite rushed out after the Rio Kid, almost stuttering with rage.

"Black George!" he gasped. "The durned skunk! Black George hyer, on the Bar-One! Horses—say, you guys—horses—get after him! You hear me yaup! Get after him!"

The crowd poured out of the bunkhouse, guns in hand. Desperate and daring as the black road-agent was known to be, his audacity in venturing on the ranch astonished the Bar-One outfit. Yet the attempt on the Rio Kid had been safe from its very daring. The road-agent had skulked in the darkness to the bunkhouse window; he had stayed for only one shot, and his horse had been at hand. He was galloping away into the blackness of the night before the punchers had a chance at him.

The Kid rushed to the corral and called to Side-Kicker. He was the first to mount, without waiting for saddle or bridle. On the bare-backed mustang he leaped the fence and galloped in the direction taken by the fleeing road-agent. Fast after him came a dozen men of the Bar-One, though not so fast as the Kid.

But the pursuit, prompt as it was, was in vain. Darkness and the lonely ranges had swallowed up the road-agent, and after a long and futile hunt the punchers rode savagely back to the Bar-One, disappointed. Black George had come, and he had gone, leaving in the timber wall of the bunkhouse the bullet that had been intended for the Rio Kid.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### The Kid's Hunch!

COLONEL SANDERSON, leaning back in a rocker on the ranch-house porch in the morning sunshine, nodded and smiled to the Rio Kid as he came up the shallow wooden steps and raised his Stetson respectfully.

"Mornin', sir!" said the Kid. "Mendin', I hope?"

"Mending!" agreed the rancher. "I guess that scallywag, Black George, gave me a close call. But I'm beating him to it. I'll say I'll be in the saddle in a few days from now."

"I'm plumb glad to hear it, sir," said the Kid. "Yuba allowed last night in the bunkhouse that you wanted to see me this morning."

"Sit down, boy," said the rancher.

The Kid sat on the pine-wood rail, facing the boss of the Bar-One in his rocker. His face was bright. It was good to know that the boss was getting over his wound, which, but for the Kid, would have been the finish for him.

"I sure owe you my life, boy," said the rancher slowly. "That fire-bug would have riddled me with lead if you hadn't been there—and I guess it was lucky for me you signed on to the Bar-One. I'd have gone up, sure, if you hadn't been riding with me that night."

"You've said it, sir," said the Kid. "But it was your own kindness, and taking me on trust, that did it."

The rancher smiled.

"Black George nearly got me, anyhow," he said, "and now I'm mending I reckon I'm going to get Black George before he puts in again. Mesquite told me he horned in on the ranch last night, and handed you a pot-shot from the bunkhouse window."

The Kid rubbed his cheek.

"Jest that, sir," he said, "and it was a close call. That scallywag sure has got it in for you and me."

"He don't seem a whole lot afraid of the marshal," remarked the rancher. "He ain't ever tried to shoot up Seth Starbuck."

The Kid grinned.

"Colonel Sanderson, sir," he said, "I guess I got a whole heap to get off my chest about that marshal."

"Shoot!" said the colonel.

"I been thinking a whole lot, sir, while I've been riding with your bunch these days," said the Kid, sinking his voice a little, "and I guess I suspicion that marshal guy a heap."

"How come?" asked the rancher, eyeing him, puzzled.

"All the section's wise to it that that nigger trail-thief has got a side-pardner who puts him wise," said the Kid. "Starbuck aimed to put that across me, figuring that he'd fit me with a rope necktie if he could get Kicking Mule to believe it. Nobody knows who the double-crossin' skunk is; but there ain't no two ways about it—Black George don't dare show his black face in any cow-town. But he gets all the news, and he can't get it only from a white man in cahoots with him."

"Correct!"

"Well, you know I followed the trail of that coon, sir, in the hills, and I'll say it led me right into Kicking Mule," said the Kid. "That's why I struck the town. It was Black George's hoss I trailed into Kicking Mule; and I guess it must have had Black George's side-pardner on its back. I put the marshal wise to it, him standing for the law in the town—and he was sure hoppin' mad, and he pulled his gun on me. I guess you know how he's tried to put it across me since. Well, that marshal guy is a gun-man, and a hard case. But I keep on asking myself why did he pick on me special? And I guess I've asked myself further—was it because he figured that I was dangerous to Black George?"

Sanderson started violently.

His eyes opened wide at the Kid.

"You mean?" he gasped.

"Look at it as it stands, sir," said the Kid quietly. "That ain't the whole jugful, either."

"Go on," said the rancher, in a low voice.

There was a strange look on his face, and it told that the Kid's words had started a wholly new train of thought in his mind.

"Starbuck's been marshal of Kicking Mule nigh on four years, I'm told. Black George has been cavorting around about the same time. All the section grouched because the marshal ain't never got that fire-bug. Looks like he never wanted to get him."

"Mebbe!" said Sanderson. "Mebbe! But he's gone after that thief, many a time, after a hold-up or a murder."

"And every time Black George was wise to it, and hunted cover," said the Kid. "And that ain't the whole jugful, either. When that Ranger guy was sent for, to pick up sign on Black George, ain't it true that only four men knew—you and two other ranch bosses, and the marshal."

"That's a cinch."

"I guess it wasn't you or Carter or Hanson who put that road-agent wise to it," said the Kid. "But he knowed

—he laid for the Ranger on the Juniper trail and shot him up. Who let the rabbit out of the bag?"

"That's puzzled me a whole lot," said the rancher. "A gaioot might have dropped a word here or there—I'd figured that it was the marshal that talked too much in town."

"I sure guess it was the marshal that talked too much, in town or not," said the Kid.

"Sho!" murmured Sanderson. "Is that the whole jugful?"

"Not yet, sir," said the Kid. "That night you was shot up—the marshal knew you was riding home that night late, for I heard you speak of it when he was in the Golden Mule. And Black

"If he wasn't a coon," he went on quietly, "if he was jest a road-agent with a mask on his face, I'd say that Starbuck was the man, and that he jest took his mask off, when I trailed his hoss that day into the town. But that's no cinch, for Starbuck sure ain't a coon, though I guess his heart is as black as Black George's face. I figure that that marshal guy is in cahoots with him, squeals to him about what goes on in Kicking Mule, puts him wise, and takes a share in his plunder. I ain't giving you this for gospel, sir—but that's the big idea."

Colonel Sanderson sat silent in the rocker.

His brow was dark with thought.

what I figure, sir, and you won't be talking about it."

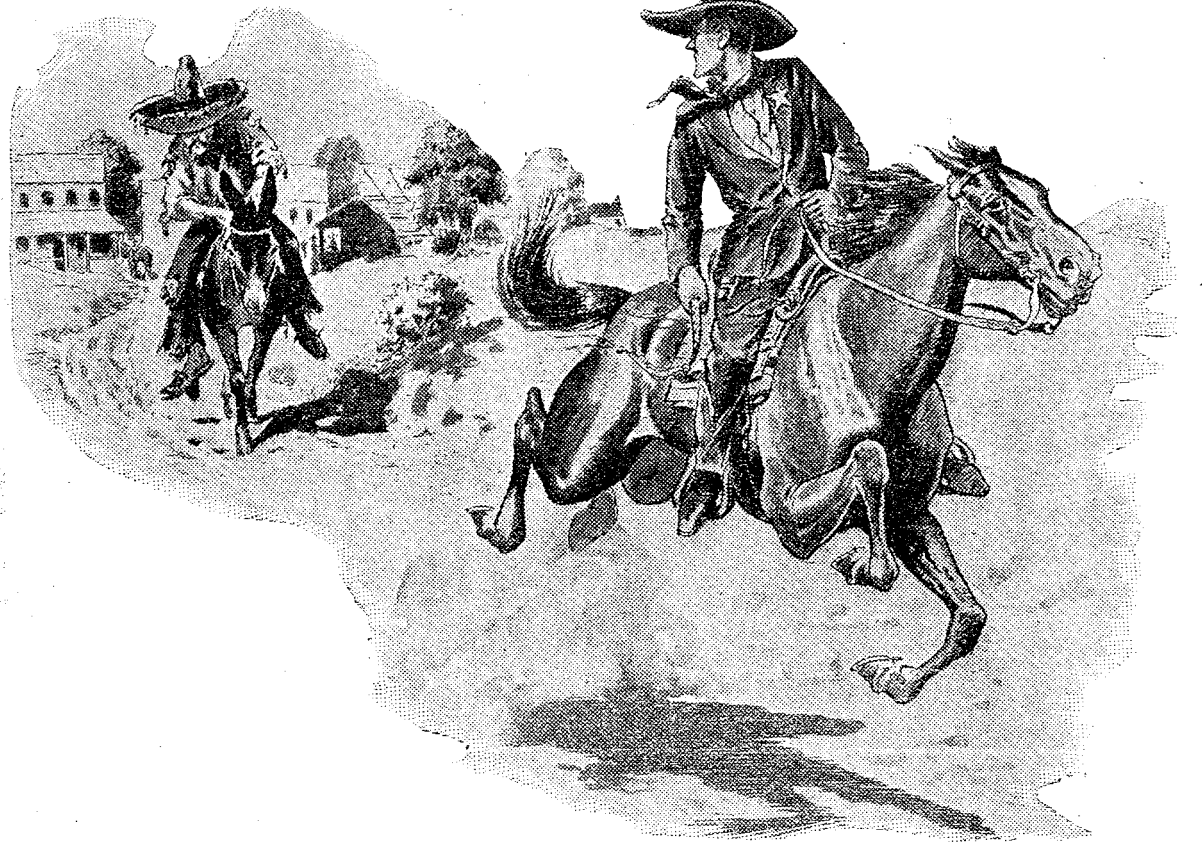
"Not a word," said the rancher. "I reckon I'll chew on it with my mouth shut. But you've some idea, back of your mind?"

"Sure!" said the Kid. "And I'm asking you to give me leave from the ranch to see if I can work the raffle."

"Take all the leave you want," said Sanderson, "and all the bunch to help you, if you like."

"I guess I'm goin' on a lone trail," said the Kid. "I got to get wise to that marshal guy, and that's to be done in Kicking Mule."

"You'll sure get shot up in town, boy," said the rancher, shaking his



Seth Starbuck, the marshal, glanced suspiciously back over his shoulder at the Mexican. Little did he realise, however, that this Mexican was none other than the Rio Kid in disguise!

George was sure waiting ready on the trail for you with his gun."

The rancher nodded.

"Mind, I ain't worked it all out yet," said the Kid. "There's suthin' in the game that puzzles me a whole lot. I don't rightly understand how that nigger hides away in the hills, never showing up near a town, and all the while sticking to this same section. He's sure roped in thousands of dollars all the time he's been cavorting around Kicking Mule; but what's he done with it? A white road-agent would blow the dollars on a jamboree in some town where he wasn't known or looked for; but that coon couldn't dare show up—he's been seen a hundred times, and his black face is too well known—he don't look an ordinary coon, either. But it beats me to a frazzle, a man risking his neck every day for dollars that he don't dare to spend, and living like a wolf in the hills all the time. There's suthin' in it that beats me."

The Kid paused, a wrinkle in his brow.

The Kid had started a new train of thought in his mind—a new line of suspicion.

Long the rancher sat deep in thought, silent.

The Kid waited for him to speak. He broke the silence at last.

"I guess you've given me somethin' to chew on, Two-gun," said the rancher. "What you've said never came into my mind before, not for a minute, but now you've put it there, I guess I can think of a whole lot of things to back it up. By the great horned toad, if Starbuck's that nigger's side-pardner, we'll run him down and hang him over the door of his own office. But how're we going to get the proof? If he's a double-crossin' polecat like you let on, he's cute; he covers up his trail like a Yaqui Injun. He sure won't be easy to cinch."

"I ain't looking for an easy trail, sir," said the Kid. "But if he's the guy we want, we'll get him, soon or late. And I ain't shoutin' this out all over the town. We don't want to put him wise to what we're figuring. Only you knows

head. "Starbuck's likely to shoot on sight, and I wouldn't put it past him to draw a gun on a guy from behind."

"Starbuck won't know me when he sees me next time, sir," said the Kid. "I got that all cut and dried."

The rancher listened, with surprise growing in his face, as the Kid unfolded his stunt. He raised no demur, but there was a dubious expression on his face as he watched the Kid ride away from the Bar-One a little later in the day. The boy puncher was riding on a perilous trail, and it was in the rancher's mind that, as like as not, he was looking his last on that member of his outfit.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Half-Breed!

THE Mexican half-breed had slumped down by a wall near the door of the marshal's office, and Seth Starbuck glanced at him carelessly, as he stood in his doorway looking out up Main Street in Kick-

ing Mule. Mexican half-breeds were not uncommon in the town, and there was nothing in this specimen to draw a second glance, unless it was his obvious state of inebriety. His ragged shirt, his patched calzoner, his dark, dirty face with its ragged black moustache shadowed by an immense ragged sombrero, told of nothing that was unusual in that half-breed. The marshal of Kicking Mule did not give him a second glance, though he was worth it, if Seth Starbuck had known.

Starbuck stood looking up the street, bright and dusty in the morning sunshine. If he thought anything about the Mexican, it was that he had got drunk very early in the day. He had seen the man before, loafing about Alcazo's Mexican dive down the street, guzzling pulque. Now he fairly reeked with the Mexican native drink, and the way he slumped down by the wall looked as if he was helplessly overcome. A faint snore from the wretched dilapidated figure reached the marshal's ears as he looked up the street watching a horseman who was riding in from the prairie trail.

Mesquite Bill from the Bar-One, pulled in his broncho and saluted the marshal curtly. Starbuck gave him a brief nod. They were not friends, and had been less so than ever since the time Mesquite had horned in to save the Kid from lynching. But the foreman of the Bar-One had business now with the town marshal.

"Mornin', marshal!" he said gruffly. "Mornin'," grunted Starbuck. "How's the boss?"

"Mendin' fine! He's been in the saddle to-day."

"That's good!" said Starbuck. "I'll say it is," agreed the cow-man. "That durned fire-bug meant to make it the last sickness for him, and I guess he'd have done it, too, if that kid puncher hadn't been along."

The marshal scowled.

"That puncher on the ranch?" he asked.

"Sure, and I'm telling you, marshal, Black George horned in on the ranch a few nights back, and aimed to get him from the bunkhouse window."

"You don't say!" ejaculated the marshal.

"I'll tell a man!" answered Mesquite. "Say, you ain't on the trail of that fire-bug yet?"

"He don't leave a trail as broad as a remuda does," said the marshal sarcastically. "And I guess I ain't the only hombre in Kicking Mule that can't put salt on his tail."

"You've said it. I got a message from the bank at Juniper to-day, to pay the bunch," said Mesquite, changing the subject which was reckoned to be a sore one with the marshal.

"Spill it!"

"You've said it. I got a message from the bank at Juniper to-day, to pay the bunch," said Mesquite. "The colonel figures that he won't have it sent on the stage, because that scallywag, Black George, is as like as not to hold up Jerry Cook somewheres between Juniper and this burg. The boss has fixed it for them to send the dust by a guy on a cayuse."

The marshal's eyes glimmered.

"It's being kept dark," continued Mesquite. "But you know as well as the boss does, how that scallywag George gets wise to things. Like as not he's going to get wise to this and lay for that man from the Juniper bank."

"I wouldn't put it past him," said the marshal.

"That's what the colonel reckons, and he figures that you want to keep your eyes peeled on the Juniper trail this

afternoon," said Mesquite. "The guy from the bank will quit Juniper an hour after the stage pulls out, which is at three. If Black George goes for Jerry Cook's hearse, the boss figures that the trail will be clear arter, but you never can tell with that coon."

"You've said it!"

"I guess if the boss was in my boots he'd send a bunch of Bar-One boys to ride with the guy from the bank," said Mesquite with a grunt. "But Sanderson sure thinks you're the man to look for that road-agent, and he's the boss. If you want a chance at Black George, marshal, you want to be riding the Juniper trail this afternoon with your men handy where you want them. That's what the boss says."

"How'm I going to ride the Juniper trail this afternoon, when I got business over at Post Oak?" demanded the marshal surlily. "There's been horses rustled over to Post Oak, and the guys sure look for me to get a holt on them rustlers. Black George ain't the only pebble on the beach, I'm telling you."

"Waal, I give you the boss' message," said Mesquite, preparing to ride on.

"A guy can't be in two places at once," grunted the marshal. "I got a suspicion of them Post Oak rustlers, and I got to look into it. But you can tell your boss that I'll put three deputies on the Juniper trail to keep their eyes peeled for Black George."

"I'll sure tell him."

Mesquite rode down the rugged street, to drop in at the Golden Mule before he hit the trail back to the ranch. The marshal stood looking after him.

He went back to his office at last.

The Mexican half-breed, slumped by the wall, had not stirred. Through the sunny, dusty noontide he remained where he was. Mesquite Bill passed him again a little later on his way to the prairie trail and the Bar-One. A playful puncher, pausing to stare at the sleeping man, tilted his big sombrero over his face and walked on grinning. The half-breed stirred enough to shift the broad hat back into its place, grunted, and composed himself to slumber again.

He was still there when the marshal of Kicking Mule led his horse from behind the building and mounted in the street. The marshal rode out of Kicking Mule at a canter.

As he rode away, the dirty, dusty Mexican stirred at last, dragging himself to his feet, and rubbing his eyes. Those eyes, under the shade of the sombrero, were singularly sharp and wide awake for a half-breed soaked with pulque. They gleamed at the burly back of the marshal as he rode, and the half-breed moved along to Alcazo's Mexican dive, unhitched a tough-looking burro from the post, slumped into the ragged saddle, and rode out of the town in the direction the marshal had taken.

Outside Kicking Mule, Seth Starbuck glanced over his shoulder at the sound of hoof-beats on the trail behind him.

The suspicious gleam died out of his eyes, however, at the sight of the Mexican, swaying clumsily on the back of the burro.

The marshal rode on till he reached the spot where the trail forked, one way leading over the hill towards the Juniper stage trail, and the other by the prairie towards Post Oak.

It was the former that the marshal took.

As he passed the fork, he gave his horse the spur, and in a few minutes vanished from sight among the woods that grew on the slopes of the hill.

The Mexican half-breed jogged on, on his tough-looking burro, to the fork of the trails.

There he pulled in the donkey, as if uncertain of his way. If the marshal looked back from the wooded slopes of the hill, all he saw was a drunken half-breed swaying in the saddle and staring blearily about him. Finally the man reeled so wildly that he slumped out of the saddle and collapsed into the trail. The burro cocked up its ears, stared for a moment or two at its fallen master, and then ambled away back towards the town, leaving the Mexican sprawling on the earth.

But that half-breed, as he sprawled, was communing with himself. His eyes scintillated under the shadow of the big sombrero.

"I guess if that guy's watching from the hill, he ain't wise to this baby!" murmured the half-breed, and the voice that murmured was the voice of the Rio Kid. "Snakes! That galoot allows that he's got business at Post Oak this afternoon, and so he can't ride the Juniper trail and keep his eyes peeled for Black George! But he sure has given the Post Oak trail a miss, and gone over the hill toward Juniper. He sure has!"

The Kid grinned under the walnut-juice that stained his face beyond recognition.

"That marshal guy ain't hitting for Post Oak a whole lot!" he murmured. "He sure ain't! He's hitting for the Juniper stage trail—the way the guy from the bank will come, according to what Mesquite let on."

The drunken half-breed rolled out of the trail into the brush, as if to seek shelter from the sun.

But, once hidden in the brush, he rose to his feet, and all pretence of drunkenness dropped from him like a cloak. Never had the Rio Kid been more alert.

Far away on the wooded hillside a distant sound of cracking twigs came to his ears. The marshal of Kicking Mule was riding fast up the ascent, through the brush. The Mexican half-breed—without sign of slackness or slumping about him now—picked his way through trees and bushes on foot, following the trail of the marshal's horse.

If matters were as the Kid suspected, the marshal of Kicking Mule had one object in view now—he was going to meet up with Black George, and put him wise to the plunder on the trail. The horseman left little sign behind him; but the faintest sign was enough for the Rio Kid. Softly and swiftly the Kid followed up the trail.

The sound of the horseman ahead died away in the distance. On the wooded hillside it was impossible to gallop; but the marshal was making good speed—too good a speed for a man on foot to keep pace with him. But the Kid, patient as an Indian followed on, with the certainty now in his mind that the trail of the marshal of Kicking Mule would lead him to Black George, the road-agent.

#### THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

##### The Secret of the Cave!

"SHUCKS!" murmured the Kid. He was perplexed.

Screened among rocks covered with ferns and trailing juniper, the Kid lay and watched.

Long minutes had passed—lengthening to an hour, and the Kid was more and more puzzled.

Faithfully as a bloodhound the Kid had followed the trail of the marshal's horse, winding through brush and scrub

up the hillside. He was far behind the marshal—a long way behind, he figured; but unless the Kid missed his guess, he had run the guy down. And yet—the Kid was beginning to feel that he was beaten to it, and he did not know how.

Where he lay, he was watching a deep cleft, a cave, in the hillside, which at that spot rose sharply like a cliff. The trail of the marshal's horse had led him there, and if there was anything in signs, Seth Starbuck had ridden to that cave half an hour, perhaps, ahead of the Kid.

He had ridden up—and away, for a return trail came from the cave, winding away down the hill. The marshal, evidently, had entered that lonely cave high up the hill, and left it again, before the Kid reached the spot.

There was no doubt about that; the sign could not lie, and the Kid's eyes did not deceive him.

So far, it squared with what the Kid had figured. The marshal had ridden to that lonely cave to meet up with Black George, and put him wise to the loot that would be on the Juniper trail

It perplexed the Kid.

An hour had passed, and it was now the time that the bank messenger would be leaving Juniper. It was time for Black George to be on the stage trail waiting for him, if he aimed to hold up the dollars from the bank.

The Kid waited patiently, but with growing doubt and trouble in his mind. He had fixed up that scheme with Colonel Sanderson, and it had looked as if the marshal of Kicking Mule was caught in the trap. If the road-agent was there, the Kid had no doubt of getting him as soon as he showed up, and there would be no doubt left that Starbuck was his secret confederate.

But as the long minutes passed, the Kid began to doubt whether the black road-agent was there at all.

He waited controlling his impatience, till another hour had passed. It passed slowly; when it had elapsed it was too late for a man to ride down from the cave on the hill, and lay for the bank messenger on the stage-trail. It looked as if the Kid had been led, step by step, on a false trail. Yet, if

But the Kid shook his head. Starbuck was not the man for that. Had he known that he was trailed, he would have met the trailer with a bullet from behind a tree. That was Starbuck's way, the Kid figured.

But why, then, had the marshal gone there? Not to meet up with Black George, that was certain now. Why?

That there was some secret in the cave the Kid could not doubt. And, with grim determination he searched for it—and found it. In a hollow of the rocky floor, hidden by a great boulder that the Kid rolled aside in his search, lay a large can of black paint! The Kid stared at it blankly. The Kid knew the use of paint for disguising a horse; he was an old hand at that game.

That, then, had been the marshal's game—he kept the paint in that solitary spot, and he had used it to turn his pinto into a black horse. A black horse! The road-agent, as the Kid remembered, rode a horse as black as night. But what was the connection?

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THE ideal machine for the fellow who is just taking up motor-cycling, this VIOC model Rex-Acme is a lightweight motor-bike with a 1½ h.p. two-stroke engine, made by the famous firm of Villiers, makers of the finest engines of this type. It is ever so easy to handle and yet powerful enough to haul its rider over all but impossible roads. It's nippy, too—capable of 45 m.p.h. on the level. For economy of upkeep there is not a motor-bike on the road to beat it. The engine will run for not far short of 200 miles on every gallon of petrol, and a cupful of oil will suffice for the same distance. You could run this splendid machine at a cost of about a 1/- for every hundred miles!

### 50 WARNEFORD "DEMON" TRACTOR PLANES as

prizes in our Big New Competition this week! Length, 25½ inches; span, 23 inches. Fitted with 10-inch hand-carved and balanced propeller, patent double-bearing and shock-proof silk with identification discs. Weight and wind resistance are reduced to a minimum in this splendid model, giving the utmost duration of flight.

50 OF THEM ARE WAITING TO BE  
WON BY "POPULAR" READERS.

that afternoon. Then he had ridden away.

But there was no other trail leading from the cave. If, therefore, the marshal had met up with Black George there, Black George was still in the cave.

That was a cinch.

With the caution of a trailing Indian, deep in cover, the Kid had examined the whole of the ground round the cave, and satisfied himself that no trail led from it but that of the marshal's horse. Neither was any sign to be picked up leading to it, except the marshal's; but if the road-agent was there, his trail might be an old one, obliterated by wind and weather. He might have been days in the cave, if that was his hiding-place. There was nothing to that.

As the Kid figured it, the marshal had talked to Black George in the cave, and ridden away again. Why else had he lied to Mesquite about a pretended business at Post Oak that afternoon, and then ridden from town to that secret and hidden den in the trackless hillside?

He had some business there, that was a cinch, and what else could it be? Satisfied of that, and that the black road-agent was there, the Kid was content to wait for him to appear. He could not be long, if he aimed to hold up the man from the Juniper bank on the stage trail that afternoon.

Yet he did not emerge.

the marshal had not gone to that solitary cave to meet up with Black George, why had he gone there?

It puzzled the Kid sorely.

But he was fed-up with waiting at last. Leaving his cover, gun in hand, eyes on the alert, he approached the opening of the cave.

Still, he more than half-expected a shot to greet him. But no shot came, and he stood in the opening of the cave, unassailed.

"Carry me home to die!" murmured the Kid, in wonder and perplexity.

He stepped into the cave, still on the alert; but he knew now that no one was there. It extended back into the cliff a dozen feet or so, widening. It was strewn with loose rocks and stones. Here and there, in the dimness of the interior, the Kid picked up sign of riding-boots—the marshal's boots, he reckoned. But there was no faintest sign of any other tread.

The Kid breathed hard and deep.

The marshal had met no man at the cave. Black George had not been there!

That was certain now. But why, in the name of the great horned toad, had Starbuck gone there at all? A thought came into the Kid's mind that brought the crimson to his cheeks. Had the marshal known that he was watched and followed—had he been leading his tracker on a wild-geese chase, laughing in his sleeve?

The Kid did not like to admit himself beaten; but the puzzle of it was too much for him. He felt that he had his finger fairly on the clue to the mystery, and yet somehow he could not get it. The marshal of Kicking Mule had ridden miles up a steep hillside, to a lonely spot far from the haunts of men, and there he had disguised his horse. Why? What was his game? And what was his connection, if any, with Black George, the road-agent?

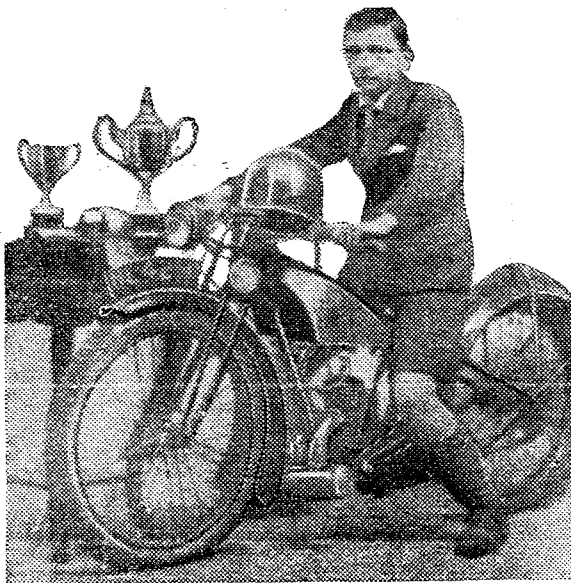
The Kid emerged from the cave at last. "You dog-goned bonehead!" he said to himself savagely. "You pesky, pie-faced son of a gun, that god-darned guy has got you beaten to a frazzle."

He glanced at the marshal's downward trail, winding away through shadowy trees and brush. But it was useless to follow it now, after the lapse of hours. Whatever the marshal's game had been, it was likely that he was back in Kicking Mule by this time.

Savagely discontented, the Kid hoofed it. But he did not take the direction of Kicking Mule. The Mexican half-breed was not seen in the cow-town again, and it was the Rio Kid who arrived at the Bar-One Ranch—in a worse temper with himself than he had ever been before.

THE END.

(Does the Rio Kid stop looking for Black George? Or does he still keep on the trail of this very elusive road-agent? See next week's topping Western yarn: "TRAPPING AN OUTLAW!"



**LOOK—**  
**AMAZING COMPETITION OFFER**  
**TO YOU**  
*and it's* **FREE!**



**1ST PRIZE**

**REX-ACME**  
**MOTOR-BIKE**

**ALL PRIZES MUST BE WON**  
*—and you can enter now!*

**AND 50 MODEL PLANES** (See page 7.)

Warnerford "Demon" Tractor Planes supplied by Messrs. Wm. Appleby, of Newcastle-on-Tyne.

**T**HIS is the second week of our grand new competition in which every fellow has an equal opportunity of winning the superb first prize—which is nothing less than a "Rex-Acme" Motor-Cycle—ready for the road. If you are a New Reader, you can still join in by obtaining last week's POPULAR (dated January 25th) which contained the opening puzzle-set and Key List of Names.

The contest is as simple as A B C. As before, all you have to do is to solve a few easy puzzles denoting boys' Christian names; names which boys use every day in speaking to one another. They are all quite easy, but, to make sure that every boy has the same fair and equal opportunity of winning, we gave last week the Full List from which all the names represented in the competition have been taken. So, you see, you really only have to fit the right name to each picture.

As you find the answers in this second set, write them IN INK in the spaces provided underneath. Then cut out the set and keep it, together with last week's puzzles, until next week, when the third set will appear. The competition will last for four weeks in all, and with the final set full directions for the sending in of your entries will be given.

**RULES** (which must be strictly adhered to.)

**T**HE "Rex-Acme" Motor-Cycle will be awarded to the reader whose solution of the four sets of "Who's Who" Puzzles are correct or most nearly correct, the 50 model Aeroplanes following in order of merit.

In the event of ties, the Editor reserves the right to divide the value of the prizes as he thinks best, but no competitor may receive more than one prize. The Editor's decision will be final and binding. You may send in as many attempts as you like, but only complete attempts made out IN INK on the "Who's Who" Picture-Sets Nos. 1 to 4 inclusive, will be considered.

Only one name may be written under each picture. Entries mutilated or bearing alterations or alternative solutions will be disqualified. No correspondence will be allowed. Proof of posting will not be accepted as proof of delivery, and no responsibility can be taken for entries lost, or mislaid, or delayed in the post or otherwise.

Employees of the proprietors of THE POPULAR and of "Modern Boy," in which the contest is also running, must not compete.

"WHO'S WHO" SET 2	
 <b>ER</b>	 <b>L</b>
9 _____	10 _____
 <b>N</b>	
11 _____	12 _____
 <b>L</b>	 <b>P H</b> <b>I</b>
13 _____	14 _____
	 <b>R M</b>
15 _____	16 _____

STILL A CHANCE To Win A MOTOR BIKE or Model Aeroplane!

SEE INSIDE.

# The POPULAR

Week Ending February 8th, 1930.  
No. 576 (New Series).

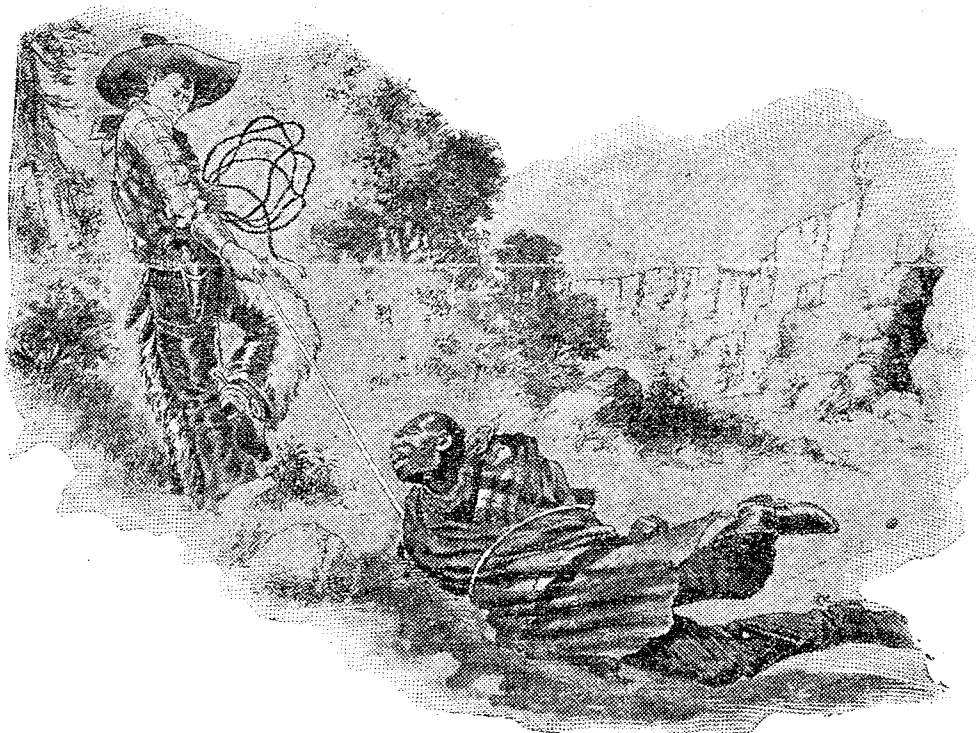
EVERY TUESDAY.



A "REX-ACME" MOTOR-BIKE, | and 50 WARNEFORD "DEMON"  
Ready for the Road, as 1st Prize | - TRACTOR AEROPLANES.

ENTER THE SIMPLE COMPETITION TO-DAY!

Black George, the mysterious and elusive road-agent, is brought to justice at last by none other than a boy outlaw, the Rio Kid!



# TRAPPING AN OUTLAW!

## BY RALPH REDWAY.

### THE FIRST CHAPTER. Dollars on the Trail!

"I GUESS I'll wait outside, sir!" said the Rio Kid, with a grin. "The marshal of Kicking Mule don't love this baby."

Colonel Sanderson smiled, as he drew rein outside the marshal's office on Main Street at Kicking Mule.

"You've said it!" he agreed.

He dismounted, hitched his horse to the post, and strode into the marshal's office.

The Rio Kid remained in the saddle.

From where he sat on the mustang, in the bright sunshine of the dusty street of Kicking Mule, he could see into the frame building; and he could be seen.

Seth Starbuck, the marshal, glanced past his caller, and his eyes rested on the horseman outside, for a moment or two, with a deadly glint in them. His hand made a motion towards his gun; but he checked it. Taking, openly at least, no heed of the boy puncher, Starbuck greeted the boss of the Bar-One ranch.

"Say, I'm sure glad to see you riding again, rancher," he said, though he did not look glad. He pushed a chair towards the Bar-One boss, and sat down himself on his desk. "You got over the damage?"

"I guess so; though it was a close call," said Sanderson. "Black George meant to make it last sickness for me; and he would have got away with it, if that puncher outside hadn't been along. He sure scared the road-agent off."

Starbuck's bearded lip curled.

"I allow I don't reckon that Black

George would be a whole lot feared of that kid puncher," he said with a sneer.

"He beat it, at any rate," said the rancher curtly, "and the puncher saved my life. But that ain't what I've come to tell you, Starbuck."

"Shoot!" said Starbuck, with equal curtiness.

"I'm buying steers on the Joshua-A ranch," said Sanderson. "A deal with Tom Carter of the Joshua-A. I'm sending to Juniper for fifteen thousand dollars from the bank."

"Next?"

"Fifteen thousand dollars don't grow on every clump of sassafras," said the rancher, "I guess I don't want Black George to cinch it on the trail. I want to know what you're doing about that road-agent. I ain't the only hombre in this section who allows that it's time he was roped in and strung up."

Starbuck shrugged his shoulders.

"I reckon if any guy in Kicking Mule can cinch that fire-bug, Black George, I'll hand over the office of marshal to him," he said. "That's all there is to it. He don't give a galoot a chance. I guess I hear a whole jugful about not roping in that coon. That Ranger guy you sent for didn't have better luck. Black George shot him up on the trail. He ain't never shot me up, anyhow."

Colonel Sanderson's keen eyes, under his grizzled brows, dwelt curiously on the hard face of the man before him, who looked so much more like a gunman than a town marshal.

"That's so!" he assented. "But there's marshals and sheriffs in Texas who'd call it pie to rope him in. A black coon—it ain't as if he was a white man with a mask on his face. A nigger—and there ain't many niggers in

this part of Texas, and not one in Kicking Mule. How does he keep out of sight all the time?"

"How's a guy to guess?" grunted the marshal. "He does keep outer sight—anyhow he ain't never seen. He gets his news from some scallywag in cahoots with him, and you know the hombre I suspect—" The marshal made a gesture towards the horseman waiting in the street.

"Guff!" said the rancher. "That kid puncher is straight as a string. Forget that, marshal."

"He's got you fooled, some," said Starbuck sourly.

"I guess he wasn't fooling, when he stood by me, and kept that murdering coon off me," said Sanderson. "Forget it, I'm telling you. Anyhow he don't matter—it's the fifteen thousand dollars I'm thinking of."

"If that puncher knows, I guess Black George will get wise to it," said the marshal obstinately.

"Guff!" snorted Sanderson. "Leave him out, I'm telling you. I want you to advise me as marshal of this burg. I could send a bunch of cowmen to Juniper to bring the money from the bank; but I can't easily spare them. You reckon the dollars could be brought in secret?"

The marshal seemed to reflect.

"If Black George gets wind of fifteen thousand dollars on the Juniper stage, I guess he will lay for the hearse," he said. "There ain't no two ways about that. It's a long trail and a lonely one; and he's stopped the stage there often enough. But if the dollars was packed secret, say under the driver's seat, and nothing said till after they got

here, I guess even that fire-bug could be fooled."

"Now you're talking!" agreed the rancher.

"But I guess you want to keep it dark," added Starbuck. "If that kid puncher gets wise to it, I guess—"

Sanderson interrupted him. "I'm telling you I trust that boy, and I don't aim to keep it secret from him. I can trust Jerry Cook; and I reckon I'll get him to take the dollars aboard in one of the horse-bags! Even if Black George holds up the stage, there ain't any reason why he should look into the horse bags, I reckon."

"There surely ain't!" agreed the marshal, "and I guess I'll let some of my deputies keep an eye on the trail, too, when the dollars are sent. When you aim to send for them?"

"I'm sending a messenger to the bank this morning. They'll fix it with Jerry Cook, and get the bundle on board by the stage this afternoon. But I'm telling you, Seth Starbuck, I ain't feeling easy in my mind, till Jerry drives the hearse into Kicking Mule."

There was a glimmer in the marshal's eyes for a moment.

"I guess it will be O.K.," he said. "But if Black George gets wise to it, you won't have to look further'n that kid puncher for the guy that spilled the beans."

"You sure got a grouch agin that puncher, Starbuck," said the rancher, laughing. "Well, it's settled, and I'll be getting back to the ranch; I got to see Mesquite started for Juniper."

And with a nod to the marshal, Colonel Sanderson strode out of the office, and remounted his pinto. He rode away with the Rio Kid; and the marshal, standing in the doorway of his office, looked after them as they went, with a glimmer in his eyes, and a sour grin on his hard face.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### The Kid on Hand!

"**B**ANKING on it?" asked the rancher, with a smile, when the two riders were clear of Kicking Mule.

The Rio Kid's face was dark with thought.

He shook his head.

"I ain't banking on it, sir," he said quietly. "But I guess if this racket don't put paid to Black George, nothing will. I'll tell all Texas that marshal guy is in cahoots with the road-agent, and there ain't no two ways about it."

"Jest what he allows about you," smiled Sanderson.

The Kid nodded.

"Sure; and that lets him out," he said. "When Black George lays for the Juniper stage this afternoon, and roots in the horse-bags for the dollars, Starbuck will be able to say that he warned you agin me. It's sure a cute game when he's the hombre all the time that puts the road-agent wise."

"I ain't sure of that," said the rancher. "I allows you've made out a case, and I'm giving you a chance to prove it up, but that's all."

"That's all I want," said the Kid. "Boss, there ain't nary doubt about it in my mind. First day I struck Kicking Mule I followed Black George's trail right to the town; and as it don't seem possible that a black coon could ride into Kicking Mule, I guess his side-partner, the marshal, was mad as a hornet when I told him, and pulled his gun on me; and he's been after my scalp ever since he knowed I was trailing Black George."

The Kid knitted his brows.

"I ain't saying I'm wise to the whole game," he said, "I ain't. I trailed the marshal up to a cave in the hills, and found the can of black paint he keeps there—that's for disguising his hoss, I reckon. But the marshal ain't never been seen on a black hoss, and the road-agent always rides a hoss as black as the ace of spades—as black as his own dog-goned face. But he never lent his hoss to Black George that time—for the trail showed only one hoss, the marshal's, and nary a sign of a man on foot—and I own up the whole thing's got me beat. But I reckon the marshal never went to the cave jest for a little pasear on his lonesome—no, sir. I sure want to know."

They rode on in silence for some minutes, approaching the fork in the trail.

The Kid spoke again at last.

"It's a dog-gone puzzle, and it's got me beat to a frazzle," he said. "But there's sure one thing clear to my mind, sir, and that is that Seth Starbuck is playing Black George's game. How he gets in touch with the road-agent I ain't guessing, but he does it, and his stamping-ground is that cave in the hills. If I don't miss my guess, Starbuck will be heading for that same spot, same as he did afore, in plenty time for Black George to hold up the stage and cinch them dollars out of the horse-bags."

"Mebbe," said the rancher, but his tone was doubtful.

"I ain't trailing him this time," said the Kid quietly. "I'm going to be there first. If the marshal comes up to that cave to-day, he'll sure find me on the watch, and if I don't get wise to the game that's going on, I'll sell my cayuse, and buy me a posada, and sell pulque to Greasers, I sure will."

"Luck!" said the rancher; and they parted at the fork of the trails, Colonel Sanderson riding on towards the Bar-One Ranch, and the Kid turning from the trail into the thickly-wooded hill-side.

In a few moments the Kid was lost to sight in the woods and scrubs. Once in the thick brush, he dismounted, and led Side-Kicker by the bridle.

The brush was dense, and no trail was marked; but the Kid could have found his way blindfold, after once covering the ground. And as he went he was careful to leave no sign to betray the fact that a horseman had already gone that way up the hill. If the marshal came that way, he was unlikely to ride in precisely the footsteps of the Kid; but if he did, the Kid left no sign to meet his eyes.

For several miles the Kid wound his way through the trackless brush till he reached an open space before a towering mass of cliff-like rocks.

In the face of the rock opened a cave, the cave to which the Kid, a few days before, had trailed the marshal of Kicking Mule.

Carefully the Kid concealed his mustang in a deep hollow in the thick of the brush. He could rely on Side-Kicker to keep motionless and silent till he heard his master's call. He unhooked the coiled riata from the saddle before he left the mustang.

He crept forward on foot, keeping carefully in cover, till he reached a favourable spot for watching the cave, without revealing his presence.

Then he settled down to wait.

It was weary waiting. Hours passed, the silence broken only by the buzz of insects in the brush.

But the Kid was as patient as an Apache watching for an enemy. He hardly stirred as the long minutes passed.

He was rewarded at last.

From the thick of the brush came a sound of crackling twigs as a horseman pushed his way through.

The Kid's eyes glittered.

A horseman was coming up the hill, and who could be approaching that lonely, almost inaccessible spot except the man he was expecting?

He waited, listening. From where he lay on the edge of the brush he could scan the whole of the open space in front of the cliff where the cave opened.

"Sho!" murmured the Kid.

The horseman pushed out of the brush and crossed the open tract to the cave. It was Seth Starbuck, the marshal of Kicking Mule, mounted on his brown horse. The marshal looked neither to the right nor the left, plainly not having the faintest suspicion that there was any human being within miles of him. He reached the cliff, dismounted at the mouth of the cave, and led the brown horse in.

The Kid breathed quickly.

He had figured correctly. Starbuck, after hearing from the rancher of the dollars that were coming on the stage that afternoon, had hit for the lonely cave in the hills. For what purpose, unless to put Black George wise to the plunder?

And yet, where was the black road-agent? The Kid had watched the cave for long hours, and there had been no sign of life there; he was sure that it was untenanted. Days ago he had explored the cave, and found no sign of camping. That was not the road-agent's den; it was simply a place of appointment, the Kid reckoned. Was Black George coming to meet the marshal there? It seemed the only explanation; yet the meeting might have taken place as safely and more easily in the thick woods lower down the hill. But the Kid was done with guessing and surmising; he was there to watch and to see.

The marshal of Kicking Mule and his horse had disappeared into the cave. There was no sound of anyone approaching. The woods were silent and still in the afternoon sunshine. The Kid waited with grim patience and watched. From the cave came sounds at last, and a man appeared in the opening, leading out a coal-black horse by the bridle.

And it was all the Kid could do to suppress the cry of amazement that rose to his lips.

For the man who appeared from the cave was not the marshal of Kicking Mule; he was a negro, dressed in a Mexican serape belted round his burly form; a Stetson hat pulled low down over his black face.

The Kid stared, almost unbelievably.

He knew that black face, with its flat nose, thick lips, and heavy, thick, bushy brows that overhung the eyes and almost hid them. More than once the Kid had seen the black road-agent.

"Black George!"

The Kid breathed the name.

"Thunder! It's Black George!"

## THE THIRD CHAPTER.

### The Secret of Black George!

**B**LACK GEORGE led the horse from the cave, and prepared to mount.

The Kid, thunderstruck, watched him, without motion.

For once, the Rio Kid was too surprised to act swiftly. Under his staring eyes, from the cover of the brush, the black road-agent mounted the black horse, evidently to ride down the hill and wait on the stage-trail for the coach from Juniper. It was hard for the Kid to believe his eyes as he saw him.



Where was the marshal? What had become of him? How had the black trail-thief got into the cave from which he now emerged? The Kid could have sworn that the cave had been untenanted all the time he was watching it. Where had the negro sprung from? A vague thought passed through the Kid's mind of some secret tunnel through the cliff, yet in his search of the cave, days ago, he had seen no sign of such a thing. The Kid had to confess that he was beaten to a frazzle.

But, whatever the meaning of the mystery, one fact was clear—there was the black road-agent, the terror of the cow country, not a dozen yards from him, aiming to take the trail and ride down the hill to hold up the Juniper coach. The Kid took a grip on himself and prepared for action.

Silently he rose to his feet in the brush, the riata in his hand. His gun was ready, if it was needed, but the Kid was not the man to shoot a guy down from cover if he could help it. Neither did he want gun-play with Black George. His aim was to rope in the road-agent and make him a prisoner, and ride him into Kicking Mule. There was always time for gun-play if he failed with the rope. But the Kid was not the man to fail with the rope.

The marshal, he figured, was still in the cave, and there was no doubt he would emerge, gun in hand, to the aid of his confederate, when the Kid tackled the black trail-thief. But once the rope was on the black rider, the Kid's gun was ready for the marshal if he chipped in.

Black George was on his horse, riding across the open space, heading for the brush, that in a few moments more would have swallowed him from sight. But those few moments were not granted him.

The Kid stepped clear of the thickets, and his arm swept through the air. The rope whizzed, uncoiling as it flew.

Before the road-agent even knew that he was assailed, the noose of the lasso dropped over his shoulders.

In that second, as the Kid's ready drag tightened the rope, the road-agent's hand flew to a gun, but the grip of the riata fastened his arms down to his sides, with a grip that was like a band of steel.

The next second, Black George was torn from his saddle by the jerk of the rope, and sent crashing to the ground.

A startled yell left his lips as he fell.

The black horse shied, and trotted off a few paces, and stood riderless. The black road-agent sprawled on the rough ground, struggling madly with the gripping noose that was fast round him, pinning his arms to his sides. The Kid's fierce pull on the rope gave him no chance of getting the noose loosened, and with his arms pinned, he could not get at a gun.

The Kid passed the rope to his left hand, a gun was in his right now. His eyes flashed to the opening of the cave, in expectation of seeing the marshal of Kicking Mule emerge. No man in the cave could have failed to hear the infuriated yelling of the lassoed road-agent as he wrenched and struggled with the gripping cord.

But the marshal did not appear.

If he was there, he was keeping close. He was there—he had to be there—unless there was a secret way out of the cave through the cliff behind. But if he was there, the Kid saw nothing and heard nothing of him. Dragging at the rope with his left hand, lifting the gun with his right, the Kid watched

tensely, but the marshal did not show up.

"Carry me home to die!" muttered the Kid in perplexity.

No sound came from the cave—no movement. Was Starbuck watching for a chance to take a treacherous pot-shot? The Kid could not get it—he was puzzled. But he holstered his gun at last, and put both hands to the jerking rope. He was not going to deal with the road-agent in the open, at the risk of a sudden pot-shot from the cave. With a powerful grasp on the rope, he plunged into the brush, dragging the lassoed man after him, rolling and bumping on the rough ground.

Yell after yell of fury came from Black George, as he was dragged helplessly along at the end of the lasso.

The Stetson hat was brushed from his head. The folded serape was torn on rough stones. In a breathless, cursing bundle, the captured road-agent rolled over under the drag of the merciless rope, and was drawn struggling into the cover of the brush.

Then the Kid rapidly coiled the rope, keeping it taut as he coiled, approaching the sprawling road-agent with every turn of it.

In a few moments more, he was standing over the gasping, cursing ruffian. He stooped over him and knotted the rope, giving Black George no chance now of loosening the loop and getting his arms free.

Then he scanned his prisoner.

Still there was no sound or sign from the cave, the marshal of Kicking Mule did not appear. But the Kid was about to learn what had become of the marshal of Kicking Mule.

As he scanned the sprawling, breathless man at his feet, amazement came into the Rio Kid's face.

He gasped.

"Jumpin' snakes!"

The Stetson hat was gone, revealing the head of the road-agent, and instead of the negro's wool that the Kid would have expected to see, he saw a rough shock of hair. It was such hair as had never grown on the cabeza of a black man.

The Kid's almost stunned glance turned on the road-agent.

The eyes were blazing with an almost mad fury. But the features were strangely still.

"Carry me home to die!" muttered the Rio Kid, as he understood at last the strange secret of Black George and the marshal of Kicking Mule—the secret of which no man in the country had dreamed, of which the Kid, keen as he was, had never dreamed.

He stooped, heedless of the furious cursing of the captured man, and ran his fingers over the black face.

Even at a distance of only two or three feet, the Kid could not have doubted that it was the face of a negro. But the touch of his fingers told him a different story.

Why the mysterious road-agent had never worn a mask, to hide the fact that he was a negro, had often puzzled Kicking Mule. But the Kid knew why now.

The black face was itself a mask.

It had never, the Kid reckoned, been made in the cow country. The man had had that mask manufactured in some city, where such things were made for use in the theatres. It was made with great skill, fitting perfectly to the face and the bushy, over-hanging brows completely hid the holes that were left for the eyes, the thick lips concealed the slit that was left for breathing. The neck-scarf met the mask where it ended under the chin. Even now he knew that

it was a cunningly-contrived mask, it was difficult for the Kid to believe that a white man's face was behind the black skin, so complete was the illusion.

"By the great horned toad!" said the Kid blankly.

A fierce oath answered him. The eyes from the black face burned at him with mad rage.

The Kid gave a chuckle.

"And me watching the cave for the marshal after I had roped in this cuss!" he ejaculated. "Kid, you sure are some bonehead!"

Leaving the man securely bound in the lasso, still struggling in the brush, the Rio Kid approached the black horse, and caught it. He knew now the use of the can of black paint in the cave, it had turned the marshal's brown horse into the black steed ridden by the mysterious road-agent. The Kid led the disguised horse into the brush, and tethered him close by the panting trail-thief.

"I guess we're going for a little pasear together, Black George," he remarked pleasantly. "You ain't hitting the stage-trail to-day, and holding up the colonel's dollars, I reckon! No, sir! You're coming for a little pasear with me, and we're hitting for Kicking Mule."

The ruffian panted.

"Ten thousand dollars!" he said hoarsely. "Twenty thousand dollars to release me and keep the secret."

"Whose dollars, feller?" asked the Kid.

"Fifty thousand dollars!" hissed the road-agent desperately.

The Kid whistled.

"Say, you've sure made your pile in the hold-up business, Black George," he remarked. "You sure was on to a good thing, if you've stacked away a pile like that. I'll tell a man!"

"Fifty thousand dollars—I'll hand it to you in Kicking Mule, you're a stranger in this country—ride with fifty thousand dollars in your pocket!" hissed the bound man. "You ain't no call to horn into this."

"I guess I got a powerful call to horn in, feller," said the Kid. "I allowed I'd get you when you shot up that Ranger guy in cold blood on the Juniper trail. You durned skunk, you've killed more men than you've got fingers and toes—men that trusted you, too—men that talked to you friendly in Kicking Mule. I guess you're some poisonous polecat, feller, and you've got to the end of your trail. Can it!"

The Rio Kid swung the captured road-agent to the back of the black horse. With a length of trail-rope he bound him there. A call brought Side-Kicker trotting to his side. The Kid mounted his mustang, and started down the hill through the brush, leading his prisoner after him with the riata.

#### THE FOURTH CHAPTER. Rough Justice!

COLONEL SANDERSON, standing outside the Golden Mule Hotel in the cow-town, looked up the rugged street of Kicking Mule, and his eyes brightened. From the open prairie, a horseman dashed into the town; Mesquite Bill, the foreman of the Bar-One. He was waving his Stetson excitedly in the air, and yelling at the top of his voice, though as yet he was too far off for the rancher to hear what he said.

Others, as well as the colonel, stared at the excited cowman, as he came down the irregular street with a crashing of wild hoofs, in the midst of a cloud of dust. Men came out of the

Golden Mule, and others stopped in the street, to stare at Mesquite Bill.

"It's news!" muttered the colonel.

Clatter! clatter! crash! In a cloud of dust, Mesquite dashed up, and dragged in his broncho so suddenly, that the horse almost fell back on its haunches. Sanderson strode towards him.

"Spill it, Bill!" he snapped.

Mesquite spluttered.

"He's got him!"

"H e — w h o — what —"

"That kid puncher!" howled Mesquite, brandishing his hat again. "He's sure got him — got Black George."

"Got Black George!"

The colonel gasped out the words; they were repeated in a roar by the others who heard the foreman.

"Black George! Cinched?"

"Cinched!" yelled Mesquite. "I'll tell a man! I'll tell the world! Carry me home to die, if that kid puncher ain't riding him into town, tied on his horse! Search me!"

"Great snakes!" gasped Sanderson.

There was a roar in the street of Kicking Mule. The news ran like wild-fire. Carter, of the Joshua-A Ranch, Hanson of the Sundown, came out of the Golden Mule, their faces full of excitement. Sanderson yelled to them:

"Say, he's cinched Black George—that kid puncher of the Bar-One has roped in Black George! He's riding him into town!"

There was a rush along the street towards the prairie trail. Fifty or sixty men had gathered already; others were gathering. It was the wildest excitement that had ever been known in Kicking Mule.

"Black George cinched!" said Carter of the Joshua-A. "Search me! I guess that is some news."

"And that kid puncher's worked the rifle!" exclaimed the boss of the Sundown. "I guess that will make Seth Starbuck look sick, after he's been fooling about that fire-bug for years on end."

"He sure will be sick!" chuckled Mesquite Bill. "But not so sick as Black George, when this town gets hold of that coon."

There was a wild roar.

"Here they come!"

At the end of the street appeared the Kid, riding Side-Kicker, and leading on a rope a horseman who was bound to a black horse. A crowd surged round them already; it thickened as they drew nearer to the hotel, where the three ranchers stood in a group; and the Kid had to slow down. Fierce hands were stretched out towards his prisoner on all sides; but the Kid waved them off.

"Hands off, fellers—hands off! The guy is sure cinched—but I'm handing

him over to my boss: I guess you can leave it to Colonel Sanderson to deal with that galoot! Hands off!"

And the men of Kicking Mule stood back to let the riders pass, closing in and following them. The Rio Kid rode up to the group of ranchers outside the Golden Mule, and lifted his Stetson.

"I guess you want this hyer fire-bug, gentlemen!" he said.

"Lynch him!" came a roar, from almost every throat in Kicking Mule.

in the serape, the man from whose hidden face the cunning disguise had been stripped, was the marshal of Kicking Mule! Savage defiance mingled with despair in the bearded, haggard face, that was now revealed to all eyes. For some seconds, there was silence; and then there was a roar from a hundred throats.

"Starbuck! The pizen skunk! String him up!"

"Lynch him!"

The crowd closed in, furiously, relentlessly. The discovery that the red-handed miscreant who had terrorised them for years, was the town marshal of Kicking Mule, gave the finishing touch to the frenzy of the excited crowd.



"Lynch him!" came the roar from almost every throat in Kicking Mule.

Wolfish eyes were fixed on the ruffian who had so long terrorised the cow country. There were guns in many hands now, as if the cowmen were too impatient to wait for the rope. But Colonel Sanderson waved back the surging, infuriated crowd.

"Hold in your hosses, fellers," said the Kid coolly. "I guess you want to know who this guy is! You'll sure be some surprised when you see his face, I reckon."

"I guess I can see his face plain enough," growled Carter, of the Joshua-A. "It's Black George."

"You've said it!" grinned the Kid. "But he's sure somebody else, too—somebody that you guys know. That black skin comes off'n his face—"

"What?"

"This hyer burg never got Black George, because you allowed that he was a coon!" said the Kid. "And I guess I was sure fooled like the rest, till I roped him in and saw him close. But I'll tell the world that he ain't no coon, any more'n I am; there's a white man's face under that black skin."

The cunning mask that seemed moulded to the features of the road-agent was roughly dragged away. Then, as the white man's face was revealed, there was a gasp of stupefaction from the Kicking Mule crowd.

"Seth Starbuck!"

"The marshal!"

The roar of astonishment was followed by a breathless silence. The man

"Lynch him!"

The road-agent was surrounded, by fierce eyes, threatening faces, clutching hands. Bowie knives slashed through the rope that tied him to the horse; many hands grasped him and tore him from the broncho's back; in the midst of a whirling, raging crowd, he was dragged to the tall cottonwood that grew opposite the Golden Mule Hotel. Colonel Sanderson looked on with a grim face. The Kid slipped from his saddle. Mesquite Bill plunged into the crowd with a riata in his hand. The Kid walked quietly into the Golden Mule. He had handed over the road-agent, the merciless robber and slayer of the trails, to the justice that had so long waited for him; but he did not care to take part in the last scene.

Justice, swift and sure, was meted out to Black George. The vengeance of the cow-town that he had so long deluded and betrayed, fell fiercely on the marshal of Kicking Mule. The roar of six-guns awoke every echo of the town, riddling with bullets the body of the desperado that swung from a branch of the cottonwood.

Black George had ridden his last trail; Kicking Mule had lost its marshal!

THE END.

(Don't miss next week's Western thriller, entitled: "THE RIO KID'S NEW PAL!")

# LAST WEEK—Post Your Efforts NOW!

NOTHING  
TO PAY

1ST PRIZE  
AND  
**50** MODEL  
PLANES

**REX-ACME**  
MOTOR-BIKE

Warneford "Demon" Tractor Planes  
supplied by Messrs. Wm. Appleby, of  
Newcastle-on-Tyne.

MUST  
BE WON

## How To Send In Your Entries.

We have now come to the fourth and final week of this contest; so you must complete your entries and send them in without delay.

We give you here the Fourth Set of puzzles to solve. As before, each of the pictures represents a boy's Christian name. They are quite easy, but to make the contest absolutely fair and equal for every boy, we have already given the Full List of names containing every solution required in the entire contest in the "Popular" dated January 25th.

As you find the solutions, write them IN INK in the spaces provided underneath, sign your name and address on the coupon attached to this set, and cut out the whole tablet.

Now gather together the three previous sets, and pin all four together in order, so as to form one complete entry. Place the entry in a properly stamped envelope and post it to:

The POPULAR "Who's Who,"  
5, Carmelite Street,  
London, E.C.4 (Comp.),

so as to arrive there not later than THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 20th, 1930. Efforts arriving after that date will be disqualified.

### RULES (which must be strictly adhered to.)

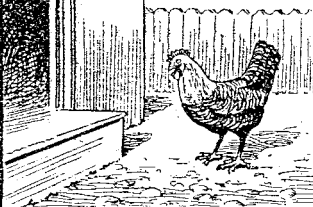
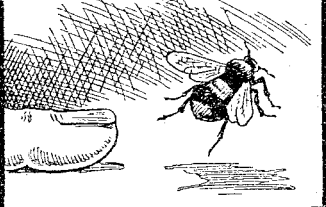
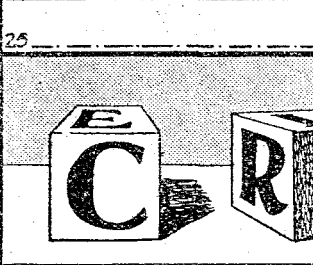


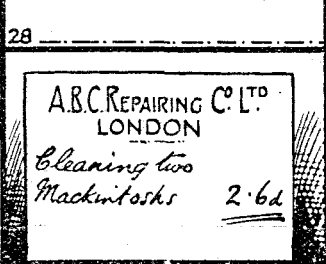
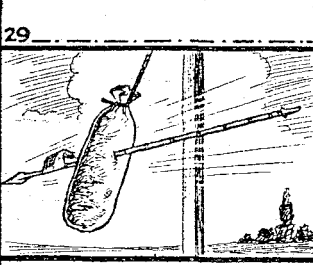
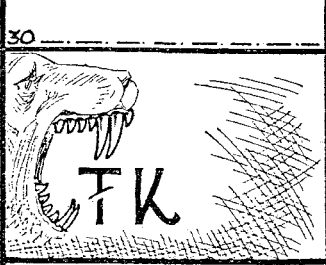
THE "Rex-Acme" Motor-Cycle will be awarded to the reader whose solution of the four sets of "Who's Who" puzzles are correct or most nearly correct, the 50 Model Aeroplanes following in order of merit.

In the event of ties, the Editor reserves the right to divide the value of the prizes as he thinks best, but no competitor may receive more than one prize. The Editor's decision will be final and binding. You may send in as many attempts as you like, but only complete attempts made out IN INK on the "Who's Who" Picture-Sets Nos. 1 to 4 inclusive, will be considered.

Only one name may be written under each picture. Entries mutilated or bearing alterations or alternative solutions will be disqualified. No correspondence will be allowed. Proof of posting will not be accepted as proof of delivery, and no responsibility can be taken for entries lost, or mislaid, or delayed in the post or otherwise.

Employees of the proprietors of The POPULAR and of "Modern Boy" in which the contest is also running, must not compete.

THE POPULAR.—No. 577.

"WHO'S WHO"		SET 4	
		25	26
		27	28
		29	30
		31	32
I agree to accept the Editor's decision as final and binding.			
Signed .....			
Address .....			
..... 'Popular.'			