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# THE RIO KID'S NEW PAL!

BY  
**RALPH REDWAY.**



Ride the trails with the Rio Kid; camp in the hills with this daring boy outlaw, for he will lead you into adventures galore!

### THE FIRST CHAPTER. Comrades of the Bar-One!

**T**HE Rio Kid hummed the tune of a Mexican fandango as he came out of the bunkhouse at the Bar-One Ranch in the bright sunny morning. The morning was bright, but not brighter than the face of the Kid. Life seemed good in these days to the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. It had seemed good to the Kid ever since he had joined Colonel Sanderson's outfit at the Bar-One, and the Kid reckoned that it was a lucky day when he had first struck the Kicking Mule country.

Mesquite Bill, the foreman of the ranch, gave him a nod and a grin. He liked the new recruit, as every other man in the bunch did. What they would have thought had they known what he was called in other parts of Texas the Kid sometimes wondered. But they did not know, and the Kid had no hunch to tell them. His name was Carson at the Bar-One, and he was a cowpuncher like the rest, and he was more than content to let the Rio Kid fade out of existence.

"Say, you look like you'd lost a Mexican cent and found a Texas dollar!" said the Bar-One foreman.

The Kid laughed. "I'm sure pleased to belong to this outfit," he answered. "The Bar-One suits me fine! It's a good ranch, and a good boss, and there ain't a guy in the bunch that ain't a white man. Say, where's Yuba?"

"Waitin' for you in the corral." The Kid swung away towards the corral gate, the foreman's glance following him approvingly. Boy as he was, the Kid was as useful a man as any in the bunch, and the oldest hand could teach him nothing about riding and roping. They knew little of him; he had never told them whence he came, or with what outfit he had ridden before. But there were plenty of galoots in Kicking Mule who had no hunch to talk about the past. The Kid was taken at face value; and if he needed a recommendation, all Kicking Mule knew that

he had roped in Black George, the road-agent, who had been the terror of the cow country for years.

The Kid walked into the corral and looked round for Yuba Dick, the horse-wrangler.

Dick was sitting on a rail, with a well-worn deck of cards on his knee, patiently and solemnly dealing himself hands. Yuba Dick was a young man, not many years older than the Kid—a good-looking young man, rather given to touches of elegance in his clothes, as straight as a die, but with one besetting weakness—a passion for draw poker. He was a gambler to his finger-tips, and an unlucky one; and when he drew his pay, it seldom lasted him twenty-four hours. More than once, on leave to the cow-town, Yuba Dick had trudged home on the hoof, having lost his cayuse as well as his dollars at his favourite game.

The Kid's sunny face clouded a little at the sight of Dick's occupation. He had become more friendly with Yuba than with any other man in the bunch, from a similarity of age and tastes, but that taste of the horse-wrangler's for draw poker the Kid did not share. And he disliked to see his friend the slave of such a weakness.

"Say, Yuba, it's burning daylight," said the Kid.

Yuba finished the hand he was dealing and examined it before he looked up; then he glanced at the Kid and grunted.

"It sure gets my goat!" he said. "Look at that hand! A full house, three aces, and two jacks! I never corral a hand like that when I'm playing poker at Kicking Mule. It gets my goat!"

"Aw, forget it!" said the Kid. "We got to get that string of hosses over to the Joshua-A, and you fooling around with a deck of cards while we're burning daylight! Forget it!"

Yuba Dick sighed, slid from the rail, and slipped the deck of cards into his pocket.

"Say, I reckon the luck will turn one of these days, Two-gun," he said.

"I've sure had a hunch for a long time that I'm going to make a ten-strike. I dreamed last night that I'd won a thousand dollars from a man from San Antone."

"You won't never do it while you're awake," said the Kid. "I guess I will—some day," said the horse-wrangler confidently. "I tell you I got a hunch."

"Dog-gone your hunches!" said the Kid. "Come and pick out the cayuses for Carter, or the boss will have a hunch to boot you off'n the ranch and get a good man."

Yuba Dick grinned and proceeded to select the horses. The Kid saddled up his own mustang, Side-Kicker, for the ride. The wrangler soon had the horses on the string, and saddled his own broncho; then he paused to look at the Kid's mount and to give the Kid a curious look.

"Say, what's the big idea?" he asked. "How come?" asked the Kid, though he guessed what was coming.

"You got that cayuse painted with brown stockings," said Yuba. "If you want a painted hoss, why don't you buy yourself a pinto? What's the big idea in painting him brown stockings?"

"Just a fancy of mine," said the Kid indifferently. "I like him better that-a-way."

Yuba chuckled. "I guess if we didn't know you was a white man, Two-gun, the boys would figure that you'd rustled that cayuse," he said. "I guess he would look plumb different without them stockings."

"Well, I never rustled him," said the Kid. "I've had that critter since he was big enough to carry me. And I reckon it's time we was riding hosses, instead of talking about them, Yuba."

"Sure!" And they mounted and rode, with the string of half a dozen bronchos trailing behind the horse-wrangler.

There was a shade of thoughtfulness on the Kid's brow as he rode away.

from the Bar-One. Side-Kicker, the grey mustang, was as well known as his master, and the Kid had painted him brown stockings when he first rode into the Kicking Mule country. When he located at the Bar-One it would have been wiser to part with that well-known cayuse, but the Kid had no hunch to part with Side-Kicker.

Yuba Dick was looking thoughtful, too; and the Kid wondered whether he was thinking about the grey mustang's stockings. But as the ranch disappeared from sight behind and Yuba Dick began to talk he soon showed that he was thinking of his own business. His talk ran on the subject of the "hunch" he had that some day he was going to win a pot of dollars at poker. Yuba was looking forward to his next leave, when he hoped that that luck was going to materialise.

"Say, I guess we might as well take in Kicking Mule on our way," Yuba remarked after a time. "It ain't more'n a few miles out of the trail for the Joshua-A, and—"

"You dog-goned bonehead!" said the Kid. "You figuring on getting into a game of poker while you're on the boss' business, with a string of hosses in charge? You sure are the world's prize boob!"

"There's a man in Kicking Mule that cleared me out last pay-day," said Yuba. "Now, I got a hundred dollars, and I guess I'd like to see the guy."

"And you'd leave your hundred dollars in his rags, and hit the Joshua-A after sundown," said the Kid.

"I tell you I got a hunch—"

"And I tell you you're a bonehead!" said the Kid. "The boss will be hoppin' mad if you don't get them critters over to the Joshua-A before sundown. Forget it, I'm telling you!"

Yuba sighed, with a glance towards a distant patch of smoke on the blue sky that told where the cow-town of Kicking Mule lay. There were a hundred dollars in Yuba's pockets, and money always burned in his pockets till he had lost it at poker.

But he yielded the point, and the two cowmen gave Kicking Mule a wide miss, and rode on with the string of bronchos across the solitary prairie towards Carter's ranch.

"You don't never play poker?" asked Yuba.

"Too much savvy," answered the Kid. "You won't never make a fortune punching cows!" declared Yuba.

"I guess I'll make a fortune punching cows afore you make the price of a can of beans playing poker!" grinned the Kid.

And they rode on with the clattering string of horses towards the ford of the Kicking Mule creek, where they aimed to stop for food. And it was at the ford that they met up with the stranger.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### Yuba Dick Makes His Ten-Strike!

THE stranger was camped at the ford.

Wide and shallow, the creek flowed through muddy banks, glimmering in the noonday sun. Tracks of cattle and horses led thickly down to the ford. Beside the trail, within a lasso's cast of the creek, a buckboard was drawn up, with a horse tethered by it, and the stranger sat in the shade of the buckboard, eating canned beans and bully beef. As the two cowmen rode up and pulled rein he looked at them under the brim of his Stetson, nodded, and called out "Howdy!"

"Howdy!" answered Yuba Dick civilly, and the Kid nodded.

The stranger was a prosperous-looking man. He wore riding-clothes that

had been made in a town, rings on his fingers, and a diamond in his tie. His face was fat and rosy, but his eyes hard and cold, and the Kid had no liking for his looks. He had the eyes of a sharp, the Kid reckoned. But on a lonely prairie trail Yuba Dick was glad to meet up with a stranger, and the Kid was not sorry; and the cowmen from the Bar-One camped down, and ate their beans and bacon in company with him.

The Kid was not much of a talker; he had learned silence on many a lonely trail in his outlaw days. But the stranger talked enough for two, if not for three or four. He was a drummer, he told them, and his name was Brown—Nathaniel P. Brown. He was from Austin, and he was drumming the cow country for orders for a special kind of stirrup-iron; and he had taken so many orders that he guessed he was satisfied. He slapped a fat wallet that was fastened to his belt, and announced that he'd lost count of the dollars he'd taken since he had hit the cow country.

The Kid heard him almost in silence; Yuba Dick with a good-humoured grin on his sunburnt face. The man was talkative, boastful, confidential, and fond of the sound of his own voice; but the Kid had met boobs and boneheads before, and did not mind.

After feed, the stranger produced cigars, and they were good and expensive cigars. Yuba Dick accepted one; the Kid politely declining. The Kid, whose life had often depended on the accuracy of his shooting, could not afford to smoke cigars.

The stranger smoked, and Yuba Dick smoked, and Mr. Brown's conversation turned from the subject of his successful drumming, to a game of poker he had played at his last stop, at Post-Oak. He illustrated that game by taking a pack of cards from his wallet and dealing the various hands; and Yuba Dick, with the keenest possible interest now, watched and listened.

The Kid grew restless.

He reckoned that they had halted long enough, and that it was time they were riding. And he had a well-founded fear that, at the sight of the cards, Yuba Dick would propose a little game; and he figured that Mr. Brown, with all his chatty blether, was the man to skin Yuba down to his boot soles.

"Say, I reckon we want to beat it, feller," said the Kid at last. "We sure got to hit the Joshua-A before sundown!"

"Aw, sit down and chew the rag sociable a piece!" said Yuba. "I was jest going to ask Mr. Brown if he'd care for a hand at poker."

"I'm your antelope, with the wool on!" announced Mr. Brown, and he handed the cards to Yuba to be shuffled.

The Kid grunted.

They began to play poker, with a box from the buckboard as a table. The Kid looked on for a few minutes, and then strolled away to the horses. Horses were good company for the Kid.

After a while, however, he sauntered back, and found the gamblers still going strong.

Yuba Dick's face was excited.

On the other hand, there was a very serious expression on the countenance of Mr. Brown, of Austin.

The Kid stared at them. Judging by their looks, Yuba was winning.

It was seldom that Yuba won anything like a stake at poker; and when he did he would always play on till he lost it again.

The Kid sighed.

If Yuba had lost his hundred dollars to the stranger the Kid would

have been sorry for his friend; but at least they would have pulled out for the ford and hit the trail for the Joshua-A.

But with Yuba Dick winning it looked like a long halt at the ford. So long as he had anything left he was not likely to tear himself away.

"Say, feller—" hinted the Kid.

Yuba stared up at him.

"Can it!" he said briefly.

"Feller, we're on the boss' business."

"Aw, can it, I tell you!"

Evidently Yuba Dick was not moving yet; he would not have moved if Colonel Sanderson had been going to fire him for delaying. Draw poker had him in its grip, heart and soul.

The Kid waited patiently. The string was in charge of the horse wrangler, and the Kid could not take them on without him, even if he had been disposed to leave his friend. He leaned against the buckboard and watched the game.

It looked as if Yuba Dick's hunch was coming true. For he was winning in that game hand over fist.

Little pots were raked in by the stranger; every now and then he corralled ten dollars, or fifteen dollars, or twenty dollars, in small bills. But whenever there was a big pot it seemed to go to Yuba Dick automatically.

More than once the stranger felt in his pockets in vain for small bills, and had to throw a large bill into the hat that served as a pool, and take out change. Yuba Dick's face was glowing.

He gave the Kid a delighted grin.

"What'd I tell you about my hunch, feller?" he asked. "Say, you want to believe in that hunch, you surely do. Look!"

"I'll say you're the prize poker player of Texas, hombre!" said Mr. Brown disconcertedly. "I sure never hit such a bad streak. Look here, ain't your pard taking a hand?"

"Nope!" said the Kid.

"Aw, take a hand and be sociable. Two-gun!" said Yuba. "I guess this hombre is aiming to leave his dollars in Kicking Mule, and I ain't no hog. I don't want to cinch the whole caboodle."

"I guess I can afford to lose some dollars," said Mr. Brown boastfully, "and your friend's sure welcome to corral all he can!"

But the Kid shook his head.

"I guess poker ain't my long suit," he said. "I'm powerful glad to see you in luck, Yuba; but we got to hit the Joshua-A—"

"Dog-gone the Joshua-A!" snorted the horse-wrangler. "I'm telling you, my luck's turned, and I ain't quitting while Mr. Brown has got the sand to keep on!"

And the Kid waited as patiently as he could. But he was glad to see that Mr. Brown lacked the "sand" to keep on, after a time. He gave a grunt and rose.

"I'm quitting!" he said. "I got to get on to Juniper, and I ain't travelling after dark. I'll see you agin some day, cowboy, and win all them dollars back."

"I'll sure be glad to see you any time you like to horn in at the Bar-One!" grinned Yuba. "Sure you'll quit?"

"You've said it!"

And Mr. Brown harnessed his horse to the buckboard, said farewell to the cowmen, and drove away by the rugged trail. He drove in the direction of Juniper; but when a fold of the prairie hid him from sight, Mr. Brown changed his direction, for reasons best known to himself.

"Well, we hitting the trail, Yuba?" asked the patient Kid.

"Aw, wait a piece, while a guy counts up his dollars!" argued Yuba. "Say, feller, I've struck it rich this time! Look at that!" He held up a hundred-dollar bill. "Five hundred—six hundred—seven—and fifty! Feller, I sat down to this game with a hundred dollars in small bills."

"And you've cinched seven hundred and fifty?" asked the Kid, in great wonder.

"Nope! Six hundred and fifty. That guy's got my small bills," said Yuba. "He's sure welcome to them, when he's left me his big ones!" Yuba Dick chuckled jubilantly. "I guess I've made just about six hundred and fifty clear. And how long you reckon I'd take to make that punching cows and tcting around hosses?"

"Some luck!" said the Kid.

"Did I say I had a hunch?" chuckled Yuba. "Did I, feller? I guess I did. Say, I'm the poker-player from Pokersville! I guess I'm getting leave from the boss and hitting Kicking Mule to-night, and makin' the most of it while it lasts. Say, I'm going to round up the town! You believe me."

And Yuba was grinning as the comrades rode on across the ford with the string of horses. All the remainder of the ride to the Joshua-A ranch, Yuba talked of his good luck, and of making the most of that wonderful vein of fortune while it lasted.

The Kid smiled and nodded, but it was not pleasant hearing to him. He did not reckon that Yuba's seven hundred and fifty dollars would last out the night once he got among the poker sharps at Kicking Mule, and he could not help figuring that it would have been better for Yuba if he had lost instead of winning. But he did not dash the joyousness of his friend by handing out unwelcome wisdom.

They reached the Joshua-A, and the horses were handed over; and Yuba Dick, speaking for himself and his companion, declined the hospitality of the Carter bunkhouse and rode homeward at once. He was in haste to hit the Bar-One again, and get leave from the boss for his projected raid on the poker sharps of Kicking Mule.

"Say, I guess we're going hell-for-leather, Two-gun!" he said, when they rode away from the Joshua-A. "Let that cayuse of yours out!"

And he dashed off at a gallop, the Kid easily keeping pace on Side-Kicker. They kept up the pace, hot-foot, all the way back to their ranch, and arrived at the Bar-One long before sundown. And they came up to the Bar-One with sweating horses in a cloud of dust.

**THE THIRD CHAPTER.**  
**Trouble in the Bunkhouse!**

**M**ESQUITE BILL, standing before the bunkhouse at Bar-One, stared at the two riders as they halted, covered with dust and foam.

"Say, you guys was in a powerful hurry!" he said. "What's been biting you?"

"I guess I got to hit town to-night!" said Yuba Dick, as he slid breathlessly from his sweating broncho.

"Guess agin!" grunted the foreman. "You ain't got leave!"

"I'm sure getting leave, old-timer!" "You surely ain't!" retorted Mesquite Bill gruffly. "You've had your leave, you pesky bonehead, and you're wanted to earn your corn! Take that

head!" he said "He's a pesky, sour, all-fired boob! I don't give a Continental red cent for Mesquite! Say, if I don't get leave, I'll get fired! What'll I care when I can make my fortune playing poker?"

"Oh, great gophers!" said the Kid, in dismay.

"Scrapin' cayuses in a corral when I can make hundreds of dollars a day at poker!" sneered Yuba. "Aw, I ain't that size in boneheads, and don't you forget it, feller! I'm gettin' that leave, or I'll know the reason why! You watch out!"

He strode to the bunkhouse, where most of the outfit were gathered to supper. There was a determined expression on Yuba's face and a glint in his eyes, and his jaw looked very square.



The Kid leaped at Yuba, grasping his gun-arm, and forcing it upwards. "Quit that silly game, you gink!" he snapped.

cayuse and rub him down, if you ain't forgotten how to treat a hoss! You got him in a pesky lather!"

The Kid was already taking Side-Kicker into the corral, to rub him down after that wild race back to the ranch. Yuba Dick followed him in, with a frowning brow. He cared for his broncho; but there was a black look on his handsome face while he was doing it, and he made a string of uncomplimentary remarks concerning Mesquite Bill. When he left the corral with the Kid, the latter touched his arm.

"Forget it, feller," the Kid advised, "Bill is foreman of this outfit, and what he says goes. Kicking Mule will sure keep."

Yuba gave an angry snort. "I'll tell you I'm hitting Kicking Mule this night, Two-gun! You come along with me and see the fun."

"But you can't go without leave, feller, and you don't want to hunt trouble with Mesquite," urged the Kid.

Another snort from Yuba. "Mesquite's a darned dog-goned bone-

The Kid followed him, with misgiving. He liked and respected the foreman of the ranch; but Mesquite Bill ran the bunch with a firm hand, and he was not the hombre to take back-chat from a man in the bunch. The horse-wrangler had had his leave, and he could not be spared from the ranch; and the foreman was certain not to let him go, and the Kid could not blame the foreman. But Yuba was his friend, and the Kid was troubled.

Yuba strode into the bunkhouse, and a dozen pairs of eyes were turned on him. Mesquite Bill gave him a rather grim look. Yuba dragged a bunch of bills out of his pocket and held them up. "Look at that!" said the horse-wrangler.

"Say, you been holdin' up the bank at Juniper?" exclaimed Tucson.

"Stoppin' pilgrims on the trail," asked Colorado Jim.

Yuba grinned.

"I sure been playing poker!" he announced.

There was a roar of laughter in the bunkhouse.

"Say, you guys can snicker!" exclaimed Yuba Dick. "I'm telling you I met up on the trail with a drummer from Austin, and I cleaned him out of that boodle! Yes, sir!"

"Say it again!" chuckled Mesquite.

"Ain't it true, Two-gun?" demanded Yuba.

"It's a cinch, you-uns!" said the Kid, with a nod. "Yuba sure cleaned that drummer guy out of six hundred and fifty."

"Great gophers!"

"And I'm sure going to follow the vein while it lasts!" chuckled Yuba. "I sure am, you guys! I'm hitting for Kicking Mule immediate after supper, and I guess I'll come back with thousands!"

"You'll come back on foot, arter losing your money and your hoss!" grinned Colorado.

"Aw, talk sense!" said Yuba. "I allowed I'd got a hunch that I was going to win a big stake. Don't this look like it?" He crammed the bills into his pocket. "I'm corning back with thousands, and don't you forget it!"

"You ain't coming back at all, because you ain't going, Yuba!" said Mesquite Bill. "You got to be on hand to fix up the remudas!"

"I'm asking you for leave to Kicking Mule, Mesquite!"

"And I ain't giving you none!"

Yuba's eyes gleamed. The Kid touched his arm persuasively, but the horse-wrangler shook off his hand. Yuba was in a state of excitement now that brooked no argument. He was like a man intoxicated with wine for the time. And the Kid, who liked him, was sorry to see it, and he wished that that dog-goned stranger from Austin had camped that day anywhere but at the Kicking Mule ford.

"You ain't giving me leave, Mesquite Bill!" demanded Yuba.

"I sure ain't!"

"Then, dog-gone you, I'm taking it!" roared the horse-wrangler angrily. "And you can chew on that, darn your hide!"

"You take leave you ain't given, and you're fired out of this bunch!" rapped Mesquite gruffly.

"And who cares a Continental red cent if he's fired out of this bunch?" snorted Yuba. "Aw, go into a corner and shake yourself, Mesquite! Fire me out of this bunch as soon as you darn like! Say, you figure that I'm freezing out to hoss-wrangling when I can make hundreds of dollars a day at poker! Say, I guess I'm quitting horse-wrangling, sir, and taking up poker! Yes, sir!"

"You dog-goned jay!" said Mesquite. "I guess that man from Austin must have been the world's boob to let you win money from him at poker! You won't strike another boob like that in a dog's age!"

"I guess I'm going to have the poker sharps at Kicking Mule busted afore the night's out!" boasted Yuba. "I'm sure going to round up the town! You hear me talk? Yes, sir! I'll say that my hunch is good, and I'm the poker player from Pokerville! Yes, sir!"

"You're the big stiff from Stiffville, you mean!" growled Mesquite. "Shut your bean trap, and sit down to your supper! You want to get to your bunk; you got to see to the cayuses in the morning!"

"Dog-gone the cayuses, and you, too, Mesquite! Ain't I shouting out to you that you can fire me as soon as you darn like?"

"You ain't fired yet, and you ain't hitting Kicking Mule!" said the foreman. "You can walk up to the house and ask the colonel for your time, if you want! But if you quit sudden when you're wanted on the ranch, arter the boss has always treated you fair and square, you're a dog-goned, white-livered greaser, and if you was worth shucks I'd pull a gun on you! But you ain't worth burning powder, you all-fired scallywag, and if you quit I'll take my quirt to you, and whip you off'n the ranch like you was a half-breed's mangy dog!"

Yuba crimsoned. The foreman was angry, and he did not measure his words, and the feeling in the bunkhouse was on the foreman's side. Even the Kid shared it, though he could feel for Yuba in his keen desire to follow up his "hunch" while it lasted.

"You'll take your quirt to me!" roared the horse-wrangler. "Why, you long-legged, pie-faced son of a Digger Injun, you ornery bean-feedin' Piute, I guess you ain't the size of man to take a quirt to me. If your face vasn't ugly enough already to frighten a bull buffalo I'd sure make it, if you talk to me about your quirt, you buldozin' pie-can! Shut up that barranca you call a mouth, afore I lay you on the floor of this bunkhouse!"

Mesquite Bill leaped to his feet. "That sure does it!" he roared, and he grabbed down a quirt that hung on the bunkhouse wall.

Yuba's hand flew to his gun. The punchers were all on their feet now, the bunkhouse in a roar. The Kid leaped at Yuba, grasped his gun-arm, and forced it upward.

"Let go, darn you!" yelled Yuba. "I ain't letting go none," answered the Kid. "Quit that gun, you swarved bonehead!"

"I'm telling you to let go!" shouted Yuba. "By thunder, you ain't no friend of mine if you don't let go my arm! Mesquite, you buldozin' Greaser, you pack a gun! Quit that quirt, and pull your gun, darn you! Stand out of the way, you, Carson, or you'll get yours!"

Mesquite Bill promptly pulled his gun. "Stand aside, Carson!" he rapped out.

But the Kid did not stand aside, and he still held Yuba's wrist in a grip of steel, rendering his gun-arm useless.

"I ain't standing away a whole lot," drawled the Kid. "You guys ain't going in for gun-play, unless you want to put the lead through me, and you're sure welcome to do that if you want."

It was dangerous work to stand between two angry and excited men, with guns in their hands. Every other man in the bunkhouse had crowded back to the walls, out of the line of fire. But the Kid was cool as ice, though he well knew his danger.

"Stand back!" roared Mesquite. "Git away, you pesky bonehead!" yelled Yuba.

"Not by a jugful," said the Kid. "I tell you that gun-play ain't coming on in this picture."

"Right!" said a voice at the doorway. "Put up your guns, you 'uns, and tell your boss what's the trouble."

#### THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

##### A Surprise!

COLONEL SANDERSON stood in the doorway of the bunkhouse.

The tumult ceased abruptly at the sight of the rancher and the sound of his voice.

Mesquite Bill jammed his gun back into its holster, and Yuba ceased to struggle in the grasp of the Kid. He allowed the Kid to drag down his hand

and force the gun into the holster. And the crowd of punchers ceased backing to the walls.

The boss of the Bar-One eyed them sternly.

"What's this trouble?" he demanded. There was silence for some moments; then Yuba Dick spoke sulkily.

"I guess I'm asking for my time, boss."

"I reckon if you're tired of this ranch you can quit when you want," said the colonel. "What's your grouch?"

Yuba looked a little shame-faced. "I ain't got no grouch, sir."

"He's sure got a hunch!" chuckled Colorado; and the punchers laughed. Yuba glared round at them.

"Snigger all you want!" he snorted. "I got a hunch, and I made a ten-strike, and there ain't no two ways about that. Boss, I've sure got to hit Kicking Mule. That pie-faced Mesquite ain't giving me leave, and I guess I want to be fired. That's the whole piece."

"I sure don't want to fire you, Yuba," said the colonel. "You're a good man with hosses, though I reckon you're some bonehead in other ways. What's bitin' you to go to Kicking Mule when you know you're wanted on the ranch?"

"I guess I'll come back if you want, and as long as you want me, sir," said Yuba, "though I reckon I'll never need to draw your pay no more. No, sir!"

"Yuba's made a ten-strike, sir," explained the Kid. "He met up with a man from Austin to-day, and won six hundred and fifty dollars from the jay, and it's sure got into his head a few."

Colonel Sanderson raised his eyebrows.

"Yuba won six hundred and fifty dollars from a stranger!" he ejaculated. "Sure!" said Yuba. "I had a hundred, and I won six hundred and fifty. Now I got seven-fifty in big bills—and here they are, sir."

Yuba flourished his wad. "This sure has got me guessing," said the colonel, in astonishment. "That man from Austin couldn't have known how to play poker, I reckon."

"He had the dust," said Yuba, "and he lost it like a little man. I been telling the guys for days that I got a hunch I was going to make a ten-strike, and I sure done it. And I aim to follow it up while it lasts, and that piecan Mesquite ain't going to stop me!"

Mesquite gave a snort. "I'll say—" he began.

But Colonel Sanderson stopped him with a gesture.

"Leave this to me, Mesquite," he said. "It sure has got me guessing what the man from Austin let Yuba win his dollars for."

"Let me nothing!" snapped Yuba. "I won them dollars at poker, and I'm telling this outfit that I can play poker, jest a few! Yes, sir!"

"He sure won it, sir," said the Kid. "That Austin guy won Yuba's little bills, and sure took them away with him; but Yuba won as many big bills as he lost little. It surprised me a whole lot. That galoot Brown's got Yuba's tens and fives, but he's left his hundreds and fifties with Yuba, and there they are. But that ain't no reason for the jay to hit Kicking Mule and lose it all agin!"

"Lose your great-grandmother!" said Yuba derisively. "Ain't I shouting out to you that I'm going to clean out Kicking Mule like it was a can of beans?"

He turned to the colonel. "I don't like quitting this outfit, sir," he said. "But I got a hunch, an' I'm following it up. Mesquite can sure go and shake himself; but I'll say to you, sir, that I'm sorry, but I got to go—I sure got to! I'm quittin' horse-wranglin' for poker, sir; and mebbe I'll come

back later and buy your ranch off'n you."

"Let me see them bills close," said the rancher.

"I guess you can see them all you want, sir," said Yuba; and he handed the wad to the colonel.

Colonel Sanderson examined them with a keep eye. All the punchers in the bunkhouse watched him, wondering what was in his mind—wondering still more when the colonel's thoughtful face broke into a grin.

He handed the bills back to Yuba. "That guy from Austin sure knowed what he was about when he corralled your small bills, Yuba, and let you win his big ones," he said.

"What?" gasped Yuba. "You hit Kicking Mule as soon as you like," said the colonel. "But don't you take them bills along and part with them."

"Why not?" demanded the horse-wrangler.

"Because you'll get four years in the pen, if you do, for passing counterfeit bills," answered the rancher.

Yuba staggered. "Counterfeit bills!" he repeated faintly.

"That's the size of it," said Colonel Sanderson. "And if you was anything but a boneheaded mutt you'd have guessed why you was let to win. That galoot from Austin has got away with your hundred dollars, and he's left you a bundle of wastepaper that you'll be cinched by the sheriff for passing, if you pass it. You got me?"

"Counterfeit bills!" gasped Mesquite. "Haw, haw, haw! That was why Yuba

won the dollars from the Austin guy! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Green goods!" gasped Colorado.

"Sawdust!" stuttered Tucson.

"Yuba's lost a hundred dollars, and won a bag of sawdust! Ha, ha, ha!"

The bunkhouse rocked with laughter. The Rio Kid joined in it; he could not help it. The expression on Yuba Dick's face was too much for him.

Yuba stood thunderstruck, gazing at the wad of bills in his hand.

He had made his ten-strike, and had wondered at his luck. It dawned on him now that that cunning Mr. Brown had wanted him to win, that the poker game was a stunt for passing counterfeit money, and that Mr. Brown was quite content to pocket small bills while he was losing large ones, because the small bills were good and the large ones were not.

"You—you sure, boss?" gasped the hapless horse-wrangler at last.

The colonel laughed.

"Plumb sure," he answered. "But you can ride over to Juniper, and ask them at the bank."

"By the great horned toad," gasped Yuba, "I'll sure ride over to Juniper. That scallywag was going to Juniper, and if I strike him I'll fill him so full of holes that he will pass for a colander!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the punchers.

"Aw, snigger all you want!" snorted Yuba; and he rushed out of the bunkhouse for his horse, followed by a roar.

Late that night Yuba Dick came riding in from Juniper.

He had left seven hundred and fifty dollars there. They were not worth

carrying home, after he had shown them at the bank and heard an opinion on them.

He was late, for he had hunted through Juniper, with a gun in his hand, for Mr. Brown. But the man from Austin and his buckboard had not been seen at Juniper, and Yuba rode away at last, disappointed. Mr. Brown, probably, was very far away by that time, doubtless looking for a game of poker with some other unsuspecting cow-puncher in another section, with an unlimited supply of hundreds and fifties to lose in exchange for tens and fives.

Yuba Dick did not take his "time." He did not hit Kicking Mule, and the poker sharps in the cow-town were not "busted" by the horse-wrangler from the Bar-One. For a whole day Yuba went about with a grouch, while his comrades chuckled and grinned, and asked him when he was going to make another ten-strike.

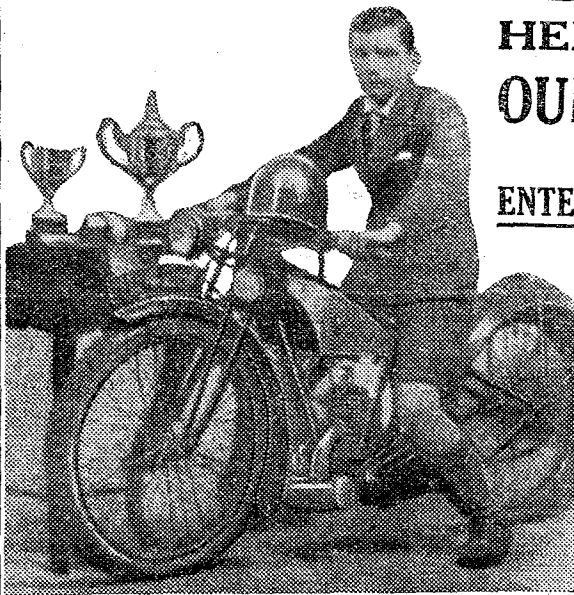
By the next day Yuba had recovered his spirits.

"I guess one swallow don't make a summer, Two-gun," he said to the Kid. "I got a hunch that I'm going to make a ten-strike, and it will sure come off some day. You watch out!"

And the Kid chuckled, and agreed that he would watch out, though not with any expectation of ever witnessing Yuba Dick's ten-strike!

THE END.

"YUBA DICK'S LAST GAME!" is the title of next week's roaring long tale of the Wild West!



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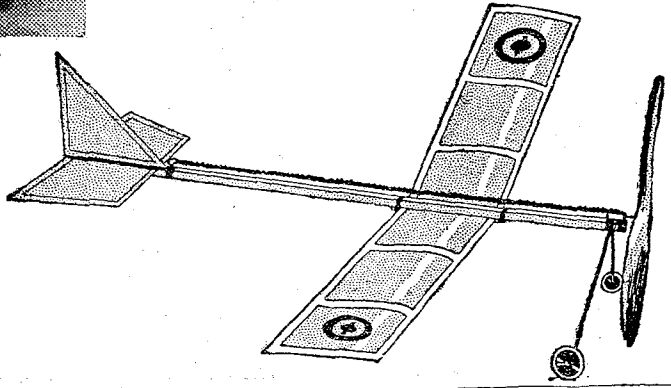
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OUR WESTERN YARNS ARE THRILLING THE WORLD!

# YUBA DICK'S LAST GAME!

By Ralph Redway.

When Yuba Dick, puncher of the Bar-One Ranch, is in urgent need of a pal, he finds one in the Rio Kid, boy outlaw!

## THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Kid is Not Pleased!

"YOU dog-goned bonehead!" said the Rio Kid.

Yuba Dick grinned.

"You pie-faced loceod gink!" said the Kid warmly.

"Aw, can it!" said Yuba. "You sure do shoot off your mouth a whole lot, feller."

"If you wasn't a friend of mine," said the exasperated Kid, "I'd sure take you by the back of the neck and the slack of your pants, and heave you out of this shebang on your cabeza, I sure would."

"And if you wasn't a friend of mine," retorted Yuba, "I'd sure pull a gun on you, and fill you so full of holes that any guy that saw you lying about would take you for a dog-goned sieve."

"Look here, you pesky geck—"

"Ain't I telling you to can it?" demanded the horse-wrangler of the Bar-One ranch. "You sure make a galoot tired."

The Kid, standing in the doorway of the Ace of Spades at Kicking Mule, glared at the horse-wrangler who sat at one of the little tables where they played poker.

Yuba Dick had a pile of chips before him, and a pack of cards in his hands, shuffling the same.

How long he had been sitting there, the Kid did not know; but it was a long time. Yuba Dick had dollars in his pockets, and when that was the case, his besetting weakness generally found him out. Up and down Kicking Mule the Kid had been hunting him, and he had found him at last—up to the neck in draw poker at the Ace of Spades.

"You're a durned double-crossin' scallywag," said the Kid indignantly. "You left me at the Golden Mule feedin', telling me you wanted to see a man. And that was three hours ago."

"Waal, I did want to see a man," said Yuba, "and I've sure found a man, and I'm playing poker with him."

Yuba was for the moment alone at the table. His adversary had gone over to the bar for cigars.

"You figure that we're on leave?" demanded the Kid. "You figure that you can cavort round this cow town just as long as you like?"

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roll. Yuba Dick was not only an inveterate gambler, but an unlucky one, and the Kid hated to see him with the cards in his hands.

Since he had been at the Bar-One, the Kid had made friends with all the bunch, but he liked Yuba the best of all. They had become great friends, and perhaps it was that streak of weakness in Yuba's character that helped to draw the Kid to him. Yuba was the kindest, best-natured galoot going; he would have shared his last dollar with friend or foe; nobody could help liking him. He was a good man with a horse, a gun, or a rope; a man in everything but that one weakness; but when he came under the influence of the painted pasteboards, he was nothing but a soft rube. And the Kid, whose character was like a rock, hated to see it.

But concern for his friend was not all that troubled the Kid now. Yuba, finding himself in town, and unable to resist temptation, was taking leave that had not been given, and that got the Kid's goat. They ought to have been riding back to the ranch long since, and even now that the Kid had found him, Yuba was not proposing to ride. Evidently he was glued to the Ace of Spades till his last dollar was gone.

"It ain't no use chewing the rag," said Yuba, "I guess I'm on a lucky streak, and I'm sure following it up."

"Aw, you boneheaded gopher," growled the Kid. "I've heard that afore—you was on a lucky streak when thet guy from Austin cleaned you out."

"You got your cayause there?" asked Yuba,

Yuba did not reply to that. He shuffled the cards.

"Ain't the boss sent us into town on business?" went on the Kid. "Ain't we done our business, and got to get back to the ranch? Colonel Sanderson sure ought never to trust you off'n the ranch, you big stiff!"

"Aw, can it," protested Yuba. "Mesquite Bill's looking for us back before sundown—"

"Dog-gone Mesquite Bill!"

"Ain't he your foreman, you gink?"

"I guess you can git on your cayuse and hit the trail for home, if you want," said Yuba. "I ain't keeping you."

"I ain't going without you," growled the Kid.

"Waal, sit down at the table and take a hand in the game," suggested Yuba. "Poker Smith will sure be pleased."

The Kid grunted.

Now that the Kid was a member of the Bar-One bunch, and drawing the pay of a puncher, he had no hunch to lose his pay at the game of poker. Still less did he like to see Yuba losing his



"Yep."

"Git on him and ride, then."

The Kid grunted again.

"You pesky jay! I ain't leaving you here none. What chance you got agin the poker sharps in this shebang, you gink?"

"I reckon I can keep my end up at draw poker," said Yuba.

"Shucks!" grunted the Kid.

"Waal, I ain't trailing! Quit if you want, and hit the trail for home."

"Aw, you big boob," said the Kid.

A hard-faced man, with the cold eyes of the professional gambler, came back to the poker table, and dropped into the seat opposite Yuba.

The horse-wrangler of the Bar-One gave the Kid no more attention then. He handed the deck to Poker Smith, who cut.

Poker Smith's icy eyes glanced towards the Kid. It was an inimical glance, and it fell at once before the Kid's steady gaze. Poker Smith packed a gun, and was well known to be prompt in the use of it, but the most reckless gunmen in Kicking Mule walked warily when the Rio Kid was around.

Nobody in Kicking Mule knew that he was the Rio Kid, his name was Two-gun Carson at the Bar-One. But if they did not know who he was, they knew what he could do with a gun. The boy puncher who had roped in Black George, the road-agent, was not a galoot to seek trouble with.

Poker Smith gave his attention to the game.

The Kid looked on frowning.

But it was obviously useless to think of getting Yuba away from his game, and the Kid lounged out of the Ace of Spades at last, and left him to it.

His mustang, Side-Kicker, was hitched to the rail outside by the side of Yuba Dick's pinto. The Kid paused to stroke his glossy neck.

"I guess we got to hang on, old boss," he remarked. "We got to hang on, waiting for the biggest boob in Texas."

And the Kid strolled away up Main Street of Kicking Mule, not in a pleasant frame of mind.

For an hour, under the hot afternoon sun, the Kid strolled about the cow town. He chatted with punchers in from the various ranches; he dropped into Slias Shook's store and bought cartridges, and killed the minutes as best he could.

After an hour, he came back to the Ace of Spades.

By that time, he reckoned, Yuba ought to have lost his last dollar, and ought to be ready to ride.

But when he looked in, Yuba was still sitting at the table, with cards in his hand, though the good-humoured expression had left his face, and he looked set and harassed. That he had been losing was plain, but the fact that he was keeping on indicated that he still had something to lose.

"Say, ain't you quitting yet?" called out the Kid.

There was no answer from Yuba. His attention was concentrated on the game.

The Kid came towards the table.

Poker Smith was playing with the impassive, bored air of the accustomed poker sharp; it was business with him, not pleasure. He was there to clean the cowpuncher out of all he had, and was prepared to sit at the table until it was done.

The Kid tapped Yuba gently on the shoulder.

The horse wrangler of the Bar-One looked up for a second.

"Git!" he snapped.

The Kid stepped back. He did not

want to quarrel with his friend, and Yuba, by that time, was in a mood for trouble.

The Kid stood watching the game. His young life had been passed among men who gambled as readily as they breathed, and though the desire to gamble never touched him, and he despised it as a foolish weakness, he knew the game of poker thoroughly enough. Less knowledge than the Kid's was needed to see that Yuba was not getting an even break.

Twice the Kid saw Poker Smith deal from the bottom of the pack, though it was done so swiftly and skilfully that a keen eye was needed to detect it.

Yuba Dick saw nothing. He fancied that he was a "chief" at the game of poker, but he was a baby in the hands of the professional sharp.

Poker Smith "stocked" the cards to suit his game when they came into his hands, and when they were cut, he brought the two halves of the pack together exactly as they were before, though so skilfully as to deceive the eye. And he had always a few winning cards at the bottom of the pack to deal himself.

It was clear enough to the cool, watching eyes of the Kid, as he stood behind Yuba's chair, and it went against the grain with him to keep silent while his friend was robbed.

But Yuba was not in a mood to be reasoned with. He was in a mood to quarrel at a word of warning.

And had he discovered that the poker sharp was cheating him, he would have reached for his gun at once; there was only one way of settling such a dispute in Kicking Mule. And good man as Yuba was with his gun, he was not in the same street with the professional gunman, neither was he in a state to do his best.

The Kid had no desire to bring on gun-play, and see his friend robbed of his life as well as his dollars. "Shooting up" the poker sharp afterwards, on his own account, would have been very small satisfaction.

The Kid strode out of the shebang with a worried brow.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### A Test of Friendship!

"AW, you've quit!"  
The Kid was sauntering wearily under the glow of the setting sun when Yuba came out of the Ace of Spades at last.

The horse-wrangler looked pale and tired and dismal.

He gave the Kid a faint grin.

"Yep, I've quit!"

"I guess it was time," said the Kid gruffly. "We'll sure get the rough side of Mesquite Bill's tongue when we hit the ranch!"

"Durn Mesquite Bill!"

"Well, now you've quit, let's mount and ride."

"Mount and ride!" repeated Yuba Dick.

"You ain't looking for another game before we hit the trail, I reckon?" asked the Kid sarcastically.

"Nope!"

"Well, let's get going then. Say what's the matter with the guy?" exclaimed the Kid, as Yuba made no move towards the horses tethered outside the Ace of Spades.

The colour rushed into Yuba's wan face.

"Feller, you called me a dog-goned bonehead!" he said.

"I sure did, and some other things, too, and meant every one of them," answered the Kid. "I'd call you some more if I had the time."

"Well, you was right," said Yuba. "I ain't denying it. I've sure left all my dollars with that sharp. But—that ain't all."

"What more is there to it?" asked the Kid.

"I've lost my cayuse, too."

The Kid rapped out an exclamation. "You've played away that pinto?" he said.

"Sure!"

"Well, of all the locoed geeks——"

"What's the good of chewing the rag?" said Yuba dismally. "I've lost that cayuse, and he was a good critter, too."

"You sure are the world's prize boob," said the Kid. "But if you've lost your critter, you got to ride double with me on my cayuse to get back to the Bar-One, and there ain't no two ways about it. Get moving!"

Yuba Dick hesitated.

"That ain't all," he muttered.

"Aw, carry me home to die!" ejaculated the Kid. "What more is there to it, you jay? Lost your boots and chaps as well?"

"Nope!"

"Well, what?"

"We can't ride your mustang back to the ranch, Two-gun!"

"And why can't we? He can carry double, he's carried double afore."

"Tain't that! But——"

"But what?" hooted the exasperated Kid.

"I've lost him, too!"

The Kid jumped.

"You've lost my hoss at poker?" he yelled.

"Just that!"

"Great snakes!"

The Kid stared at him blankly.

That Yuba would lose all he had, he had had no doubt; and it was not the first time that he had lost his horse, too, on a poker game, and had to hoof it back to the ranch. But it had never crossed the Kid's mind that Yuba would, or could, go further than that. But he had gone further this time.

"You've staked my hoss on a poker game, and lost him!" said the Kid dazedly.

Yuba Dick nodded.

He had the grace to be ashamed of himself, but there it was, he had done it, and it couldn't be helped.

The Kid drew a long breath.

Anything else that he had, the Kid would have handed over to his friend without stopping to think, even to his walnut-butted guns. But Side-Kicker was no ordinary cayuse. Side-Kicker had carried the Rio Kid through many a peril; more than once the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had owed his life to the grey mustang's speed. And it might come to that again, for pleasant as the Kid found life on the Bar-One ranch, he doubted whether it would last. Sooner or later, he figured, it would come out that he was the Rio Kid, the hunted outlaw, and he would have to ride.

Side-Kicker was not merely a cayuse to him, he was a tried and trusty comrade. He would have parted with a limb as soon as with Side-Kicker.

"Well, carry me home to die!" said the Kid, at last.

Yuba grinned sheepishly.

"I allow it's pesky hard on you, pardner," he said "I guess I'll get you another cayuse. That's sure! But——"

"That cayuse is like my own flesh and blood to me, Yuba," said the Kid, very quietly.

Yuba's lips quivered.

"I know! But you got to stand for

"Two-gun! I lost him fair and square to Poker Smith, and you ain't letting down a pardner!"

"I ain't letting down a pardner," said the Kid, with a nod. There were no two ways about that. In the cow country it was the law for a man to stand by his friend to the last turn of the cards.

"I guess you can kick me if you want," said Yuba. "I allow I been some bonehead! I surely do allow that."

"Kicking you wouldn't unloose Poker Smith's grip on my cayuse," said the Kid grimly.

"It sure won't! Say, we can borrow hosses at the Golden Mule and ride hoss," said Yuba. "I'm powerful sorry, pardner, and I allow that when I get the cards in my hands, I'm some boob! But—"

"You lost him fair and square?" said the Kid sarcastically.

Yuba started.

"Say, Two-gun, you don't reckon that tin-horn sharp was ringing in a cold deck on me?" he exclaimed. Apparently some vague suspicion had already entered Yuba's innocent mind that he had not been given an even break.

The Kid did not answer. Yuba's hand was already on his gun, and there was a glitter in his eyes.

"Say, Two-gun, what do you think? If that durned poker sharp has been stocking the cards on me, I'll sure go back and get him! I'll get him if he was the gold-darndest gunman in Kicking Mule!"

The Kid checked the words on his lips. The poker sharp had cheated the simple cowman almost palpably, and the Kid was wise to it. But it was futile to put Yuba wise to it. Poker Smith was not the man for an excited and enraged cowman to go gunning after. He was a dead shot, lightning on the draw, and if Yuba hunted trouble with him, Yuba was a dead puncher at the first shot.

"Aw, forget it, Yuba!" said the Kid. "You've done been a dog-goned boob, and if you lost my hoss, you've done lost him."

"You ain't mad with me, Two-gun?" asked Yuba shamefacedly.

The Kid laughed.

"Say, what's the good being mad with a big baby like you, Yuba?" he asked. "I guess next time we hit town I'll sure lead you around at the end of my riata and keep you out of trouble. But I'm standing for what you done, being your pard; and you don't want to worry none."

"You're a white man, Two-gun!" said Yuba gratefully. "I'll tell all Texas you're a white man, and me a loosed gink!"

"Well, it's done," said the Kid. "It ain't no use sitting on our tails and howling like coyotes in the chaparral. You hit the Golden Mule and feed, Yuba, while I rustle some cayuses to ride home."

And Yuba Dick went into the lumber hotel to feed, the Kid taking his way slowly back to the Ace of Spades.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER. Gun-Play!

THERE was a wrinkle in the Rio Kid's brow, a gleam in his blue eyes. He was thinking hard, as he paced slowly along Main Street towards the poker dive where Yuba had lost all he had, and all that his friend most valued. And the Kid's hand caressed the walnut butt of a gun.

Outlaw the Kid had been—and still was if the sheriffs got wise to his new haunt—but he was outlaw by accident: THE POPULAR.—No. 573.

cowpuncher by nature and training. The unwritten law of the cow country held him fast; what his friend had done he stood for. Well he knew that Yuba Dick, with all his reckless thoughtlessness and weakness of character, would have stood by him to the last shot in his Colt, and died by his side if need had been. Not even for Side-Kicker, not to save his life, would the Kid have let his partner down.

Had it been a fair game in which Yuba Dick had lost all to the poker sharp of Kicking Mule, the Kid would have had nothing to say. But it had not been a fair game; Yuba Dick had been cheated in the game, skinned as ruthlessly by a thief as if he had been held up on the trail with a gun at his head.

That was what got the Kid's goat. He could not tell Yuba how the matter stood without sending the cowman gunning after Poker Smith, which was not good enough in the Kid's opinion. But there was one guy in the cow town who could put paid to any gunman there, and that guy was the Kid himself. That was why the Kid had sent Yuba to the lumber hotel to feed by himself. He wanted the horse-wrangler off the scene while he handled the situation with Poker Smith.

Poker Smith was standing outside the Ace of Spades, looking over the two horses hitched there. His hard face expressed satisfaction. He had reason to be satisfied. Dick's pinto was a good horse; but the grey mustang was a cayuse of ten thousand. The gambler was examining Side-Kicker's points with delight in his ice-cold eyes. He knew horses; and he knew there was no cayuse in Kicking Mule that was a patch on this grey mustang painted with brown stockings.

"Say, you reckon that's a good cayuse, feller?" drawled a gentle voice at his shoulder.

Poker Smith spun round.

His face hardened; his eyes narrowed almost to pin-points as he looked at the Kid. There was nothing hostile in the boy puncher's look or manner; but the gunman was on his guard at once.

"I figure he's some cayuse!" he answered. "Say, I reckon you're standing for your pard's game? He allowed that you'd stand for it when I put five hundred dollars on the cards agin that cayuse."

"I guess I'm standing for it," said the Kid.

"He's a good cayuse!" said Poker Smith, as amicably as his hard and cold nature allowed him to speak. He did not want trouble with this side-partner of the man he had fleeced, if he could help it. "Say, what's the big idea painting him brown stockings? He's pure grey if you leave him alone."

"Oh, just a fancy of mine!" said the Kid carelessly.

Poker Smith made a movement to unhitch the mustang. The Kid gently touched his arm.

"Go slow!" he remarked.

"What's the idea?" asked Poker Smith. "You're standing for what your friend done; this hyer cayuse is mine."

"I guess if Yuba lost him fair and square, I'd have to stand for it, though I'd sure be a whole lot sorry to lose that cayuse!" said the Kid. "I guess I'll put you wise, Mister Smith! I'm standing for what Yuba done—but I ain't standing for what you done."

"How come?" asked the gambler quietly.

"If Yuba lost that hoss in a fair game, what'd his friend have to say?" said the Kid. "Nothing! But he didn't."

The gambler breathed quickly. He knew that it was war; and he longed to reach for a gun. But though the Kid's hands were not near the walnut butts of his Colts, Poker Smith knew how lightning swift was his draw. He was fast himself with a gun; but he doubted whether he would get his gun out before the Kid fired.

"You saying it wasn't a fair game?" he asked.

"Am I?" grinned the Kid. "Why, Mister Smith, I guess anybody but that gink Yuba would have seen it wasn't a fair game. Didn't I see you stocking the cards on him and dealing yourself aces from the bottom of the pack?"

Poker Smith started.

"That's what I don't stand for!" said the Kid casually. "You ain't stealing that hoss, Mister Smith; and you ain't stealing Yuba's hoss! No, sir, I don't stand for a thief, whether he lifts the goods with a deck of cards in a dive, or with a gun in his paw on a prairie trail. No, sir!"

The gambler's face had a quiver. The Kid was calm, cool, smiling, as he spoke; but his eyes were like steel. No other man in Kicking Mule could have spoken those words without facing fire the next instant; but Poker Smith was not keen to draw on this puncher.

"If Yuba ain't satisfied, he packs a gun!" he sneered. "Is that geek hiding hisself behind you, cowboy?"

The Kid set his lips.

"You don't want to talk that-a-way about my friend, Mister Smith!" he said. "Yuba don't know I'm hyer talking to you. He figures that I'm looking to borrow a hoss to ride home—jest what I'd be doing if he'd lost them cayuses fair and square. Yuba don't even know that you double-crossed him, and I ain't told him."

"Waal, what you want?" asked the gambler restively.

"I'm telling you what I want. I want you to walk along to the Golden Mule and see Yuba."

"Next?"

"You'll play another game of poker with him," said the Kid.

Poker Smith laughed harshly.

"I guess he ain't got nothing more to lose."

"That cuts no ice!" said the Kid. "You got something to lose."

The gambler stared.

"You figure that that soft jasper could win anything off me at poker?" he jeered. "What you dreaming of?"

"You'll lose them two cayuses to him in a single game," said the Kid calmly.

"How come?"

"That's what I'm asking. I'm pointing out that it will be better for your health to do it."

Poker Smith's lips were drawn back from his teeth in a snarl.

"That's your stunt, is it, Two-gun Carson?"

"That's the very thing!" assented the Kid. "You won't say a word to Yuba about me talking to you. You won't put him wise that I've horned in at all. I ain't letting Yuba figure that his friend is going around protecting him; he sure wouldn't stand for it. You'll jest drop in promiscuous and get him into that game and lose them two hosses back to him. You can keep the dollars you've cheated him out of; I guess he deserves that for bein' such an all-fired bonehead. You'll do jest as I tell you, like a good little man, because it's right! Ain't it right, now?" asked the Kid pleasantly.

Anyone looking at the Kid would have supposed that he was chatting amicably with the gunman. But his

eyes, like steel, were watching the gambler's face intently. He was ready for what he knew must come; for Poker Smith was not the man to stand for this.

"And you figure that I'll do as you say?" hissed the gambler.

"I sure hope you will."

"Forget it!" gritted Poker Smith, between his teeth. "I ain't hunting trouble with you, cowboy; but any guy in Kicking Mule will tell you that I can't be crowded! Forget it!"

"You ain't playing up like I say?" asked the Kid regretfully.

"Not in your lifetime!"

"I guess I'm powerful sorry!" said the Kid. "You see, you cheating, thieving, double-crossing lobo-wolf, you're giving me the trouble of shouting out to all Kicking Mule that you're a cheat and a thief, and of—"

The Kid did not finish the sentence. The gambler was snatching at his gun; and the Kid, dropping his banter, reached for a Colt like lightning.

Bang!

Poker Smith's weapon went spinning through the air, carried away by the bullet that struck it as he raised it.

The Kid had beaten him to the draw. Bang, bang!

A wild yell broke from the gunman as a bullet grazed his left ear and another his right.

There was a roar in Main Street, and men crowded back to get out of the way of the bullets. But there was no need. The Rio Kid never wasted a ball; he knew just where his lead was going.

Bang, bang!

Poker Smith yelled again, as the bullets clipped through his boots, grazing his toes.

"Dance, you dog—dance!" snapped the Kid. "You hear me yaup? I'm fanning you, you lobo-wolf, and if you don't dance, I guess you'll want wooden legs to hop on around Kicking Mule! Dance, you double-crossing thief—dance!"

Poker Smith danced—he had to dance.

He leaped into the air at every shot. For the Kid was firing at his feet now, not to graze them; and only by rapid leaping could the gambler prevent the bullets from crashing through flesh and bone.

With the face of a demon, his eyes burning with rage and hatred, the poker sharp danced, while the Kid fanned him with bullets.

There was a roar of laughter from fifty throats. Often had the Kicking Mule men seen some hapless Chinaman dancing while a thoughtless puncher fanned him with bullets.

Sometimes such a rough joke was played on a tenderfoot. But the sight of Poker Smith, the hard-bitten gambler, the desperate gunman, dancing to fanning bullets, was an unexpected sight in the street of Kicking Mule.

Poker Smith's gun lay smashed a few feet away; and he had to dance for his life. Doors and windows of the Ace of Spades were crammed with staring, grinning faces.

Poker Smith was a dangerous man and a dreaded man; and such a man was not likely to get sympathy in his fall.

Many a man in Kicking Mule suspected, or knew, that the poker sharp had swindled him at his game, but had not ventured to back up the knowledge with his gun. Poker Smith was now where plenty of Kicking Mule gamblers were glad to see him.

Bang, bang!

Breathless, panting, covered with humiliation as with a garment, Poker Smith danced to the roar of the six-

guns, knowing that after this his game was done in Kicking Mule; after this show-down he would never be able to show his face in the street again. He had to pull up stakes and find new pastures—if he lived! For while he danced desperately to the bullets, he was not at all sure that the Kid would not wind up the performance with a bullet through his heart.

The Kid ceased fire.

"You sure are some dancer, Mister Smith!" he said. "I guess you can hop lively when you want it!"

He glanced round at the grinning crowd:

with bitter hatred in his face, he shook his head.

"You ain't standing for it?" asked the Kid pleasantly.

"Durn your hide, no!"

"You playing the game with Yuba?" asked the Kid, pleasantly and implacably.

"You've got me!" muttered Poker Smith. "It's your say-so!"

"Good man!" said the Kid agreeably. "Take them hosses down the street to the Golden Mule; you'll find Yuba there at feed. And keep in mind that I'll be hanging around all the time, and if you don't play up I'll know the



"I'm finished with cards!" said Dick, as he tossed the pack into the air. "Shake on it!" The hands of the two chums met.

"Say, you guys, this here ain't an entertainment; it's jest between Mister Smith and me!"

And the onlookers, taking the Kid's hint, moved off. The boy puncher stepped nearer the panting, infuriated gunman, and spoke in a low voice:

"Say, Mister Smith. I ain't honing to shoot you up, though I sure opine the cow country would be better off if they fixed you in a pine box. You dog gone double-crossin' lobo-wolf, I'd have given you yours for keeps, only I want you to play that little game with my pard Yuba." His eyes glinted at the defeated gambler. "You standing for it, you durned scallywag, or you want me to fan you again? I'm telling you that if I burn more powder on you, it's you for the long jump!"

Poker Smith gave him a deadly glare. "You durned bull-dozing hobo!" he said thickly. "If I had a gun—"

"You don't want to let that worry you none," said the Kid. "I ain't shooting up a man without a gun in his hand, not even if he's a thief and a cheat. If you want a finish, I'm handing you a gun, and giving you an even break."

The Kid took one of his walnut-butt'd guns by the barrel, and extended it to Poker Smith.

The gambler panted.

He longed to grasp the gun and stake all on a last desperate chance. He half extended his hand, but it dropped again. His nerve was shaken to rags by the fanning, and he knew that the Kid was his master at gun-play. He knew that it was not revenge, but death, that he would be grasping. And,

reason why! You say a word to Yuba to put him wise, and I'll fix you for the cemetery in short order, you dog! Get going, durn you; and be glad that you're alive to quit town to-night, for I'm telling you, Mister Smith, that if you hang on in Kicking Mule, I'll hunt for you next time I hit town, and shoot on sight!"

Without a word, the sullen-faced gambler unhitched the two horses, and led them away to the lumber hotel at the other end of the long, irregular street of Kicking Mule.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Yuba Dick's Luck!

THE Rio Kid lounged under the cottonwood-tree that grew before the lumber hotel, and talked to Side-Kicker, who was hitched there with Yuba Dick's pinto.

Poker Smith was in the hotel; and the Kid did not reckon that he would have to wait long.

He was right.

A quarter of an hour later Poker Smith came out of the lumber hotel and walked away down Main Street.

He gave the boy puncher one look as he passed him—a look into which worlds of hatred and revenge were concentrated. The Kid smiled back at him sweetly, and raised his Stetson in ironical farewell.

With a black brow the gambler strode away—to pack his traps, saddle his own horse, and hit the trail out of Kicking Mule. Some other cow-town, at too great a distance to have heard of his defeat and humiliation, was to have

tribe. Give them a wide palaver. Point out to them the advantages of a British Protectorate. Convince them that it will be for their own good, and get that silly delusion about the King out of their heads. Will you do it?"

The Baker Street detective nodded.

"Yes, I will go," he said. "And I will do more than you want me to do."

"Indeed! And what is that?" asked the chief.

"I will prove to the Mashombas that it was one of their own people who murdered the negro, Sambano."

"One of their own people? Good heavens! It can't be possible!"

"It is the truth, Sir Francis. It was the youth Sekundi I have mentioned, the brother of the chief, who committed the crime."

"You amaze me, Locke. I had no idea that you were investigating the case."

"I haven't been until to-day. By the way, do you happen to know a person called Prince Ali?"

"I have met him. It was at Le Pentiland's house."

"Well, Prince Ali is Sekundi."

Sir Francis stared in blank bewilderment, and listened to Ferrers Locke who told all he knew of the prince's past, what he had just learned, and what reasons he had for suspecting him of the murder.

"If I can fasten the crime on him, and I don't doubt that I can," resumed, "the trouble in Mashombaland will blow over, and you will give your British Protectorate peaceably."

"Of course we will," replied the chief. "The murder is at the bottom of it all. You will go, then?"

"Yes, I will take the matter in hand. I had serious thoughts of going to Africa after the murderer as it was."

"Very well. You have taken a great load off my mind, Locke. But there is no time to be wasted. When will you start?"

"As soon as possible. I am under the impression that the Calabar Castle leaves the day after to-morrow, and, if so, Drake and I will sail by it."

"It is awfully good of you, Locke. You will get me out of a deuce of a mess, for the arrangements of establishing a protectorate have already been made, and the troops are only waiting orders. Before they march, though, you must bring the Mashombas to their senses."

"You will draw on the Foreign Office for expenses, of course. Call to-morrow morning, and I will have a further talk with you, and will give you a letter to Captain Marker, who is in charge of the military station at Naijari, some miles south of the Mashombaland borders. He has a force of Haussas under him, and he will render you every assistance in his power, and will report to me by cable any news you may bring or send to him. It may be a dangerous errand for you, but Marker will be the best judge of that. I dare say he will send a detachment of troops with you to—"

Sir Francis broke off and glanced at his watch.

"I must leave you at once," he added. "I had no idea it was so late. I have an urgent appointment with a foreign minister. Call about eleven o'clock to-morrow morning, Locke. Good-bye!"

With that the chief hurriedly departed, and Ferrers Locke, smiling grimly, stepped to the telephone and rang up the offices of the West African Steamship Line.

"Unless I am greatly mistaken," he said to himself, "there is a rod in pickle or Prince Ali, otherwise the chief's brother, Sekundi!"

THE END.

(Ferrers Locke, and his young assistant, Jack Drake, in Africa. That sounds good for a real long thrill, and you're just about right. Next week's DETECTIVE-THRILLER is a winner, and in it we find the two daring detectives up against many perils in the heart of the great African Continent. Look out for: "ON HIS MAJESTY'S SERVICE!" next week.)

## "YUBA DICK'S LAST GAME!"

(Continued from page 11.)

the future benefit of Poker Smith's presence.

"Say, Two-gun!" roared a cheery voice.

Yuba Dick came out of the Golden Mule with an irradiated face, and he waved his Stetson at the Kid. Yuba was bubbling with glee.

"Waal, what's the news?" asked the Kid, looking at his friend curiously.

"You allow I can't play poker?" grinned Yuba. "Waal, I'm telling you, you pesky jay, that that tinhorn came hornin' in and asking for another game, and I've sure beaten him to it. Say, Poker Smith dealt the cards, and the hand I got I'd have betted my life on! What do you say to four of a kind—four aces—and a king over? That sharp's so pesky lucky, I reckoned he'd have a royal flush to beat it; but he hadn't. He had a pesky full house, and that's what's the matter with Hanner!"

"Sho!" said the Kid.

"You want to believe me!" grinned Yuba Dick. "Yes, sir, that poker guy had three kings and two jacks, sir; and he staked both them hosses on the hand. And he sure took it like a little man when I showed up four of a kind and beat him. Them hosses is ourn!"

"Sho!" repeated the Kid, with an air of great surprise.

"I'm telling you!" said Yuba. "And now we've got the hosses, Two-gun, I guess we want to hit the trail. We'll sure be late back at the Bar-One, anyhow."

He unhitched his pinto, and the Kid followed his example, and mounted the grey mustang. They rode down the street of Kicking Mule together for the prairie trail.

Kicking Mule was left behind, and the cowmen rode side by side by the trail over the grasslands. Yuba Dick was bubbling with glee, and the Kid's face wore a smile. But as the Bar-One came in sight over the prairie Yuba turned to his friend with a serious look.

"Say, Two-gun!"

"Shoot!" said the Kid.

"You sure was a white man to stand for my game as you did, and me a pesky locoed bonehead to lose that cayuse of yours! You wasn't mad with me, feller; but I sure was mad with myself. I guess I ain't forgetting it," said Yuba, "and I'm quitting poker! I'm sure quitting the cards, Two-gun, and that's a cinch."

"Feller," said the Kid soberly, "I'd sure rather hear you say that than see you win all the dollars in Texas, or win them myself. You sure do make me feel good!"

"It's a cinch!" said Yuba Dick.

He took a deck of cards from his pocket. For one moment he hesitated, and then, with a sweep of his arm, flung the pack into the air.

The cards scattered far and wide in the long grass, falling behind the cowmen as they rode on.

"Shake on it, Yuba!" said the Kid.

And they shook on it; and the Kid hummed a merry tune as he galloped on to the Bar-One with his friend.

THE END.



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The Rio Kid hits big trouble when he meets his boss' scallywag son, Frank Sanderson.

## THE FIRST CHAPTER.

### The Kid in Doubt!

"UNCORK it, feller!" The Rio Kid smiled faintly. But he did not heed Yuba Dick's injunction to "uncork" it. He remained silent.

Yuba Dick rolled a cigarette, offered it to the Kid, who shook his head, put it into his own mouth, scratched a match on his pants, and lighted it. He blew out smoke with a thoughtful frown.

Yuba Dick, horse-wrangler of the Bar-One, was very friendly with the latest recruit to the bunch, and hated to see him with a grouch.

And there was no doubt that the Kid had a grouch.

He was worried.

"What's bitin' you?" asked Dick at last.

"Oh, nothin' much!" said the Kid.

"You been lookin' for two-three days like you'd lost a Texas dollar and found a Mexican cent!"

"I guess there's nothin' to it," said the Kid. "A guy can't always be cavorting around joyful like a two-year-old. Say, you ain't got them cayuses ready for the remuda yet?"

"I sure ain't!" agreed Yuba Dick. "And there sure ain't no darned hurry! But I guess you mean that my company is beginning to tire you some. You give a yalp when you feel more sociable!"

And the horse-wrangler, with a grin, walked away towards the corral, leaving the Kid alone on the bench outside the Bar-One bunkhouse.

It was true that the Kid wanted to be alone.

He wanted to think; though thinking, of which he had done a whole lot lately, did not seem to cut much ice.

From where he sat he could see the porch of the Bar-One ranch-house, and Colonel Sanderson sitting in his rocker, with his feet on the rail, a cigar in the corner of his mouth, reading a letter.

The Kid's troubled glance turned often to the rancher, as he sat thinking, after his friend had left him.

Many weeks had passed since the Kid had ridden into the Kicking Mule country; never figuring on pitching his camp there for more than a few days. He had hung on in Kicking Mule to rope in Black George, the road-agent; and he had been successful; and he had gladly, though with a lingering doubt, joined the Bar-One bunch.

His life was happy at the Bar-One; and if the Kid could have forgotten

that he was an outlaw, with a price on his head, and that a score of sheriffs in different parts of Texas were still hunting him, he would have had hardly a care in the world.

Every man in the bunch was more or less of a friend; and Yuba Dick was his special comrade; and the colonel was as good a boss as any cowpuncher could have asked for. It had seemed to the Kid too good to last; yet it was lasting.

No man in the Kicking Mule country suspected, or dreamed, that "Two-gun" Carson, of the Bar-One, was the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw of Texas. A feeling of security came to the Kid at last; but with it came a worry on his mind. It looked as if he could settle down at the Bar-One, undisturbed; that it would never be necessary for him to saddle Side-Kicker some dark night and disappear across the plains before sunrise.

The Kid asked nothing better. But if he was going to settle down at the Bar-One, he realized more and more that he couldn't do it under false colours. It irked him every day to feel that if the rancher knew who he was, his trust might be replaced by suspicion; that, if Yuba Dick knew, the cordial friendliness might vanish; that, if the bunch knew, the cheery cordiality of the bunkhouse might change to cold distrust. It had not worried the Kid, while he regarded his stay at the Bar-One as temporary. But when he considered settling down as a permanent member of the bunch, it worried him a whole lot.

"I got to spill it!" he said to himself, shaking his head. "I got to spill it!"

And he rather regretted that he had

not accepted Yuba Dick's invitation to "uncork."

But, after all, the colonel was the man he had to tell.

Mesquite Bill came out of the bunkhouse, and stared at the boy-puncher on the bench.

"Still got a grouch, hombre?" asked the foreman of the Bar-One, with a grin.

"Aw, nothin' much!" said the Kid, trying to smile. But the smile came hard.

"Say, you heard the news?" asked Mesquite.

"Nope!"

"Young Frank's coming home!"

"Young Frank?" repeated the Kid.

"The boss' son!"

"I sure remember hearing the boys mention it," assented the Kid, but not with much interest.

"I mean, he's hitting the ranch today," said the foreman. "The boss is riding out as far as Juniper to meet him and bring him in. He's sure powerful pleased that Frank is coming home. Young Frank's been away from the ranch three years!"

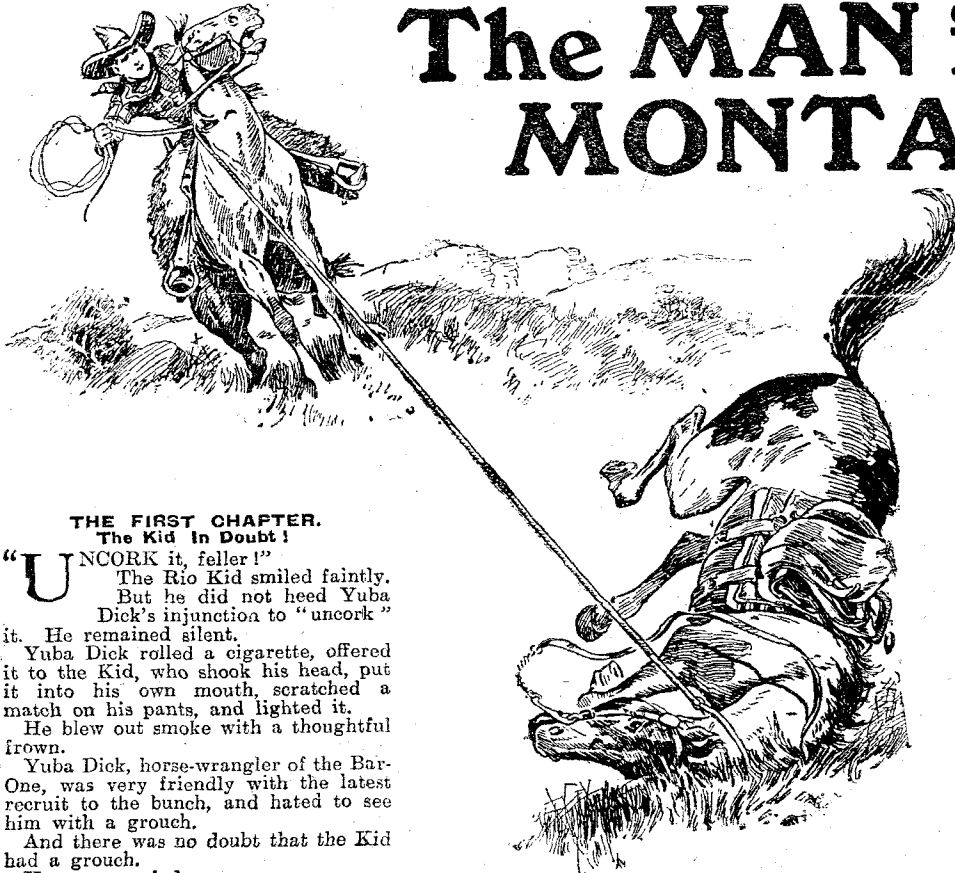
"I guess the boss will be pleased to see him again," agreed the Kid. "I reckon the bunch will be some pleased, too!"

He glanced rather curiously at the foreman's face. There was no sign of enthusiasm about Mesquite Bill.

From his looks, the Kid gathered that Mesquite was not so pleased as the colonel naturally would be.

"Waal, he's been away a long time," said Mesquite, "and guys change in three years, they sure do, a whole lot, feller! Mebbe young Frank will have changed!"

With a nod, the burly foreman



tramped on, leaving the Kid thinking, for the moment, not of his own doubtful position, but of the return of the boss' son, and wondering what the young man would be like. Every man in the Bar-One bunch was devoted to the boss; and, naturally, the boss' son would be popular; but Mesquite's looks and words did not indicate that Frank Sanderson was popular.

Yuba Dick came back from the corral, and the Kid spoke to him.

"Say, Dick, what sort of a hombre is the boss' son?"

Dick made a grimace. "I guess when he lighted out from this ranch three years ago, he was some scallywag!" he said. "I reckon there mightn't have been much harm in him; but he sure was one of the boys from Oshkosh, he sure was. He painted the town redder'n a sunset on the Staked Plain; and there sure was some trouble. But I guess he was the apple of the colonel's eye all the same. And you don't want to tell the boss what you think of him when you see him."

The Kid nodded. "Mebbe he's changed now he's older," he remarked.

"Mebbe!" said the horse-wrangler. But his look was doubtful.

The Kid was left alone again. His thoughts soon passed from that matter to his own trouble. He rose from the bench at last, and walked towards the ranch-house.

The Kid had made up his mind. Whether he stayed, or whether he went, he was going to tell the boss how matters stood; and if the colonel did not want the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande on the ranch, Side-Kicker was ready. The Kid was booked to ride after stray cattle that afternoon; and if he had to go, he figured that he would ride out without a word to the bunch and hit the trail for parts unknown. They would keep friendly memories of their pard Two-gun; and there was no need for them to know that they had entertained an outlaw unawares.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### The Kid Speaks!

COLONEL SANDERSON had finished reading his letter, and was finishing his cigar, when the Kid came up the steps of the ranch-house porch and doffed his Stetson.

The rancher gave him a smile and a nod.

He liked the handsome young puncher, and admired him for the courage and resource he had shown in cinching Black George, who had been for years the terror of the cow country. That exploit had been enough for the rancher; he had not troubled, or cared, to ask the Kid any questions about himself.

"Say, boss, if you got a few minutes to waste—"

"A whole lot if you want to talk," said the colonel. "I ain't riding for Juniper for two hours yet. I guess you've heard that my boy's coming home."

That was the subject uppermost in the rancher's mind.

"I've heard so, sir," said the Kid. "I've not seen him for three years," said the rancher. His brow clouded for a moment. "I guess you'll have heard from talk in the bunkhouse that there was some trouble when he quit, Carson. But he was only a boy then—and he was a good boy at heart, I guess. The Sandersons was always white men from the toes up. If he was a piece wild, I guess boys will be boys."

"They sure will!" said the Kid.

"And I want you to meet Frank," went on the colonel.

"Me, sir?" said the Kid in surprise. "Jest you!" said the colonel. "I've had letters from Frank—I've jest been reading one again—and he's changed a lot. He's been working on a ranch up in Montana, and made good, like I was sure he would; and he's anxious to show that he can take a man's place on his father's ranch, that will be his some day. But—"

The Kid waited as Sanderson paused. "But if he got again among the sharps and poker guys at Kicking Mule," said Sanderson slowly, "I'd be sorry to see it. I guess I'd be glad to see him make friends with you."

"Aw, and me a cowpuncher, and him the boss' son, sir!" said the Kid, with a smile.

"That cuts no ice hyer," said Sanderson. "I know a good man when I see one, and I've had my eye on you. That hombre Yuba Dick was the wildest guy in the bunch before you hit the Bar-One; and he lost his pay at poker regular, and more'n once he's rolled home from town as mad as a hornet with rye-whisky in his inside. Now there ain't a quieter and better-behaved galoot in Kicking Mule; and I guess it's you that's done it since you made friends with him."

The Kid smiled. He wondered what the sheriffs who were hunting him would have said had they heard that he was a good influence in the bunkhouse of the Bar-One.

"I reckon you're the friend my boy wants to keep him steady," said the colonel. "I sure hope he'll take to you, and you to him, Two gun. But you came here to speak to me, and here's me chewing the rag about my own business. Shoot!"

It was difficult enough after what the rancher had said for the Kid to "shoot." But he had made up his mind, and he got on with it.

"I reckon I'm going to surprise you some, sir," he said slowly. "I reckon after you've heard what I'm going to tell you you won't want me on this hyer ranch, let alone making friends with your son."

"Can it!" said Sanderson. "You're sure dreaming."

"I wish I was, sir," said the Kid, with a sigh. "But facts is facts, and you can't ride round them. You took me on trust into your bunch, sir, and you've trusted me since; and I guess I ain't throwed you down none."

"I never took you on trust, hombre. I know a man when I see one; and the guy that rounded up Black George didn't want a lot of recommendation," grinned the rancher. "Say, what's biting you?"

"My name ain't Carson," said the Kid.

"Aw, and half the guys in Kicking Mule wasn't born under the name they put on the payroll," said Sanderson. "Is that all, you young gink?"

"My name's Carfax."

"I guess it's as good as Carson; but you can call yourself Christopher Columbus on this ranch if you want!"

"They called me Kid Carfax on the ranch along to Frio, where I was raised," said the Kid. "But the name I've been given since is the Rio Kid."

It was out now! Colonel Sanderson sat bolt-upright in his rocker and stared at the boy puncher under his grizzled brows. Astonishment was mingled with incredulity in his bronzed, kindly face.

"What you giving me?" he demanded. "The goods, sir," answered the Kid sadly.

"The Rio Kid?"

"Sure!"

"Great snakes! You ain't stringing me along?" ejaculated the colonel.

"I wish I was, sir! I'm the Rio Kid!" said the boy puncher moodily. "I figure that you've heard the name."

"I reckon there ain't a guy in Texas that ain't heard it," said the colonel blankly. "Say, you the young firebug that's shot up more guys than he's got fingers and toes—"

"I ain't shot up all the guys they say I've shot up, sir," said the Kid, with a faint smile; "and I ain't never pulled a gun unless I was crowded. You've seen that I pack two guns, but I guess you ain't seen me using them promiscus."

"That's a cinch," said Sanderson, still staring at the handsome, sunburnt face blankly. "But you sure get me guessing! You're the outlaw that half the sheriffs in Texas are hunting."

"Me, sir," said the Kid. "You the firebug that the Rangers rounded up in the Mal Pais, and that beat them to it."

"Sure!"

"Carry me home to die!" said Sanderson.

There was a long silence. The rancher had forgotten for the moment the matter that had filled his mind, forgotten even the coming return of his son. He gazed blankly at the Rio Kid.

The Kid was quiet and earnest; but the rancher found it difficult to believe that this handsome puncher, little more than a boy, was the celebrated firebug whose name and fame were known in every cow town and camp in the Lone Star State. It was because the looks of the Rio Kid were so unlike his wild reputation that he was often able to ride in safety in regions where his name was a byword.

"Carry me home to die!" repeated Sanderson at last. "You the Rio Kid! You an outlaw! But you cinched Black George!"

"I sure did!" assented the Kid. "He was a killer, and I guessed it was time he went home. I never wanted to be an outlaw; and they know at Frio that I never did what I was driven into outlawry for. But they knew that too late to help me. It was me for the lone trail. I sure was glad, sir, to join your bunch on this ranch, but I never figured that it would last. But now—"

"What's your game in telling me?"

"I ain't staying here and deceiving you, sir," said the Kid quietly. "If you want me to stay, knowing who I am and what my reputation is, I'll stay—and joyful. If you don't want the Rio Kid around, I'm ready to ride. And I kinder guess you don't, and can't."

"I guess," said the rancher slowly, "that if I'd met the Rio Kid on the trail I'd have pulled a gun on him as quick as any man in Texas. But that cuts no ice. I know you now, hombre. I ain't believing much harm of the guy that cinched Black George, and stood by me and saved my life when I was shot up by that scallywag. No, sir! Young Frank would have come home to find his father in the Kicking Mule cemetery but for you! That's good enough for me, Carson."

"Carfax, sir," said the Kid. "Carson!" repeated the rancher. "Carson goes! And you stay. I ain't letting you ride."

The Kid drew a deep breath. "You know what's said of me in every cow town in Texas, sir," he said.

"I guess a whole lot of it is hot air now I know you," grinned Sanderson. "Search me! I ain't parting with a man like you!"

"You sure are a white man, sir; and it does me good to hear you talk," said the Kid gratefully. "But—"

"Cut out the butts," said the rancher decisively. "You're in my outfit, and you stay in my outfit—allowing that the sheriffs don't root you out. And I guess they won't come rubbering round the Bar-One looking for the firebug of the Rio Grande."

"But the bunch, sir—"

"The bunch know you're a good man, and they sure like you," said the rancher. "You don't want to put the bunch wise. There'd be talk, and you don't want any guy chewing the rag about the Rio Kid being here. Leave the bunch out of it. This is between you and me."

The Kid stood silent, with a lump in his throat. He had always liked and respected the boss of the Bar-One, but at this moment he would gladly have died for him.

There was another long silence, during which the rancher watched the Kid's face, understanding the emotion he read there.

"You want to forget it," said Sanderson. "You came to this ranch as Two-gun Carson, and you stay as Two-gun Carson! I'll tell the world that you're as good as any man in the outfit."

"If you trust me, sir—"

"Aw, what would you have come and told me this for, if you wasn't to be trusted?" said the rancher. "You could have kept it dark, easy. Forget it, hombre! I'm telling you that I know a white man when I see one—and you're a white man, and all they say in the cow towns won't change that. And I keep to what I said. When my boy's home I want you to be his friend, and help to keep him steady, like I know you could."

"Colonel Sanderson, sir," said the Kid, and his voice was husky, "if ever there's need for a man to be shot up for you or your son, I'm that man, and I'll be glad of the chance. I won't say no more, sir; but if you change your mind and want me to ride, I shan't take it unkindly, and I'll quit instanter, and always remember you as a white man."

"I ain't the guy to change my mind," said the colonel, "and if you quit, I'll sure ride after you and rope you in, and bring you back like you was an ornery steer breakin' out of the herd."

The Kid grinned, but his eyelashes were wet.

"I'm your man, sir, and your son's friend, if he'll let me," said the Kid, "and I'm telling you, sir, that you won't ever want to be sorry for trusting me."

"I sure know that!" said Sanderson. The Kid went down the porch, the rancher gazing after him thoughtfully.

The boy outlaw's face was bright, his heart light, as he mounted Side-Kicker and rode out on the prairie.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER. A Meeting on the Prairie!

THE pinto looked up from cropping the grass, at the sound of hoof-beats, and laid back his ears. He was a handsome horse, and the Kid would not have figured that he was a vicious one; but the way his ears went back made the boy puncher wary. He unhooked his riata as he rode nearer to the stray animal.

The sun was dipping to the prairie in the west. The Rio Kid had had a long ride that day, hunting for the strayed steers, and had not as yet found them. Now, as night was falling, he was ten miles from the ranch, and debating in his mind whether he should ride back, or camp on the prairie, and

resume his search for the steers at sun-up. Then he sighted the pinto.

A horse saddled and bridled, wandering alone on the plains, told only one story to the cowboy—the rider had fallen, or had been thrown, and lay somewhere stranded in the ocean of grass. The Kid had a proper contempt for a rider who fell from his horse, or allowed himself to be thrown; but that made no difference to his intentions. If some galoot was stranded on foot on the prairie, it was up to the Kid to rope in his horse for him, and find him, and see him safe on his way.

Likely enough, it was some cowboy returning from town full up with boot-leg whisky. The Kid, who never touched poison himself, did not judge others harshly. If the hapless rider of the pinto was "elevated," and therefore helpless, the Kid was ready to lend him the helping hand he needed.

The pinto was shy. As the Kid drew nearer, the animal flung up its heels and galloped. But Side-Kicker, even after a long trail, was too good for the pinto. The grey mustang, under the Kid's skilled hand, stretched himself out in pursuit, and the boy puncher was soon within roping distance. The lasso flew, the loop descended over the tossing head of the pinto, and the fugitive went to grass with sprawling heels.

The Kid rode up and dismounted. He jerked the pinto up, and the horse was quiet enough under his hand. The Kid had a way with horses.

His brow darkened as he saw the traces of cruel usage on the pinto's glossy skin. The rider had used his quirt freely—or, rather, savagely. It was no wonder that the horse had got rid of its rider when it could.

"Some durned skunk that don't know how to use a hoss!" growled the Kid, and he half-changed his mind about looking for the deserted rider.

But he shook his head. A man abandoned on foot on the rolling, boundless prairie, with night coming on, was in too sore a strait for the puncher to leave him to it, even if he was some scallywag who mishandled a horse.

There was light enough for the Kid's keen eyes to pick up a trail. He soothed the pinto for a few minutes, reducing him to quiet obedience, and then remounted Side-Kicker, leading the "painted" horse on the end of his rope. He rode back to the spot where he had first seen the stray.

From that spot, by following the pinto's trail back, the Kid was bound to hit on the rider soon or late, and he lost no time.

The tracks of a riderless horse were not deep; but the faintest sign was enough for the Rio Kid. He rode at a trot, sign here and there, seen from the saddle, assuring him that he was on the right way.

The Kid was wondering who the guy might be. Some "elevated" puncher on his way home from Juniper or Kicking Mule, belonging to one of the neighboring ranches, he had figured at first. But the pinto's trappings were expensive, and the Kid reckoned that it was not a cowpuncher's horse.

But whoever the man was, the Kid meant to find him, if he could, before dark, and put him on his horse and on his way. That was the first duty of a ranchman to a stranger lost on the plains. A man on foot on the boundless prairie, might wander for days, till he sank down exhausted, and died of hunger or thirst. More than once had the Kid known of such happenings.

The sun was touching the western plains now, only a red rim showing

over the sea of grass. Shadows were thickening over the prairie. The Kid's eyes, keen as they were, found it hard to pick up sign from the saddle. He guessed that he had not much farther to ride, and he received a sudden and startling confirmation of it.

Bang!

The whiz of a bullet was followed by the roar of a six-gun.

"Sho!" ejaculated the Kid. Twenty yards or so from him was a belt of thicket, and it was from the thicket that the shot had come. It flew yards from the Kid; it had been fired by an unsteady hand.

Instantly the Kid leaped to the ground.

Bang!

The second shot flew wider than the first.

Leaving Side-Kicker, with the lasso holding the captured horse to him, the Kid ran forward through the long grass.

There was a gun in his hand now, and a glint in his blue eyes.

From the shadowy thicket a figure lurched unsteadily. A shaking gun, in a shaking hand, was lifted.

"You dog-goned gink!" roared the Kid. "Drop it!"

"You dog-goned horse-thief!" came the answer, and the revolver steadied a little.

The Kid's gun roared, and the shaking gun was shot out of the unsteady hand that grasped it.

It went crashing away in the grass, and the Kid ran on, and his smoking revolver was jammed fairly in the face of the man who had twice fired on him.

"Put 'em up, you geck!" rapped the Kid.

The man stared at him stupidly, his face going white, and made an effort to put up his hands. As he did so, his legs failed him, and he collapsed in the grass.

"Aw!" ejaculated the Kid, in utter contempt and disgust. "Full as a boiled owl! I guess that guy had been jerking his elbow some afore he quit town."

The Kid holstered his gun.

He dropped on his knees in the grass beside the sprawling man. He knew that this was the man who had been thrown by the pinto; he had found the horse's master. The state in which he found him was a sufficient explanation of his having been thrown by the horse.

"Say, you geck, what you mean burning powder on a guy?" demanded the Kid indignantly.

"You durned horse-thief!" muttered the other indistinctly. "That's my pinto you've got—"

"You dirty, evil-smellin' coyote," said the Kid, in disgust. "If you wasn't as drunk as a greaser with three quarts of pulque under his belt, you'd know that I roped in your cayuse to bring it back to you, you ornery polecat!"

The man blinked at him uncertainly.

"Aw, pull yourself together!" snapped the Kid. "I ain't no hoss-thief, dog-gone you, but a cowpuncher, and I've been trailing you near an hour to find you and stick you on your cayuse. Got that?"

"I get you," mumbled the other. "I reckoned when I saw you with my pinto you was a horse-thief—"

He pillowed his head on his arm and lay in the grass. The Kid, angry, disgusted, scornful, rose to his feet.

"Say, you fizen polecat!" he said. Only a grunt answered him.

The Kid stirred the fellow vigorously with his boot. The man opened his eyes again and sat up dizzily. In the deepening darkness, the Kid could not see him clearly. Certainly he was not a cowboy, though what he was was not clear to the



Kid. The man stared and blinked at him sullenly.  
 "Say, get up, you scallawag," said the Kid; "I ain't leaving you here. I guess some water will help sober you!"  
 He fetched the can from the grey mustang, and dashed cold water in the dizzy, blinking face. It seemed to have a sobering effect on the man. He muttered a curse, and staggered to his feet, and looked blackly at his rescuer.

"Say, you able to sit a hoss?" demanded the Kid.  
 "I reckon."  
 "I'll put you on your pinto and start you. If you can't sit the critter, I guess I'll have to ride with you and hold you on," said the Kid angrily. "Get a move on!"

The man seemed to be pulling himself together now. He climbed on the unwilling pinto, the Kid holding the horse steady for him. He sat in the saddle with some steadiness, once he had found the stirrups. The Kid was glad to see it, for, though he would not have deserted a helpless man, he was far from anxious for such company.

"You O.K.?" he asked.  
 "Sure!"  
 "Then I guess you can beat it, and I'll be riding," said the Kid.

"Ride to the bottom of the deep pit, for all I care!" snarled the man on the pinto. Then he checked himself. "Say, I was sure full up when I lit out of Juniper, and I guess I've lost the trail for sure. Put me right for the Bar-One ranch."

"The Bar-One ranch!" repeated the Kid. "You aiming to hit the Bar-One?"

"Yep."  
 "I guess Colonel Sanderson won't be a whole lot pleased to see a galoot like you!" snapped the Kid. "You want to sober up a few more afore you hit the Bar-One."  
 "Forget it!" sneered the other. "I guess Colonel Sanderson will be powerful glad to see me, after missing me at Juniper!"

The Kid started a little. Colonel Sanderson, he knew, had ridden to Juniper that afternoon to meet his son there and ride back with him to the ranch. Probably he had had other business in the town, though the Kid hardly figured that a man like Sanderson would have much business with a fellow like this.

"Say, who are you?" demanded the Kid.

"Find out!" was the sullen answer. The Kid peered at him; but in the gloom he could make out only a shadow. He felt for his matchbox, struck a match, and held it up. The flickering flame glimmered on the face of a man of about twenty-five—a rather handsome but reckless and dissipated face. And it was a face that was known to the Rio Kid.

"Ace-High Sanders!" he ejaculated. The man on the pinto swore. "Dog-gone you, you've been in Montana?"

"I been in Montana," said the Kid contemptuously, "and I seen you boosted out of a saloon for cheating at cards, you pizen skunk! Ace-High Sanders was what you was called there, you tinhorn polecat! Yep! What you doin' in Texas, and what you mean by

saying that my boss was aiming to meet you in Juniper?"  
 "Your boss?"  
 "Colonel Sanderson's my boss."  
 "Say, you belong to the Bar-One bunch?"  
 "You've said it."  
 "You're a new man, then, or I'd know you." The man on the pinto peered

son of the rancher who was so keenly awaiting the return of the prodigal! It almost stunned the Kid. Gladly he would have doubted it; gladly he would have given the man the lie, and dashed his clenched fist in the dissipated face. But he knew that it was true. The boss of the Bar-One hoped, and believed, that his son had

The Kid's gun roared.



down at the Kid. "Say, darn you, if you're on the Bar-One, you'd better keep a civil tongue when you're chewing the rag with me. Get that?"

"And why?" said the Kid disdainfully.

And then, with a sudden rush of understanding, it came to him. He stepped towards the man on the pinto and grasped him by the arm. His voice was deep and tense as he spoke.

"Who are you? You was Ace-High Sanders up in Montana, a tinhorn gambler and poker sharp. Who are you?"

"You want to forget that if you keep on at the Bar-One," sneered the man on the pinto. "I'm Frank Sanderson—Colonel Sanderson's son!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Kid Keeps a Secret!

THE Rio Kid stood still. He stood silent and still, as though the words had turned him to stone.

The boss' son!  
 This waster—this pesky scallawag the

"made good" in the cow country up north; and the waster had led him to hope and believe so. But this chance meeting on the prairie told the Kid what Colonel Sanderson did not suspect—that the prodigal of the Bar-One was returning a worse man than he had gone.

It made the Kid's heart sick. "Say, you seem struck all of a heap!" jeered the man on the pinto. "You ain't put me wise yet for the ranch."

The Kid made an effort. His dislike of the man was intense. His contempt for him penetrated to the very marrow of his bones. But he was the son of the Kid's friend and benefactor, and the Kid crushed down his feelings with iron determination.

Ace-High Sanders, the swindling sharper of Montana, must be forgotten; the best that he could make of the colonel's son should be made of him. The colonel believed that his son had made good; and the Kid would never be the one to undeceive him.

"I'll guide you to the ranch, sir!" said the Kid, with a change of manner and tone that made the man on the pinto start and peer at him again. "I was sure thinking of riding back when I hit on your cayuse."

"Get on your cayuse, then, feller!" The Rio Kid mounted the grey mustang.

He led the way, and they rode for some miles in silence. Frank Sanderson seemed to be recovering more and more, and the Kid was glad to see him sitting the pinto steadily. At least he would be sober when he reached the Bar-One and met his father.

It was the man from Montana who broke the silence:

"Say, you!" THE POPULAR.—No. 579.

"Sir?" said the Kid.  
"You're new in the bunch?"

"Only a few weeks, sir."

"I guess you've changed your tone a whole lot since you're wise to it that I'm your boss' son!" sneered Sanderson.

"Sure, sir," answered the Kid, resolutely respectful. "The colonel is a man respected in the whole section; and he's a good boss to me, and a white man from the toes up! I'd like to respect his son as much as himself!"

"You ain't talking about what you know, at the ranch?" muttered the other. "The colonel don't know—"

"I ain't saying a word, sir."

The young man peered at him.

"I guess I don't want it chewed in the bunk-house," he said. "I'll tell you this, puncher, I'm going home to make

good. I never meant to get full at Juniper, and if I'd let the tanglefoot alone, I'd have waited for my father and ridden home with him. Look here, keep your mouth shut, and forget that you ever saw a man in Montana named Ace-High Sanders, and I'll make it worth your while."

"I'm keeping my mouth shut, sir, for the colonel's sake, and your sake," said the Kid quietly. "You don't want to figure that I'm going to chew the rag in the bunk-house about what don't concern me. I've forgotten all about Ace-High Sanders already."

Sanderson laughed.

"Keep to that!" he said.

"You've said it, sir."

They rode on in silence again. When

the lights of the ranch-house came in sight across the dark prairie they separated. Evidently Frank Sanderson did not wish it to be known how the Kid had found him on the prairie, and the Kid understood.

Sanderson rode on to the ranch and disappeared.

After waiting a little the Rio Kid rode on more slowly. His heart was heavy for the boss of the Bar-One.

THE END.

(Never before has the Rio Kid been placed in such an unpleasant position as this. How does he get out of it? See next week's roaring long complete tale of the Wild West, entitled: "THE SCALLYWAG OF THE BAR-ONE!" starring the Rio Kid, boy outlaw!)

## HOW TO PRODUCE A SHADOW SHOW!

### A BRIGHT WHEEZE TO WORK AT YOUR NEXT PARTY OR SCOUT DISPLAY

#### THE START.

FOR parties or Boy Scout displays, shadow shows will afford great enjoyment, and they can be produced at no expense.

Actually, all that is required to work one of these "shows" is a sheet and a lamp.

To start with, hang the sheet up in a room, with your audience sitting in front of it, leaving at the back of the sheet a fair-sized space wherein you are to perform. On the ground place a lamp which will throw a good light on the sheet, and remember that the part of the room where your audience are sitting must be in darkness. The only light will be from the lamp, which must be about ten feet or twelve feet away from the sheet. If you stand between the light and the sheet your shadow naturally will appear on the latter.

When you are close up to the sheet the audience see you at your ordinary height, but as you move backwards you seem to be getting larger and larger, until you look like a giant, and finally, by jumping over the lamp you appear to have gone right through the ceiling.

#### THE PLAY.

Now to commence: Jump over the light and come down to the sheet slowly and sideways, bowing (apparently) to your audience on the other side of the sheet, and then you are all ready to commence. Supposing you make up your mind to play a little Harlequinade—say a clown, a pantaloon; or other of your friends as a policeman, a swell, a young lady, and so on—you can make a show last a good hour or more. There is no speaking by the characters, and if you can induce one of your friends to play some music while you are performing, so much the better. You can make yourself look like a clown, etc., by using some old clothes. Anything will do as long as you can convey to your audience what you are representing, for remember you will not be seen, *only your shadows*. Everything being now ready, we start.

Clown jumps over light and comes down, bowing in a very extravagant manner. In a moment something is thrown over the light, which the clown catches and, holding it up broadside to the sheet, the audience read the words: "Here we are again!" This is done by getting an ordinary sheet of cardboard and cutting out the words in it, so that when you hold it up the words stand out in *silhouette*. Having shown it, you throw it back, when it looks to have gone up through the ceiling. Next appears the pantaloon in the same way (over the light), also bowing to the audience as the clown did. He also has a piece of cardboard thrown to him, and on holding it up everybody reads the words: "Good-evening everybody!" He also throws this back, and then shakes hands with the clown. The latter then commences to whisper to the pantaloon, during which a policeman walks on from the side (*not over the light*), with a baton in his hand (made with thick brown paper), which he shakes at both of them. They at once begin to shake with fear, but suddenly turning round they both catch hold of the policeman, running him in the direction of the light, when he jumps over it, the effect

to the audience being as though they had thrown him up aloft. Now a swell walks on from one side and a young lady from the other, and they commence to bill and coo, the clown and the pantaloon standing back and mimicking them.

The pantaloon puts his hand towards the swell's pocket and commences to draw out a long string of sausages; meanwhile, the clown is making love to the young lady, who finally jumps over the light, waving her arms as though she was screaming.

The sausages can be made by filling some small paper bags with shavings to represent them and then tie them together like a string of them; about twelve would do.

The swell is annoyed and commences to square up to the clown for a fight. This will cause roars of laughter if properly worked. First of all, you are both close up to the sheet sparring at one another for a moment or two; then the swell commences to move towards the light, sideways, still sparring, when it looks as if the clown was sparring at a giant; swell then moves down again to his normal size, when the clown starts moving towards the light, practically reversing the procedure. This can be done two or three times, *but don't overdo it*. Finally, clown gives swell a terrible (?) blow, when he falls down as though he had the knock-out. The pantaloon now brings on something to lay swell on, and which must be slightly raised from the ground (a couple of boxes would do). They then lift him on to this little platform, and then the clown brings forward a large jug of water (or filled with sawdust would do); meanwhile, the pantaloon has placed a small pail behind where the swell is lying, but it must be unperceived by the audience. The reason for this you will notice in a moment. The clown now has a large funnel thrown over the light to him, this being simply cut from a piece of cardboard in imitation of a funnel, the pantaloon holding the end *apparently* over the mouth of the swell as he is lying there, but in reality over the concealed pail. The clown proceeds to take up the jug and empty the contents into the funnel. To the audience it looks as though it was being poured into the mouth of the swell, when in reality it all goes into the pail.

#### SCREENING THE LIGHT.

From the foregoing my readers can form a very good idea of the groundwork of a shadow entertainment, and should they be of an inventive turn of mind a thousand-and-one things can suggest themselves which will very materially add to the fun of the evening.

Where possible, the sheet should be the width of the room, and touching the ground so that none of the audience can see under it. Where it is not convenient to have such a large sheet a smaller one would do with a screen on either side so as to prevent anyone from peeping round.

The lamp must throw a good strong light (a powerful cycle lamp will do), and stand it on a small box about a foot high. Don't use an oil lamp, in case of the excitement in performing, and as you are jumping you might knock it over and so cause a fire. Be sure whenever you jump over the light to keep your legs wide apart, as that will prevent your touching the lamp.

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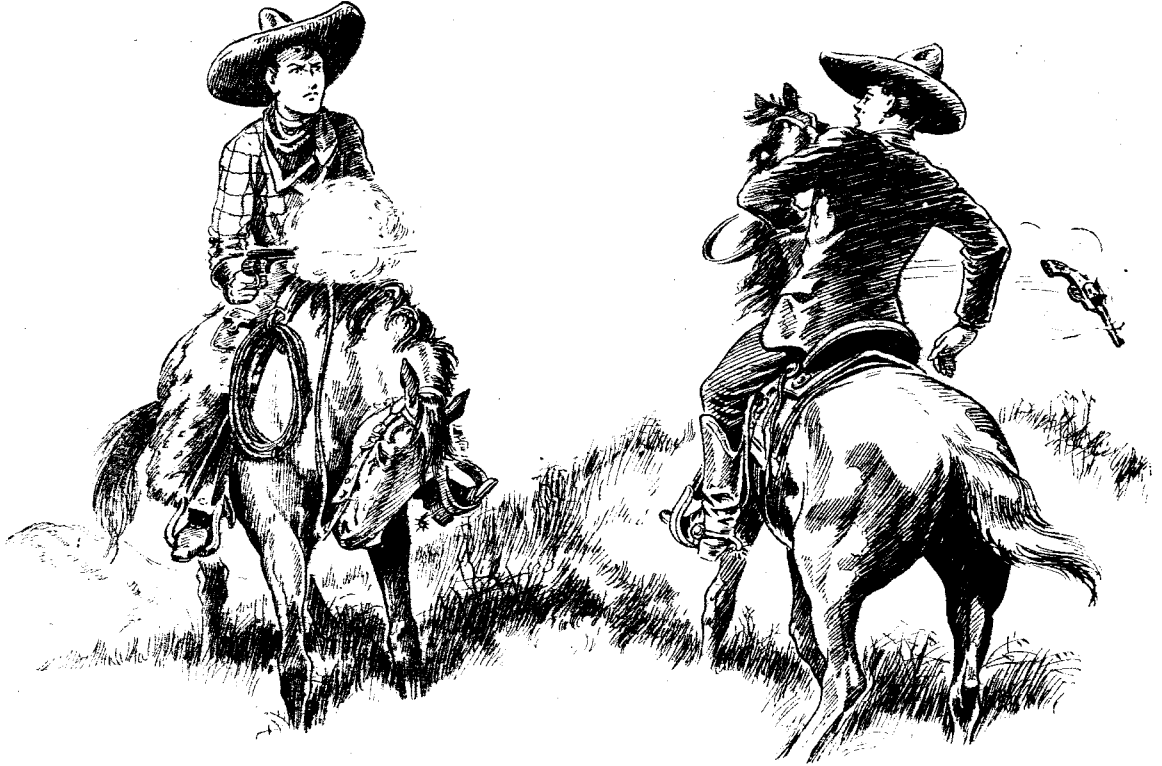
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The Rio Kid and the "Scallywag" come to grips with cattle-thieves on the wide ranges of the Bar-One Ranch.

**THE FIRST CHAPTER.**  
The Bar-One Prodigal!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hold on a piece."  
The Kid held on.

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

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

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

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

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

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

# The SCALLYWAG of the BAR-ONE!

By Ralph Redway.

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

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

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

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

Again he paused. The Kid knew

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

"I'll sure do anything I can, sir," said the Kid soberly. "But—" "Frank's going to work," said the rancher curtly. "Pears like he's come back here to loaf and drink and play poker. That ain't good enough for the Bar-One. Frank's goin' to ride with the bunch, and earn his corn punching cows."

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

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

"I'll try, sir" said the Kid. "Come over to the house when you're ready to ride."

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

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

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

"You ready, Frank?" asked the colonel.

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

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

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

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

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

"I got business in the town."

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

The rancher's jaw set grimly.

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

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

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

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

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

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### Trouble on the Trail!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"He's a good boss to me, and to all the bunch," answered the Kid.

"There's powerful few things I wouldn't do for the boss."

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

"Nop!"

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

The Kid made no answer to that.

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

Frank drew in his horse.

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

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

"We are," said the Kid.

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

The Kid was dismayed.

"But your father figures—" he said.

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

"Yep!"

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

"But—" objected the Kid.

"Can it!"

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

"I guess you want to think it over

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

"Tell him any lie you think of,

then."

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

Frank Sanderson laughed contemptuously.

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

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

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

"I sure will not!" said the Kid.

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

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

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

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

The Kid shook his head.

"Forget it," he said.

"You won't?"

"Not by a jugful!"

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

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

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

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

"Jest as you like, sir," said the Kid. "But that cuts no ice jest now. We're wasting time."

"You ain't standing by me?"

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

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

Bang!

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

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

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

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

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

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

### THE THIRD CHAPTER. The Brand Blotters!

"GEE-WHIZ!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Gee-whiz!" repeated the Kid.

"What's there?" grunted Sanderson.

"Brand blottin', I reckon."

Frank Sanderson showed a little interest at that.

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

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

"I reckon."

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

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

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

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

"Some puncher—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You pack two."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Jas Cassidy?" he repeated.

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

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

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

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

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

"I was friendly with Jas," he muttered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**THE FOURTH CHAPTER.  
Rounded Up!**

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

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

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

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

Jas Cassidy spat out a curse.

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

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

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

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

"I guess—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Mexican spurred madly.

Bang!

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

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

He was close behind now.

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

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

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

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

The Kid was in a cheery humour as

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

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

The Kid stared round him.

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

Frank Sanderson gave him a sidelong look.

"He sure got away!" he muttered.

"He got away?" repeated the Kid.

"I've said it."

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

The Kid quietly coiled his lasso.

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

"I sure got him," answered the Kid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

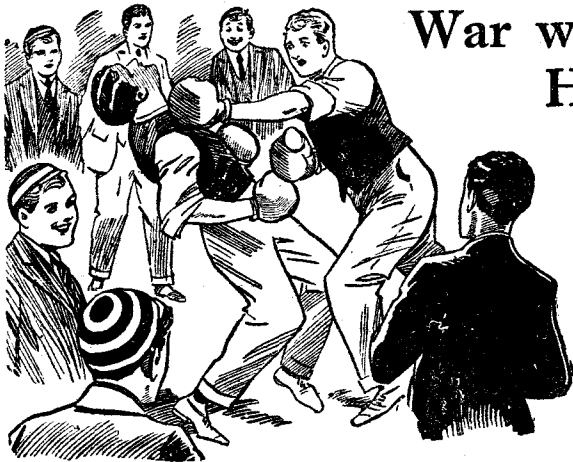
"I guess some guy might happen along and let him loose while I wasn't lookin'," said the Kid. "That Greaser's riding with me while we round up the cattle, sir." He gave the Mexican a look. "You get me, hombre? You're riding with this baby; and if you get a hunch to ride any other way, say your prayers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

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

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

THE END.

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



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# FRIENDS OR FOES?

By  
**RALPH  
REDWAY.**



For his boss' sake, the Rio Kid tries to be friendly with the wayward scallywag of the Bar-One Ranch. But it is written that he is to be his foe!

## THE FIRST CHAPTER. Rough on the Kid!

**Y**UBA DICK pulled in his broncho on the summit of a high grassy knoll, and stared across the plain under the setting sun.

"Sho!" he ejaculated.

The horse-wrangler of the Bar-One had ridden five miles out of the ranch to meet the Rio Kid on his way back from Lizard Creek.

Heading towards the ranch, rolling along in a cloud of dust, came the herd of cows that the Kid had gone twenty miles that morning to collect and drive in.

On the skirts of the herd rode the Rio Kid and Frank Sanderson, the boss' son, whom Yuba had expected to see. But there was a third rider whom he had not expected to see. And the third man, a dark-skinned Mexican, was roped to his horse and led along at the end of the Kid's riata. Which made Yuba raise his eyebrows as he stared, and ejaculate "Sho!" in tones of astonishment.

"That guy sure is Mexican Pete," said Yuba to himself, "and Two-gun has got him dead to rights! I sure wonder what sort of Cain that hombre has been raising."

And after a long stare at the approaching riders, Yuba Dick rode down the grassy slope to meet the advancing herd.

He rode round the herd in a wide detour, and joined the Kid behind the lumbering cows, waving his Stetson as he came careering up.

"Say, Two-gun, I figured I'd take a peasar this-a-way and meet you coming

in!" said the horse-wrangler. "You got the cows, but what you doing with that greaser?"

The Kid smiled and nodded to his comrade. He was glad to see Yuba Dick.

Yuba wheeled his broncho and rode with the Kid, casting curious glances at the scowling prisoner.

"I guess I'm taking that pizen skunk to the ranch for Colonel Sanderson to handle," said the Kid.

"What's he been doin'?"

"Brand' blottin'!" said the Kid tersely.

"The dog-goned polecat!" said Yuba, with a black look at the Mexican. "You caught him blottin' brands?"

"Yep! There was three of them—Jas Cassidy and Frenchy and this guy," said the Kid. "Franchy's gone up in the shootin', and Cassidy got away; but I reckon I got this galoot. The boss'll know what to do with him."

"Sure!" said Yuba. "Like as not to hang him over the corral gate. And I'll sure lend a hand with the rope."

Mexican Pete gritted his teeth and scowled sullenly. Yuba glanced across at Frank Sanderson, who was riding on the other side of the herd.

"You got on all O.K. with the boss' son, Two-gun?" he asked.

The Kid hesitated a moment.

Since they had driven the herd away from Lizard Creek, a good fifteen miles across the rolling prairie, Frank Sanderson had not approached him, or spoken a word to him.

There was a dark look on the young rancher's face; and when his eyes turned on the Kid it was not with a friendly glance.

"I guess he looks as if he's got a grouch!" remarked Yuba. "Say, you ain't had trouble?"

"Nary trouble," said the Kid slowly.

He did not feel disposed to confide to Yuba, friend and comrade as he was, that he suspected—more than suspected—the young rancher of setting free the chief of the brand blotters whom the Kid had roped in. The less that was said about that, the Kid reckoned, the better.

"Waal, he don't look a whole lot pleased with his day's ridin'," said Yuba, with a grin. "I guess he don't take kindly to punchin' cows, Two-gun. Playing poker and getting around boot-leg whisky is his long suit. The boss has got all his work cut out to make a real man of that boy of his'n, feller."

"You've said it," agreed the Kid, with a sigh.

"I guess it gets my goat," growled Yuba. "The boss is the whitest man in the Kicking Mule country, and that boy of his'n is as yellow as a greaser! Three years ago he shot up a man in Kicking Mule, and had to skip the country; and I'll tell the world that he's come back a durnder scallywag than he went. You hear me toot!"

The Kid made no rejoinder.

Frank Sanderson was not popular with the Bar-One bunch; and there was not a man in the outfit, from Mesquite Bill, the foreman, down to the ranch cock, who did not look on him as a scallywag.

"He's coming this-a-way!" added Yuba.

Frank Sanderson swung round his pinto and came riding across the rear of the herd.

"Say, you got help now, Two-gun," he said surlily. "You won't want me helping to drive in the herd."

"That's so," said the Kid. "If you want to ride on to the ranch, sir, I guess I can handle the cows with Yuba here." "I'll sure help," said the horse-wrangler. "You won't want to stop along, Mister Frank, if you'd rather hit home."

Frank Sanderson gave no heed to the horse-wrangler. His eyes were on the Kid in the furtive, sidelong way he had.

"I reckon that prisoner had better be taken to Kicking Mule and put in the calaboose," he said.

"I'm taking him to the ranch," said the Kid.

"So you've allowed before," said Sanderson. "But I'm saying that he'd better hit Kicking Mule and the calaboose."

The Kid looked steadily at the rancher's son. Sanderson's face grew obstinate and sullen; but he did not meet the Kid's steady eyes.

"You'll take the herd on, sir, while I tote the Mex along to the town?" asked the Kid very quietly.

"Nope! I'm done punchin' cows for to-day," grunted Sanderson. "I'm hitting Kicking Mule with the prisoner now you've got help with the herd."

The Kid drew a deep breath.

"I got to see that brand-blotter safe, sir," he said. "I sure got to hand him over."

"Don't you figure that he'll get safe to the calaboose in my hands?" demanded Sanderson.

The Mexican looked quickly from one to the other. There was a flush of hope in his face, an eager glitter in his black eyes. But he said no word.

The Kid found a difficulty in answering Sanderson's angry question. For the boss' sake, he wanted to ride clear of trouble with the boss' son.

"Say, Two-gun, what's the matter with that?" asked Yuba Dick, puzzled. "The greaser's roped up safe; Mister Frank can sure land him safe in the calaboose at Kicking Mule, if he wants."

There was the rub, though the Kid could not say so. He did not believe that Frank Sanderson intended to land the brand-blotter safe in the calaboose. He hesitated and shook his head.

Frank Sanderson, with a set jaw, pushed his horse closer. Taking hold of the Kid's riata, he threw it from the prisoner and took hold of Mexican Pete's reins.

"I'm taking this hombre in charge," he said. "I guess you can leave him to me, Two-gun, jest as I say."

The Kid's eyes flashed; and for a moment it looked like trouble. But he controlled his anger.

"Jest hold on a piece, sir!" said the Kid very quietly. "Jas Cassidy got away when I left him in your hands, way back at Lizard Creek. If that greaser gets away, too—"

"You sure chew the rag a whole lot, puncher," sneered the rancher's son. "You want to can it right now."

And, turning his back on the two cowmen, Frank Sanderson rode away across the rear of the dusty herd, leading the Mexican with him.

The Kid drew a deep, quivering breath. He had been defied and out-faced by a man who, he was assured, intended trickery. And yet he could not pull a gun—not on the son of the whitest man in Kicking Mule.

He sat the grey mustang, looking after the rancher's son. In the growing dusk of the prairie, the two riders soon

disappeared in the direction of the cow-town—Frank Sanderson leading the bound cowthief's horse by the reins. Once out of sight, the Kid figured, the Mexican would not long remain bound. But there was no help for it. He could not pull a gun on the boss' son, and there was an end.

The Kid rode on again with the dusty, lumbering herd, and Yuba Dick rode with him.

"Say, Two-gun!" said Yuba slowly. "Shoot!" said the Kid, as the horse-wrangler paused.

"I guess that young scallywag must have riled you some. I reckon he's glad of an excuse for hitting Kicking Mule. He's sure going to paint the town red," said Yuba. "Ain't that why he was so dead-set on taking the greaser to the calaboose?"

"Mebbe!" said the Kid. "You wasn't here in the old days," said Yuba. "In them days, Two-gun, Mister Frank used to cavort around a whole lot with Jas Cassidy and his crowd—they was friends, and Mexican Pete was one of the bunch. Say, it strikes me powerful strong—"

He paused again. "The Kid looked at him. "Spill it, Yuba."

"Waal," said Yuba, "I guess I ain't going to be surprised to hear that that greaser gets a loose leg on the way to Kicking Mule. If I hear that tomorrow, Two-gun, it ain't going to surprise me none."

The Kid made no reply. It was his own thought, and he figured that the horse-wrangler's shrewd surmise would prove correct. In a glum silence, the Kid rode on with the herd to the ranch.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### The Scallywag!

COLONEL SANDERSON listened to the Rio Kid's report with a grim brow. After herding the cows into the home pasture, Yuba went to the bunkhouse, and the Kid to the ranch-house to see the boss. His report was brief. There were matters he could not touch upon in speaking to Frank Sanderson's father. But he noted that the colonel's steely, keen eyes watched him very sharply.

"I guess we got the goods on Jas Cassidy and his crowd now," the rancher said. "All Kicking Mule knows that Jas never raises the cows he sells off the Bar Cross. He's been suspected of rustling, and changin' brands for years. Now we got the goods on him."

"We sure have, sir," said the Kid. "I got cows in the herd here now, with the Bar-Cross brand burned over the Bar-One—the cows that Jas was handlin' when we run him down at Lizard Creek."

"That cinches it!" said Colonel Sanderson. "And I guess I'm going to hit Kicking Mule pronto, and put the marshal on to him. We got a new Marshal at Kicking Mule now, and I guess he will be pleased to round up Jas Cassidy—if he ain't hit the trail out of the country. Say, you too tired to ride with me?"

The Kid smiled. "I guess I'm ready to ride, sir. I ain't tired a whole lot."

"Get you supper, then, and come round with the cayuse."

"Sure."

The Kid walked away to the bunkhouse.

Half an hour later he was riding for the cow-town with the boss, under the

glistering stars. The Kid and his mustang had had a hard day on the plains, and the Kid, who thought of his horse always before himself, left Side-Kicker in the corral, and picked out another mount for the ride to Kicking Mule. For a good distance the rancher and the puncher rode in silence, till the lights of Kicking Mule showed over the dusky prairie ahead. Then the boss of the Bar-One slackened rein, and drew his horse nearer to the Kid.

"Say, how did Jas get away after you'd roped him in?" he asked.

The Kid shifted uneasily in the saddle. He had dreaded to hear that question.

"I guess he lit out while I was going after Mexican Pete, across the creek, sir," he answered slowly.

"Wasn't Frank around?"

"Yep, he was around."

"Didn't you leave Jas roped up?"

"Yep."

"How did he get loose, then, with Frank around?"

"I reckon I wasn't careful enough with the rope, sir," said the worried Kid. "He sure did get loose and hit the horizon."

The colonel grunted.

"You ain't generally careless with a rope," he said. "Look here, hombre! That guy Cassidy was a friend of my son's in the old days—and a bad friend he was, and led him into a lot of trouble. You don't figure that Frank let him loose?"

"I sure wouldn't like to think so, sir," said the Kid uneasily.

"Waal, we'll see if Frank has got that greaser safe to the calaboose," said the rancher. "If he hasn't—"

He did not finish the sentence, but rode on towards the cow-town in grim silence.

The Kid was feeling deeply troubled.

He had no expectation whatever of finding that Mexican Pete was in the calaboose when they reached Kicking Mule. And he could see that the old rancher shared his own suspicion.

They rode into the lighted street, and the colonel drew rein at the marshal's office. In the doorway of the timber building stood Mr. Piper, the new marshal of Kicking Mule. He nodded to the rancher, and removed the pipe from his mouth.

"Say, Piper, you got Mexican Pete in the calaboose?" asked Sanderson.

"Nope!"

"Didn't my son bring him in?"

"He sure did not," answered the marshal. "There ain't nary guy in the calaboose, colonel. What you got agin Mexican Pete?"

"Brand-blottin', along with his boss, Jas Cassidy."

The marshal nodded.

"I guess I've suspicioned that galoot for dog's ages," he said. "If you got proof, we've got the goods on him!"

"Proof enough!" grunted Sanderson. "You seen my boy Frank in town this evening?"

The marshal made no reply to that. The Kid, watching him, could guess that Piper had seen Frank, and did not care to tell his father where he had seen him.

"Spill it, Piper!" snapped the colonel.

"Waal, I reckon I seen him," said the marshal vaguely. "I seen him around town somewhere. Colonel, I don't exactly remember where."

"Did you see him ride in?"

"Yep, I saw him ride in."

"Was he alone?"

"He sure was alone, colonel."

The rancher compressed his lips. He wheeled his horse, and rode slowly back along Main Street, the Kid following him, and the marshal staring after him with a faint grin on his rugged face.

The colonel stopped at the Golden Mule Hotel, and hitched his horse to the rail.

"Lights down, hombre!" he said curtly.

The Kid dismounted, and hitched his cow-pony.

"I got to find Frank and tote him home," said Sanderson gruffly. "I guess I'll get news of him here. Wait a piece."

The rancher went into the hotel.

The Rio Kid waited, in an uneasy mood. He figured beyond doubt that the scallywag of the Bar-One was painting the town red, and it looked like trouble between father and son when they met. And that prospect got the Kid's goat sorely.

After waiting a few minutes, chewing it over, the Kid left the horses and walked quickly down the street towards the Ace of Spades. He guessed that that "joint" was a likely place to look for Frank Sanderson.

He was right. As he entered the saloon, his eyes fell on the rancher's son sitting at a poker table, deep in draw poker with two others. Frank's rather handsome face was flushed; it was evident at a glance, that he had been putting away bootleg whisky. The Kid quietly made his way to the table, and touched the young rancher on the shoulder.

Frank started, and stared round. His brow blackened at the sight of the Kid.

"What you want?" he snarled.

"Your father's in town, sir," said the Kid quietly. "I guess he's looking for you to ride home."

"Aw, can it! I ain't going home," growled the scallywag of the Bar-One. "Keep clear, and mind your own business, puncher."

Sanderson laughed mockingly, and called to the barkeeper. A glass was in his hand, raised to his lips, when a sudden grip fell on his arm, and the glass went to the floor and was shattered into a score of pieces. The young man spun round with an angry oath, but the rage died out of his face as he found himself looking at the grim face of the boss of the Bar-One.

"Get to your cayuse!" said Colonel Sanderson curtly.

Without a word, the scallywag of the the Bar-One turned to the door. The rancher and the Kid followed him out. Frank fumbled unsteadily with his horse.

His father's hand fell on his shoulder. "Steady! What you done with Mexican Pete?"

"He got away," muttered Frank sullenly.

"You let him get away?"

"No answer."

"Get on that cayuse," snapped the rancher. "I guess I'll talk to you in the morning."

Frank clambered clumsily on the horse. It was a silent, gloomy ride back to the Bar-One under the stars.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

In Exile:

"HARD tack for you, Two-gun!" said Mesquite Bill.

The Kid looked at the foreman of the Bar-One inquiringly.

"How come?" he asked.

"You're for the Pecan Spring range."

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"I guess some guy's got to be for the Pecan Spring range," said the Kid cheerfully. "Me for the Pecan Spring, then."

"You ain't grousing?" asked Mesquite, with a grin.

"Not in your lifetime."

"I guess the boss wants to see you afore you vamoose," said Mesquite, with a nod towards the ranch-house.

The Kid walked slowly and thoughtfully towards the house. By that time, the new puncher in the Bar-One outfit knew all the wide ranch, from border to border. And the stockman's hut at Pecan Spring was the least desirable post on the whole ranch. It was far from the home ranch, lonely amid the boundless plains, and a week on duty there meant a week of blank solitude, far from the sound of any human voice, or the sight of any human face. But, as the Kid remarked, some guy had to be posted at Pecan Spring, and he was ready and willing to take his turn.

It was several days since the episode of the brand-blotters. The marshal of Kicking Mule and his deputies had visited the Bar-Cross ranch, but as they expected, found no one there. Jas Cassidy and his crowd were gone; and the general opinion was that they had "skipped" the country. The charge of changing brands on cattle had been fairly brought home to them at last, and nothing remained for the brand-blotters but to go while the going was good. Nobody expected to see Jas Cassidy or Mexican Pete in Kicking Mule again; it was more likely than not that they would be lynched if they showed up there.

During those days, the Kid had seen little of Frank Sanderson, and was glad of it. What had followed the return of the scallywag that night from the cow town, the Kid did not know, but from distant glimpses of the rancher's son, it was easy to see that the wastrel was not enjoying life. Whenever he came in contact with the Kid, Frank gave him black looks, the Kid, on the other hand, treating the boss' son politely, and keeping away from him as much as he could. He was haunted with the fear of trouble with Frank Sanderson, trouble that he wanted to avoid for the rancher's sake. And so the news that he was to take over the Pecan Spring post was not wholly unwelcome to the Kid.

"Mornin', Two-gun," said Colonel Sanderson, as the Kid came on the porch. "Mesquite told you?"

"Sure, sir," said the Kid, "and I'm ready to ride."

"You'll find Tucson at the Pecan Spring shanty," said the colonel.

"You'll tell him to ride in."

"Yep!"

"And—you ain't going alone, Two-gun," added the colonel.

The Kid brightened a little.

"What about Frank?"

"Frank!" ejaculated the Kid.

"I'm sending Frank to Pecan Spring," said the rancher. "I guess Frank has got to learn to be a man, and he won't learn it none cavorting around Kicking Mule. A week at Pecan Spring will give him time to think a piece, and he sure won't get any poker or bootleg poison there. You get me?"

"Yep!" said the Kid slowly.

"You ain't kicking?" asked the colonel. "Frank don't seem to take to you a whole lot, but you're the man in the bunch I'd like him to be with. I ain't giving you orders, Two-gun; you can take it or leave it, but I'd like you to be with Frank."

The Kid drew a deep-breath.

"I'm ready and willing, sir."

"You'll be kind of patient with him, Two-gun," said the colonel quietly. "I got hopes of that boy still, if he's kept out of bad company. I'm wise to it that he let Jas Cassidy and Mexican Pete loose, though they was found stealin' his father's cattle—but they was friends of his once, and I guess that was the reason. I ain't going to be hard on him for that—I reckon he felt it was up to him. Let that go! They've skipped the country now, and won't be seen around Kicking Mule agin, that's good enough. You'll ride with Frank?"

"Sure, sir!" answered the Kid as cheerfully as he could. "You done too much for me, sir, for me not to be willing to do anything you want."

"It's a cinch, then," said the rancher.

An hour later the Kid's pack was ready on Side-Kicker, and he mounted the mustang and rode away from the ranch. Frank Sanderson rode with him on his pinto.

The Kid gave one glance at the scallywag's face as they started. It was black and sullen. Evidently his banishment to Pecan Spring was a heavy blow to Frank.

It was thirty miles to the lonely station, and during that ride not a word was spoken.

In the sunny afternoon the two riders came in sight of the lonely stockman's hut. There was no sign of life about the place—no smoke rising from the iron chimney.

"I guess Tucson ain't to home," remarked the Kid, breaking the long silence.

Frank Sanderson grunted.

They rode up to the hut, and the Kid dismounted, turned Side-Kicker into the corral, and threw open the hut door.

As he expected, the hut was vacant. The stockman was out on the range looking after the cattle that fed on that distant pasture.

Frank stood in the doorway, glancing occasionally at the Kid and staring out over the boundless sea of grass. The sullenness in his face grew darker and darker.

The Kid, keeping up a cheery humour, stacked pine-chips and pecan-twigs in the rusty iron stove and started a fire, and smoke was soon pouring from the chimney. He unpacked provisions, and began to prepare a meal. His companion offered no help; but the Kid did not care for that.

When the meal was ready Frank dropped heavily on a stool at the rough log table to eat.

He ate in moody silence.

The sun was low in the west when Tucson, the stockman, came in from the range. Afar he had seen the smoke from the chimney, which warned him that his relief had come from the home ranch.

"Say, I'm powerful glad to see you-uns," said the cowman, as he tramped in. "I wasn't expecting to see anybody for two-three days yet. What's the big idea?"

"Boss' orders," said the Kid. "You sure won't be sorry to hit the ranch early, Tucson."

"You bet your life!" said the cowman, grinning. "Mister Frank rode out with you, Two-gun. Goin' back with me?"

"Nope; staying."

"Sho!" said Tucson in surprise. He looked curiously at the rancher's son, who spoke no word, remaining sunk in black, sullen ill-humour.

Tucson slept in the cabin that night; and at dawn mounted his horse and rode back to Bar-One, leaving the Kid with his sullen companion.

**THE FOURTH CHAPTER.**  
**Trouble Ahead!**

**T**HE horseman was vanishing in a fold of the prairie under the red sunset; all the Kid had was the glimpse of a Stetson hat as it disappeared. He wondered who had been at the lonely hut in his absence. Four days had passed at Pecan Spring. Every day, from early morn till dew

the trail when night was falling on the plains.

The Kid reckoned that some galoot had dropped in during the day, and as he came up to the hut he had proof that there had been a visitor; for there were fresh horse-tracks, which the Kid's keen and experienced eye knew at once were not the tracks of any of the four horses at the station.

Frank Sanderson came into the doorway as the Kid dismounted.

"Say, you've had a visitor, sir!" said the Kid cheerily, as he came in, Frank stepping back as he entered.

"No!" said Sanderson shortly.

The Kid gave him a steady look, and then turned away to prepare his supper. He had seen the Stetson hat vanishing to the northward, and the tracks outside the door told their own tale. Why Sanderson had lied to him the Kid could not figure.

On the table lay a deck of cards, and

lynx—awakened at a sound. Without moving, he grasped the six gun that was at his side and stared round in the darkness of the hut.

There was a faint red glow from the dying fire in the stove. The Kid knew what had awakened him; the pine-wood bars had been removed at the door, and the door opened.

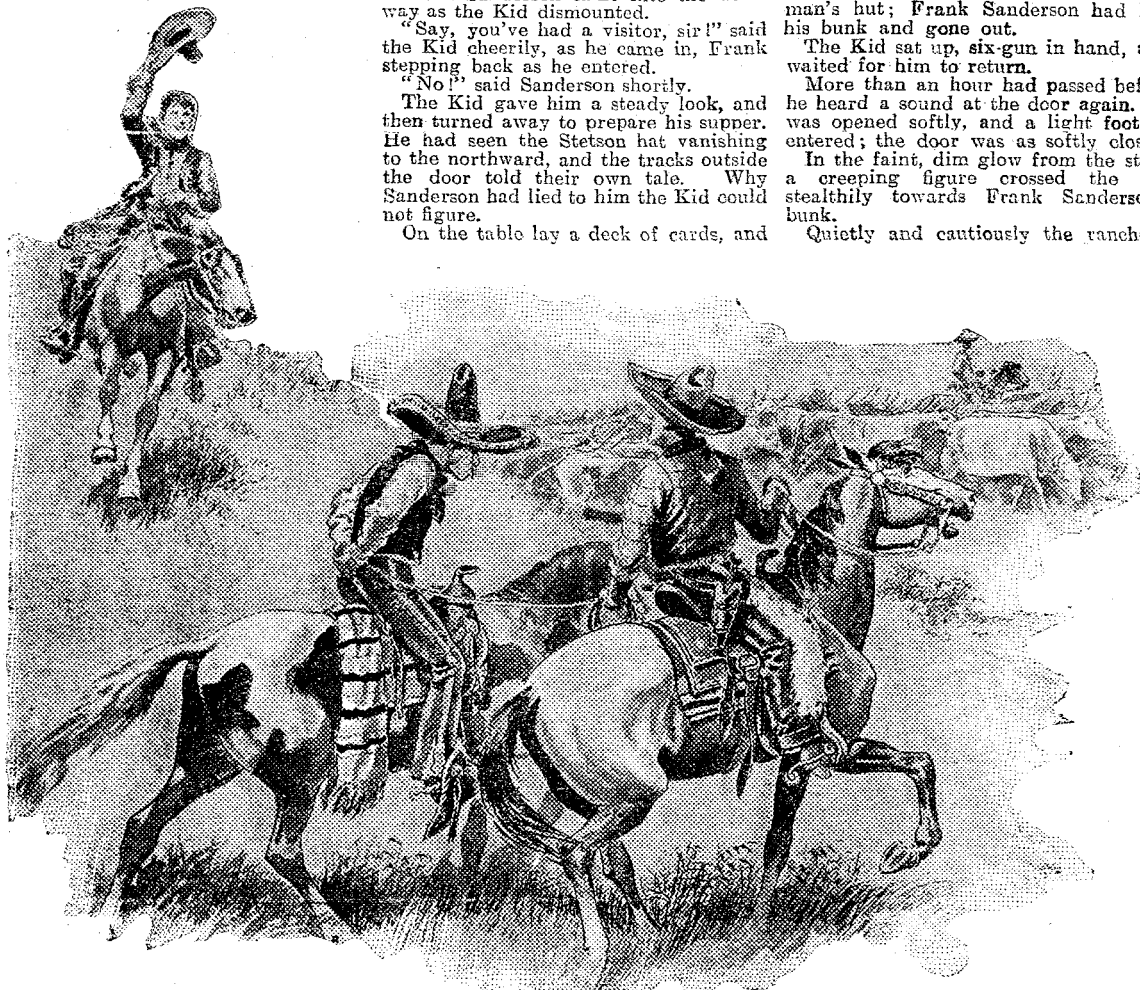
The Kid did not close his eyes again. He knew that he was alone in the stockman's hut; Frank Sanderson had left his bunk and gone out.

The Kid sat up, six-gun in hand, and waited for him to return.

More than an hour had passed before he heard a sound at the door again. It was opened softly, and a light footfall entered; the door was as softly closed.

In the faint, dim glow from the stove a creeping figure crossed the hut stealthily towards Frank Sanderson's bunk.

Quietly and cautiously the rancher's



As the herd of steers advanced, with the Rio Kid riding beside his captive cattle thief, Yuba Dick came galloping to meet them.

eye, the Rio Kid was in the saddle, riding hard.

There were five hundred head of cattle on the lonely pasture, and it was all one man's work to keep tabs on them. The Kid shifted the herd from one feeding ground to another, from one water-hole to another, taking the care of his boss' property that a good cowman takes—and always alone.

Not once did Frank Sanderson ride herd with him. His days were spent loafing about the hut, or the corral; and every night when the Kid rode in he found the rancher's son salky and sullen.

It was the evening of the fourth day at Pecan Spring when the Kid, riding in, saw the Stetson of the unknown horseman vanishing over the prairie in the sunset. The thought crossed his mind that perhaps Frank Sanderson had hit the trail at last, unable to stand the monotony of the lonely post any longer; but it was not likely that he would hit

he did not reckon that Frank had been playing poker all by himself. Sanderson hastily gathered up the cards and slipped them into his pocket.

"I guess I've been playin' dummy poker to pass the time," he remarked. "It's dog-gone slow here, Two-gun!"

"It sure ain't a lively place, sir," said the Kid. "I reckon you'd find it a whole lot better if you'd ride the range with me."

"I sure been thinkin' of that," was the unexpected answer. "I been loafin' around and leaving all the work to you, Two-gun; and I guess to-morrow I'm riding and giving you a rest."

The Kid smiled. "I sure ain't wanting a rest, sir," he answered. "If you'll ride, I'll be glad to ride with you."

Sanderson made no reply to that. When the Kid turned into his bunk that night he was wondering.

It was past midnight when the Kid—who slept as lightly as a cougar or a

son packed himself into his bunk, evidently desirous of not awakening the Kid—who was broad awake and watchful. It was a long time before the sound of steady breathing across the hut told that the rancher's son was sleeping at last.

Then the Kid laid his head on his pillow again.

But it was long before he slept. The Kid's suspicions were vague as yet; but there was one thing that was clear in his mind—there was trouble coming. As sure as the sun was to rise on the prairie in the morning, trouble was to come with the new day. And the Kid, though with a heavy heart, made up his mind to it.

THE END.

(Next week's Western yarn is entitled: "THE CATTLE LIFTERS!" and is full of thrills. Don't miss it!)

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THE RIO KID VERSUS-

# THE CATTLE-LIFTERS!

BY

Ralph Redway.

Sent to guard the cattle on the lonely ranges of the Bar-One Ranch, the Rio Kid, with cow-thieves abroad, finds his task full of perils and thrills!

### THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Kid Wants to Know!

**T**HE Rio Kid came out of the stockman's hut, in the fresh, dewy morning, with his saddle on his arm. He threw down the bar at the corral gate, and called to his horse. The mustang's whinny answered him, and Side-Kicker came up at a trot.

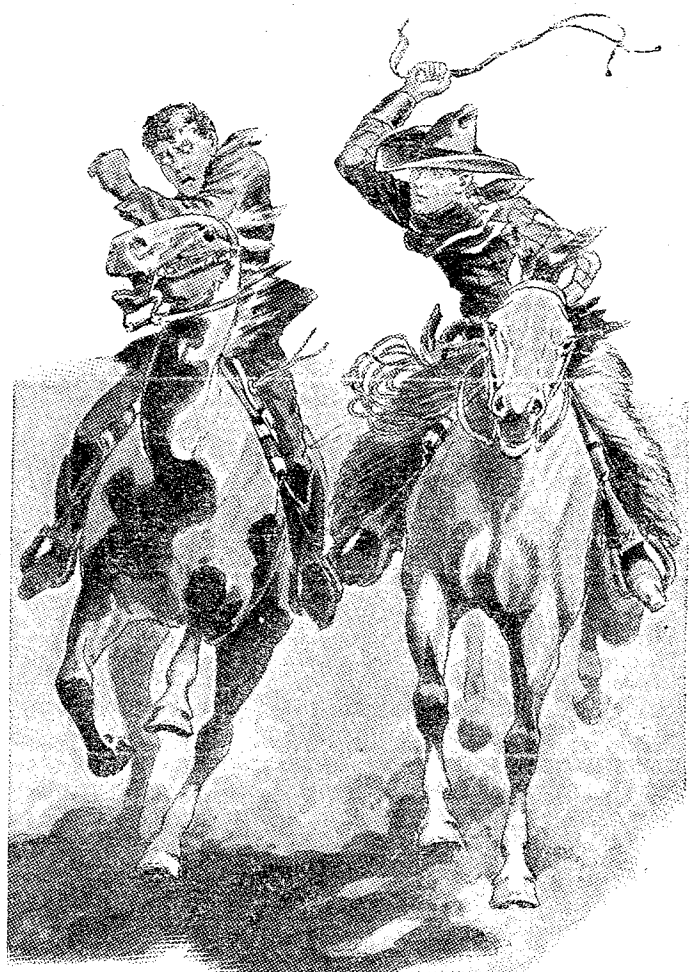
The Kid's brow was dark with thought as he saddled the grey mustang.

It was not like the Kid to greet the morning with a worried brow. In his outlaw days, when he had ridden lonely trails by llano and chaparral, hunted by sheriffs and rangers, he had ridden with a light heart and a care-free face. And since he had been a member of the Bar-One bunch, in the Kicking Mule country, the Kid had found life good, and he was wont to turn out in the morning with a visage as cheery as any in the outfit. But on this especial morning the Kid looked as if he had a grouch against Fate.

Every day, since he had been posted on the outlying range at Pecan Spring, the Kid had ridden out at dawn, and ridden in at dark, his whole day filled by riding herd, with five hundred cows under his care. But now with his mustang saddled and ready, his foot in the stirrup, the Kid hesitated to mount and ride. He looked back at the stockman's hut, where Frank Sanderson was still in his bunk, and then his glance swept the wide, rolling prairie, that stretched away mile on mile in every direction, a boundless ocean of grass. If the Kid expected to see a horseman on the plains, he was disappointed. Nothing was to be seen save the waving grass, and distant moving dots, which told that the herds were stirring. In an absent way, the Kid stroked the glossy neck of his mustang, and Side Kicker whinnied softly, as if understanding that there was trouble on his master's mind. The Kid detached his spurred boot from the stirrup at last, and walked back to the doorway of the hut. He looked in.

Frank Sanderson was sitting up in his bunk, his eyes on the doorway. He started as he saw the Kid looking in, and a flush came over his face.

"I reckoned you was riding," he said. The Kid nodded.



"It's sure time for me to ride, Mister Frank, sir," he said. "But I guess you and me has got to chew the rag a piece afore I hit the trail."

"I guess there ain't nothing to chew the rag about," grunted the son of the boss of the Bar-One. "What's biting you?"

The Kid stepped into the hut.

The rancher's son eyed him uneasily. He made a motion with his hand towards the six-gun that hung over the side of the bunk, as if in anticipation of trouble. But if he had thought of grasping the gun, he changed his mind. He had learned already how quick the boy puncher was on the draw. No man on the Bar-One ranch, excepting Colonel Sanderson, knew that "Two-gun Carson" was in truth the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. But every man on the ranch knew how he could handle a gun.

"I got to spill it, Mister Frank, sir," said the Kid, in the respectful tone he always used to the boss' son, scallywag as he was, and little as the Kid could respect him. "The boss sent you and me, sir, to this post at Pecan Spring, to ride herd together. I guess you ain't ridden herd none since we've been here, and I ain't got no kick coming; you're free to do as you want. But—"

"But what?" growled the scallywag of the Bar-One. "You're sure chewing the rag a whole lot, Two-gun."

"I guess I want to know," said the Kid quietly. "A few days ago, I rounded up Jas Cassidy and Mexican

Pote, blottin' brands—stealin' your father's cattle, over to Lizard Creek. You let them pizen polecats go, after I'd got them safe cinched. I guess it ain't no good denying it, sir. I'm wise to it, and so's the colonel, sure."

Frank Sanderson shrugged his shoulders.

"They was friends of mine, long ago," he said. "I wasn't going back on old friends, even if they was caught blottin' brands. So you can chew on that, and be darned to you. If you're aimin' to make trouble about that—"

"I ain't," said the Kid.

"Then what's biting you?" "Yesterday, while I was on the ranges, some guy horned in here," said the Kid.

"There ain't been nobody—"

"I guess I saw his Stetson when he was vamooseing, and there was his tracks left behind him," said the Kid patiently. "I don't know who that guy was, sir, but I know he was here seeing you."

Sanderson drew in a deep breath.

"Is that the whole lot?" "It ain't!" said the Kid. "Last night, Mister Frank, when you thought I was asleep in my bunk, you got out, and was out for more'n an hour, and came sneaking back quiet, thinking I wasn't awake."

Sanderson started violently.

"Dog-gone you, you was awake!" he ejaculated.

"I was, sir!" said the Kid.

The rancher's son compressed his lips.

"Well, what about it?" he said sullenly. "I couldn't sleep, and I took a walk round the corral. What about it?"

"Nothin', if that's all," answered the Kid. "But I guess that ain't the lot, sir. I got a powerful hunch that the man that horned in hyer yesterday was one of the brand-blottin' crowd—Jas Cassidy or Mexican Pete, mebber—"

"It's a lie!" muttered Sanderson. "And you offered to ride herd to-day, instead of me, for the first time since we've struck Pecan Spring," said the Kid; "and you refused to ride herd in company, like I said. And then you sneaked out at night—"

He paused. "Spill the rest," sneered Sanderson. "What you reckon you're getting at, you dog-goned giuk?"

"I ain't sure of that, Mister Frank," said the Kid quietly. "But I don't need telling that there's some game on here—some darned gum-game—and I've got my eyes peeled. Looks to me like you're getting in cahoots with Jas Cassidy's crowd, and headin' for bad trouble. If Jas has struck this section, he's after cattle-stealin'. He's had to skip Kicking Mule, since the marshal got after him for brand-blottin'; but, I guess, once a cow-thief always a cow-thief, Mister Frank"—the Kid's voice and face were deeply earnest—"a game like that ain't good enough for the son of Colonel Sanderson, the whitest man in Kicking Mule. I guess it would break your father's heart, if he found that you was in cahoots with a crowd like that. Give it a miss, sir, if that's how it stands."

"That ain't how it stands," muttered Frank Sanderson. "I ain't seen nothing of Jas Cassidy since the day you roped him at Lizard Creek. I guess he's skipped the country, like everybody allows."

"Then who was it horned in here while I was riding range yesterday?"

"Nobody. If any galoot rode this way, I never saw him," said the rancher's son stubbornly.

"And you never got out last night to speak to any guy that was hanging around for news?" asked the Kid.

"I sure did not."

The Kid compressed his lips. "If you wasn't the son of the man I respect most in all Texas, you geek, I'd sure root you outer that bunk, and lay my quirt around you," he said. "It's a darned lie—and you ain't telling durned lies for nothing. Don't touch that gun, you scallywag, or I'll fill you so full of holes you'd be useful for a colander. I'll tell the world, you're lying like a dog-goned Greaser. It ain't no use talking turkey to you, Frank Sanderson—you're a bad egg, you sure are. I'm going to tell you this—" The Kid made a step towards the bunk, and the rancher's son shrank back, eyeing him with mingled rage and fear. Standing beside the bunk, the Kid looked down at the evil face, scornfully. "I'm telling you this, Frank Sanderson—I'm here to ride herd over your father's cows, and to keep them safe for him—and if there's any cow-stealin' on this range, there's goin' to be shootin'—and if you're in cahoots with cow-thieves, and you come up agin my gun, it's you for the long range, if you was the boss' son ten times over. Chew on that, you lying scallywag."

And with that, the Rio Kid swung round on his heel, and tramped out of the stockman's hut.

The cowering man in the bunk flung a curse after him.

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Outside the hut, the Kid leaped into the saddle, and rode away with a jingle of bridle and spur.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER. Shot for Shot!

THE shot that came from the clump of pecans did not take the Rio Kid by surprise. A mile from the stockman's hut, riding out to the herd, the Kid passed within easy shot of the clump; and he noted the blue jay that fluttered restlessly over the branches. Something, the Kid figured, had scared the bird; and whatever had scared it, was still there, or the jay would have settled down again. It might be a crouching cougar, a crawling rattlesnake, a wandering coyote; but the Kid did not reckon that it was. The Kid reckoned that it was something human that had startled the blue jay out of the trees, and he was as watchful as a wildcat as he rode.

The flash of the rifle came, at a distance of fifty yards. The roar of the report followed; but ere it echoed across the plain, the Kid had slumped down from the saddle and dropped heavily in the grass.

From the pecans came a shout of triumph.

A dark-skinned man leaped up, and into view; a Mexican, whom the Kid would have recognised as Mexican Pete had he been looking at him. But the Kid lay in the thick grass, covered from sight, where he had fallen from his horse. Beside him, Side-Kicker neighed and whinnied, with a shrill, alarmed note.

"Muy bien!" chuckled Mexican Pete, grinning over his smoking rifle, in the direction of the riderless horse. "Tocos los Santos, it was easy! He is killed, por Dios!"

And the cow-thief ran swiftly across the intervening space, reloading his rifle as he ran. His dark face was full of triumph; his black eyes glittered gleefully.

Not till he was within a dozen paces of the Kid, did he see the fallen form, in the thick waving grass.

As he glimpsed it, lying there motionless close by the whinnying mustang, Mexican Pete halted, and put the rifle to his shoulder. His enemy had fallen at the first shot; but the brand-blotter was leaving nothing to chance; it was his intention to riddle the body with balls before he approached more closely. He did not know that "Two-gun" of the Bar-One was the Rio Kid; but he knew that he was too dangerous a hombre for chances to be taken with him.

But as the Mexican cow-thief's black eye gleamed along the rifle, there came the sudden roar of a six-gun from the spot where the puncher lay in the grass.

"Caramba!" gasped the Mexican. He staggered back, the rifle falling from his hands. He pitched blindly forward and fell.

The cow-thief lay groaning in the grass.

There was a heavy trampling of cowboy's riding-boots, and a Stetson showed against the sky. The Bar-one puncher was coming. The Mexican made a desperate effort to grasp the rifle; but his strength failed him, and he collapsed again with a groan. A moment more, and the Rio Kid stood over him, his six-gun, still smoking, levelled at the swarthy face of the cow-thief.

The black eyes of the Mexican burned with rage and hatred. The cool, smiling puncher, showed no sign of a wound. The shot from the pecans had

not touched him; Mexican Pete knew that now

"Say, hombre, you sure slipped up on that, a piece!" drawled the Rio Kid. "Why, you pesky skunk, I was looking for that shot ten minutes or more before you burned powder, and I reckoned I'd draw you outer cover and give you your medicine. And you sure got it."

The Kid picked up the rifle, smashed the lock under his heavy heel, and tossed the weapon away. The Mexican watched him with burning eyes. The Bar-One puncher took the revolver from the cow-thief's belt, and served it as he had served the rifle. Then he drew the long-bladed cuchillo from Mexican Pete's boot-leg, and snapped the blade under his boot. Having run his hands over the fallen cow-thief for concealed weapons, and found none, the Kid seated himself on a grassy knoll a few feet away from Mexican Pete, rested his six-gun on his knee, and eyed the ghastly face of the cow-thief coolly and scrutinisingly.

"I guess you're for the long range, Pete!" he said. "You got yours, you pesky son-of-a-gun! Anything to say afore you hit Jordan?"

"Caramba!" "Aw, can it!" advised the Kid. "Don't I keep on telling you that cursing won't buy you anything? Say, where's Jas Cassidy?"

The Mexican made no answer. "I guess that where you are, he ain't far off," said the Kid. "I sure want to know where Jas Cassidy is; and what he's got to do with Frank Sanderson at the hut, hombre."

Mexican Pete started. "That hits you, does it?" grinned the Kid. "You didn't figure that I was wise to that. Dog-gone you for a yellow Greaser, I'm wise to a good many things you ain't guessed. Say, I want to know."

"I will tell you nothing!" snarled Mexican Pete.

"I guess you'll think again," said the Kid pleasantly. "I'm sure a civil and polite guy when I'm stroked down; but when I get my mad up, I'm just one wildcat. Now, I guess you're hard hit, Mexican Pete—you got a Colt's slug in your chest, and if I mount my cayuse and ride, you'll be buzzards' meat afore noon. You want me to tie you up and stick you on your hoss, and give you a chance to hit a town and see a doc? I guess you got a hoss hidden in the pecans yonder. Shoot!"

The Mexican was silent. "Or," said the Kid, in a tone of quiet, deadly menace, "you want me to burn powder agin, and blow your brains out afore you're left for the turkey buzzards? You only got to say."

He lifted the six-gun, and his eyes gleamed over it at the swarthy face of the cow-thief.

Mexican Pete shrank in the grass. "Mercy, senor!" he panted. "I will speak! Give me my life—"

"I guess your pesky life ain't worth a cartridge," said the Kid contemptuously. "I'd sure hate to waste a Colt's cartridge in blottin' out a coyote of your heft, I sure would. You talk turkey, you yellow polecat, and I'll let you live till some sheriff strings you up to a cottonwood. Where's Jas Cassidy?"

"Nombre de Dios! He is waiting at the mesa—northward of the stockman's hut—"

"I guess I know the place," assented the Kid. "and who's that cow-thief waiting for at the mesa?"

The Mexican hesitated. But the deadly gleam in the eyes that looked



at him over the long-barrelled Colt checked the lie on his lips.

"For the Senor Sanderson!" he muttered.

"Frank Sanderson?"

"Si, senior!"

"It was Jas that horned in at the hut yesterday to see that young scallywag?" asked the Kid.

"Si, senior!"

"And fixed it up with him to ride range alone to-day, leaving me in the hut?" said the Kid.

"Si!"

"And I guess he waited around to get the news if it was a cinch, and the scallywag sneaked out last night to tell him there was nothing to it, and that I'd be riding range to-day."

"Si!"

"And what's the big idea?" asked the Kid quietly. "Now Jas has been stopped brand-blottin', and has had to skip out of Kicking Mule, he's takin' to runnin' cows, is he? And young Frank Sanderson is in cahoots with him to run his father's cows?"

"Si, senior!"

"I guess I figured it out suthin' that-a-way," said the Kid. "And they fixed

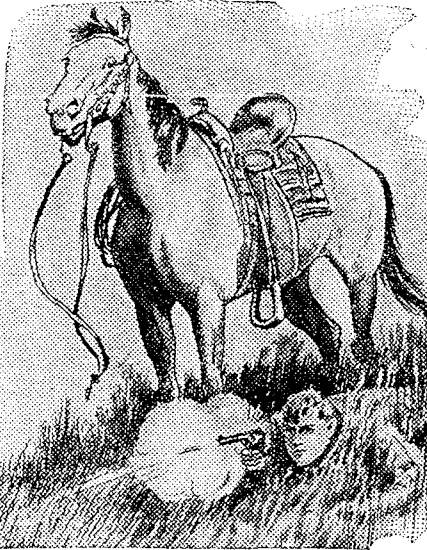
"In the pecans, senior, tied to a tree." The Kid called to Side-Kicker, mounted the mustang, and rode away to the pecan belt, from which Mexican Pete had fired on him. He came back in a few minutes leading a saddled cow-pony.

"I guess you ain't worth the trouble, Greaser!" growled the Kid. "But I said I'd tie you up, if you talked, and I'll sure do it!"

"Gracias—"

"Aw, quit it!" snapped the Kid.

There came the roar of a six-gun and the Mexican staggered back.



He knelt by the wounded cow-thief and bandaged his wound. Then, exerting his strength, he lifted the Mexican to the saddle of the cow-pony.

"I guess," said the Kid, "that you got a chance. You don't want to hit Kicking Mule—I reckon you'd be shot up or strung up in that burg. You want to hit south for Apache Creek—you'll find a doctor there. You got a chance to pull through—more'n you deserve, you pesky, all-fired, cow-stealin' coyote! And, say," added the Kid grimly, "I'm goin' all out for the mesa on the northern feedin' ground, and if I don't find Jas Cassidy there, I'm riding after you, hell-for-leather, and I guess I'll get you! You savvy?"

"Por todos los Santos, senior—" "Aw, can it!"

The Kid leaped on Side-Kicker, and rode away to the north. The Mexican cow-thief, sagging in the saddle, with a ghastly face, rode southward. The Rio Kid gave him no further thought. Whether he lived to reach the cow-town or not, he was out of the game, and the Bar-One puncher had no further concern with him. The Kid touched his mustang with the quirt, and rode northward at a furious gallop.

THE THIRD CHAPTER. At Close Quarters!

"DOG-GONE it!" the Rio Kid muttered, as he came in sight of the mesa. "Dog-gone it! I guess this gets my goat a few! The pesky scallywag!"

His suspicions of the scallywag of the Bar-One had been strong and deep, and what the Mexican cow-thief had be-

trayed had confirmed what he suspected. Frank Sanderson, the worthless son of the whitest man in Texas, was in cahoots with Jas Cassidy, hand-in-glove with the cattle-thief to run off Bar-One herds.

So far as Jas was concerned, the Kid had no doubts. It would be gun-play as soon as he sighted the cattle-lifter, and either Jas or the Kid would be left on the prairie for the buzzards and the coyotes. But Frank Sanderson was a problem. The wretched waster and gambler, penniless after his last jamboree at Kicking Mule, with no prospect of raising fresh funds for dissipation save by working as a cow-puncher on the ranch, had thrown in his lot with the cattle thieves. But he was still the son of Colonel Sanderson, the Kid's boss—the boss who had treated the Kid like a white man, and earned his undying gratitude. How he was to deal with Frank Sanderson was a problem to the Kid which he had not solved when the mesa came in sight across the rolling prairie, against the sunny sky.

Beyond the mesa was the feeding-ground of a section of the Pecan Spring herd—two hundred of the five hundred head that were in the Kid's charge—and in Frank Sanderson's charge. The herd on the southern range, no doubt, would have been driven off by Mexican Pete, had he succeeded in getting the Kid. The Kid reckoned that the cattle-thieves had aimed to make a clean sweep at Pecan Spring. And he reckoned, too, that he was going to put "paid" to it. The mesa rose larger and larger to his view, as he galloped on, Side-Kicker stretching his wiry limbs to their utmost speed. The Kid came abreast of the mesa at last, and galloped along its rugged side. Now the rolling plain north of it was in his view, and the plain was dusty with the tramp of a herd in motion.

The cow-thieves had the cattle on the run, and on the wind the cracking of quirts came to the Kid's ears as he rode. Amid the dust raised by eight hundred hoofs of cattle, he discerned the figures of two horsemen—and he knew that one was Jas Cassidy, the other the boss's son.

He gave Side-Kicker a touch of the spur, and the mustang leaped on. The dust of the trampling herd came down the wind, with the cracking of the quirts that urged the stolen cattle onward towards the distant hills. But it was long miles to the range of hills for which the cattle-lifters were aiming. The stolen cattle were never likely to reach them, unless the cow-thieves got the upper hand of the Kid.

The roar of a six-gun, from amid the dust of the herd, told the Kid that he had been seen.

He set his teeth, and galloped on, a six-gun in either hand now, guiding Side-Kicker with his knees.

Frank Anderson was on the right of the rolling herd, Jas Cassidy on the left. It was to the left that the Kid

rode, aiming to deal first with the brand-blotter who had turned outlaw and cattle-lifter.

Across the heaving backs of the trampling cows they exchanged shots, the lead flying wild from the haste and movement.

Jas Cassidy, his hard, bearded face set with rage, dragged in his broncho, and faced round at the Kid.

"You or me, dog-gone you!" he shouted hoarsely.

"You've said it!" muttered the Kid grimly.

The cow-thief came charging towards him, firing as he came. Bang, bang, bang! roared the six-gun in the cow-thief's hand.

A bullet clipped the brim of the Kid's Stetson, and spun it on his head; another cut a streak in his sunburnt cheek. But the Kid, silent and grim, held his fire till he was within easy shooting, and then his six-gun roared—once.

Jas Cassidy fired again, but his gun was sinking in a nerveless hand as he pulled the trigger. Backwards over the tail of his broncho he went, to crash into the grass amid the lumbering cows.

From the fallen man came one fearful cry; and then the trampling hoofs were over him, trampling every vestige of life from him. The bellowing cows trampled on, leaving behind them that at which the Kid, iron-nerved as he was, did not care to look.

Through the dust of the herd lead was whistling. The Kid wheeled his mustang. Frank Sanderson was firing on him—firing with a white and desperate face. But the hand that held the six-gun was shaking; the bullets flew wild and wide. The Kid drove his way through the lumbering cows towards the rancher's son.

He dashed up to the rancher's son, gun lifted.

"Drop that Colt, you pizen skunk!" Frank Sanderson's gun went to the earth with a crash. The Kid drew in his mustang beside him.

"You pizen polecat!" he said, between his teeth. "You dog-goned, pizen scallywag! If you wasn't the boss' son, I'd sure make it last sickness for you, and send you where Jas Cassidy has gone. Dog-gone you, I guess it would be doing the boss a service to wipe you out!"

Sanderson answered with a curse. "I ain't shooting you up!" said the Kid savagely. "I reckon if the boss knewed you was double-crossing him he wouldn't blame me none. But I guess I got to let you live, dog-gone you! It sure gets my goat a whole lot, but I got to let you live!"

The Kid glanced round at the herd. The cows, already excited by the hurried drive, and now scared by the shooting, were breaking into a wild stampede.

With a thunder of hoofs, the herd swept away across the prairie. And at the sight of the stampede the Kid forgot everything but that he was a cowman with cows in charge. He turned to Sanderson again, waving his hand towards the herd.

"I guess them cows is stampeding!" he shouted. "You got to help me round them up, and get them back to the range. I guess if they scatter we'll lose half the herd. You get me?"

Sanderson gritted his teeth. "Round them up yourself, darn you!" he snarled.

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"You got to help round them up, you cur!" snapped the Kid. "You hear me talking—you got to help drive them cows in!"

"Forget it!" snarled Sanderson.

The Kid had holstered his guns. He gripped his quirt, and rode closer to Frank Sanderson. The heavy whip was raised and it came down with a crash across the back of the rancher's son.

With a yell, the scallywag of the Bar-One spurred his pinto away. The Kid rode after him savagely, the heavy quirt rising and falling in a succession of blows. The rancher's son cowered and howled under the cracking lashes of the leather.

"Let up!" he yelled. "Let up, dog-gone you! I guess I'll do as you want! Let up!"

The Kid, breathing hard, lowered the quirt.

"Now ride for it, you dog!"

The Kid, without another word or look, dashed after the thundering herd. And the scallywag of the Bar-One, cowed and beaten, rode as he was ordered.

## THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

### Play Up!

**T**WO weary horsemen—even the iron-limbed Kid weary to the bone—trailed down to the stockman's hut in the sinking sunlight. They were weary with incessant riding; their horses were weary; even Side-Kicker's gallant head drooped.

But weary as the Rio Kid was, there was satisfaction in his face. The man beside him, too worn down by fatigue even to scowl or curse, sagged in his saddle, lurching to every stride of the pinto.

The stampeding herd had been rounded up, and driven back to their pasture. Not more than a dozen cows had escaped into the trackless plains; and even those strays, the Kid reckoned, he would rope in later.

At the door Frank Sanderson fell rather than dismounted from his pinto, and staggered into the hut. He did not trouble to turn his horse into the corral; he staggered to his bunk and threw himself upon it and lay still, aching with fatigue, careless even of hunger and thirst.

The Kid led both horses to the corral and put up the bar. Then he walked into the hut, dead tired, but far from sinking under fatigue as the scallywag had done.

He jammed wood into the iron stove and lighted the fire. Bacon in thick slices was soon sizzling in the frying-pan, filling the hut with an appetising scent.

Frank Sanderson lay unheeding. But when the meal was cooked the Kid carried a plate of bacon and beans to the bunk, and placed it there; and the rancher's son, sitting up, ate ravenously. The Kid, sitting by the stove, ate his supper with keen appreciation; he, like his companion, had tasted nothing since breakfast.

After feeding, Frank threw himself down again, and either slept or appeared to sleep. The Kid, leaning back on the wall, rested his eyes on the last red of the sunset through the open doorway. From the distance came the lowing of cattle.

The Kid had time to think now. Until the herd was safe he had had no time for that. The bounden duty of the cowman came before everything else.

The night came on darkly. Stars

came out in the sky, glimmering over the shadowy plains.

Sanderson did not move. Fatigue chained him down; it was likely that he would not stir till morning, if then. But the Kid, when he had rested, rose and left the hut; and, taking a fresh horse from the corral, he mounted and rode. The cattle were in an uneasy mood, and the herd required care, and there was little sleep for the Kid that night, worn as he was.

For long hours, under the glistening stars, the Kid rode round the herds, north and south. It was drawing near to morning when he came back to the stockman's hut.

Frank Sanderson still lay, inert, as he had been left. The Kid gave him a glance, and threw himself on his own bunk.

He slept for a couple of hours and turned out with the sun streaming in at the chinks of the hut. He threw the door wide open to the fresh morning breeze.

Not till he had made breakfast did he call the rancher's son. Frank Sanderson turned out of his bunk then, with a black brow and a sullen face, still stiff and weary.

He lounged to the doorway, and stood leaning on a post, lighting a cigar. His eyes were furtively on the Kid.

"What you aim to do?" he asked suddenly.

The Kid shook his head. "I sure don't rightly know," he answered. "I'm beat to a frazzle! You got me guessing, feller!"

"If you aim to tell my father, I guess I'm riding this morning—and I ain't riding back to the Bar-One!" muttered Frank.

The Kid shook his head again.

"How can I tell the boss that his son is a thief and a cattle-lifter?" he snapped. "It would break his heart if he knew. I guess I'm giving you a chance, feller. You're a bad egg—a durned bad egg—and I reckon if the boss knew he'd quirt you off'n the ranch. But I ain't spilling the beans—no if you go straight after this! Jas Cassidy sure can't talk about it—he's gone over the range—and I guess Mexican Pete ain't likely to horn into Kicking Mule country again. You run straight Frank Sanderson, and I'll give you a chance to make good."

The Kid rose from the stool.

"Now saddle up!" he said.

"I ain't riding range," said the scallywag sullenly.

"Guess again!" said the Kid coolly. "You been loafing ever since we came up to Pecan Spring and it sure ain't done you any good. You gotta quit loafing. You're riding range every day from now on, under my eye; and I'm goin' to see that you do a full day's work every day, like you was a real man—with my quirt. Got that?"

Sanderson eyed him.

"And if I don't—"

"I guess I still got my quirt," said the Kid grimly. "If you make me use it on you, feller, you'll sure be sorry. You got to be a man, while you're riding herd with me, or you got to take your medicine! There ain't no two ways about it—you got to play up!"

And when the Kid rode out to the herd in the fresh morning the Scallywag of the Bar-One rode with him.

THE END.

(Next week's Western adventure-thriller is entitled: "THE KID'S SACRIFICE!")

# WIN

## A BIKE or MODEL SPEED BOAT.

### ANOTHER EASY-TO-WIN COMPETITION

# "SHADOGRAPHS."

## 6 "Mead" LIGHT ROADSTER BIKES and

## 20 MODEL STEAM LAUNCHES (Supplied by Messrs. Hobbies).



### ALL PRIZES MUST BE WON—ENTER NOW!

Now then, you fellows, here's something both new and really attractive in competitions for you. See that you don't miss it—for in a few short weeks, winners MUST be found for all these topping prizes, and remember, one of those winners might be you! Also, there is nothing at all to pay—so come along, gather round, and start winning NOW!

You will find the competition as easy as it is attractive. All you have to do is to solve a few sets of simple silhouette puzzles such as you see here. This is Set 1, and you will notice that the artist has drawn the silhouettes of nine ordinary, well-known objects. In some cases, he has taken unusual views of them, and that makes them all the more interesting.

Take the first "shadow" for instance; after looking at it for a moment, you will realise that it is an ELEPHANT, seen head on, and so we have filled that answer in for you. In the same way, see if you can solve the other eight puzzles. They are all equally easy, but in case you have any difficulty with them, we give on page 14 the Full List of Objects in which you can find the name of every object shadowed throughout the entire contest.

As you recognise each object, write the name of it IN INK in the space 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, will be given full directions for the sending in of your entries.

You can find all the answers in the list on page 14.

## "Shadographs" Set 1

## RULES

(which must be strictly adhered to).

The Six Splendid "Mead" Cycles will be awarded to the six readers whose solutions of the four sets of "Shadographs" are correct or most nearly correct, the Twenty Model Motor-Boats following in order of merit.


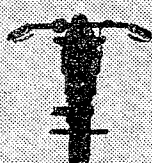

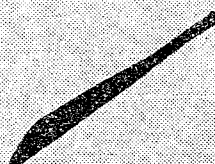




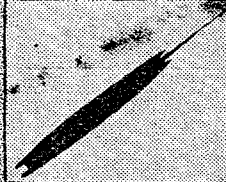
In the event of ties, the Editor reserves the right to divide the value of the prizes as he thinks fit, but no competitor may receive more than one prize. The Editor's decision will be final and binding. You may send in as many attempts as you like, but only complete attempts made out IN INK on the "Shadographs" Sets Nos. 1 to 4, inclusive, for each attempt, 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," whose readers are also taking part, must not compete.



Fill in Your Answers  
IN INK and keep the  
Set by you until Next  
Week's Puzzles  
Appear.

		
ELEPHANT.	2	3
		
4	5	6
		
7	8	9

# The POPULAR

2¢



Winnifred Brooks

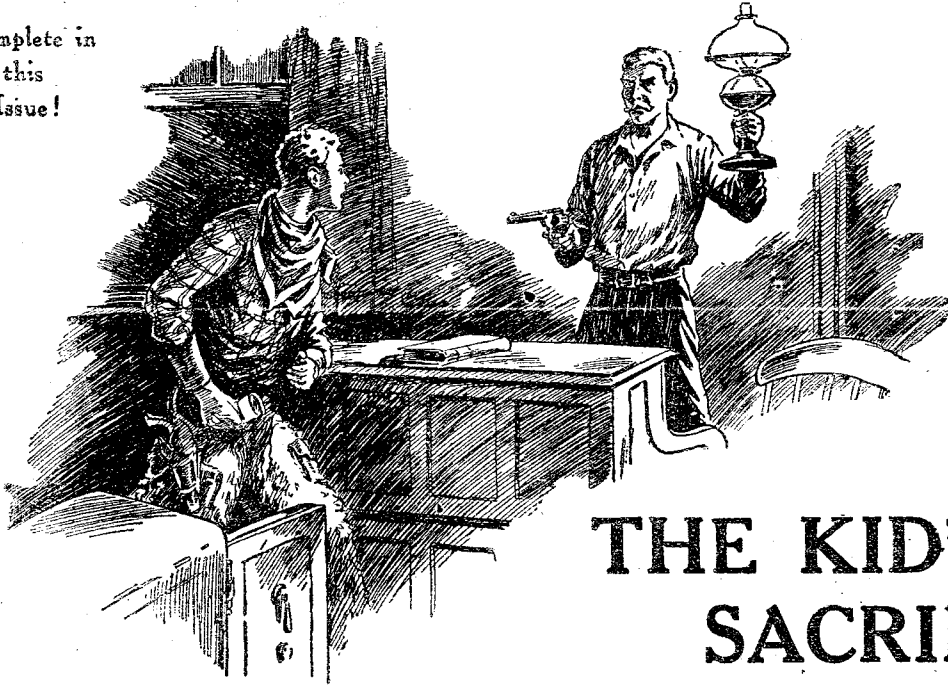
The Grand Contents  
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Valuable Prizes,  
2 SCHOOL STORIES,  
Extra-long  
DETECTIVE THRILLER,  
and a Roaring  
WESTERN YARN!

**6 TOPPING BIKES**  
AND  
**20 MODEL MOTOR-BOATS**

**MUST BE WON!**

Complete in  
this  
Issue!



# THE KID'S SACRIFICE!

## THE FIRST CHAPTER. Hold Up on the Trail!

**P**UT 'em up!" The sharp command rapped on the ears of the Rio Kid. The man who had stepped from the clump of mesquites had a rifle clamped to his shoulder, his finger on the trigger, his eye gleaming along the barrel. And the muzzle bore full upon the boy puncher of the Bar-One. The Kid pulled in his horse.

For once he was taken by surprise. But he could hardly blame himself for that. Since Black George, the road agent, had been rounded up, no hold-up man had been seen in the Kicking Mule country. And if a hold-up man was around, there seemed no reason why he should get after a puncher riding the trail from Juniper to the Bar-One Ranch.

The Kid pulled in. His eyes glinted; but he obeyed the command, lifting his hands over his Stetson.

"It's your say-so, hombre," he said pleasantly.

"Keep 'em up!" "Anything to oblige," drawled the Kid. "But what you want, feller? You holdin' me up for my hoss, or my guns, or my chaps? I guess it ain't worth your while nohow."

His eyes were keenly on the man who had stepped from the mesquite. There was an old flour-sack drawn over the hold-up man's head, descending to his waist, where it was belted in. Two holes were cut in it for his eyes, another for his mouth. There was no chance of recognising the man—he had taken care of that. Below the open end of the flour-sack a pair of ragged sheep-skin chaps and rough riding-boots could be seen. That was all. And the Kid was guessing.

"You can put down one of them paws," said the hold-up man. "If you touch a gun, or try to, it's you for the long range. Put down one paw, and throw down the roll."

"What roll?" asked the Kid. "The roll you're taking from the bank to the Bar-One. Don't chew the

rag! I guess I'd as soon turn you into buzzards' meat as not."

The Kid breathed hard. He had ridden in to the bank at Juniper that day, sent by Colonel Sanderson, the boss of the Bar-One, and was riding back with a roll of six thousand dollars in his saddle-bags. But there was nothing about the Kid to indicate that he was carrying a big roll. And he knew that this guy had not watched him, as he declared, in Juniper. The Kid had ridden in, presented the boss' letter at the bank, and ridden out again in five minutes. And he had ridden fast, wanting to hit the ranch again before sundown. If this guy had been watching him in Juniper,

## The Rio Kid loses his job on the Bar-One Ranch!

he could not have got ahead of the Kid on the home-trail. But he was ahead of him, and had evidently been hiding in the mesquites by the trail, waiting for him to pass.

The Kid's eyes glittered. The man in the flour-sack had not picked up the news at Juniper. He had known of the Kid's mission beforehand. That was clear to the Kid.

The man in the sack was a Bar-One man!

Only a Bar-One man could have known that the Kid was sent to Juniper that day, to bring back the dollars Colonel Sanderson needed for a deal in cattle at the Joshua-A the next day.

"By the great horned toad!" muttered the Kid.

The flour-sack hid the hold-up man well. But the Kid figured that he knew who he was.

Only Frank Sanderson, the colonel's wastrel son, had been present in the ranch-house, when the boss gave the Kid his instructions.

It was the scallywag of the Bar-One.

The Kid was as certain of it as if his eyes could penetrate the thickness of the flour-sack to the face behind it.

"You hear me yaup?" rapped out the hold-up man. "I want that roll you've got from the bank, and pronto. I guess I'm ready to take it from your body, if you don't hand it over."

"You dog-goned skunk—" began the Kid.

But he checked himself.

The boss' son, gambler, wastrel, scallywag, cow-thief, and now hold-up man, was the boss' son. The Kid was ready to take a chance with his gun; but he could not shoot up Frank Sanderson. Had he been anybody but the son of Colonel Sanderson the Kid would have let daylight through him without a second thought. But—

"I'm waiting!" snapped the man in the flour-sack. "I guess I ain't waiting long, feller. Pony up!"

"You hold the cards, hombre," said the Kid. "I guess I ain't arguing with that rifle."

He lowered his right hand.

The eyes from the orifices in the flour-sack watched him like a cat's. But the Kid reckoned he would have had a good chance of pulling a gun and turning the tables on the trail-thief. It was not the levelled rifle that stopped him. It was his certainty that Frank Sanderson's face was hidden behind the flour-sack. They were foes, much as the Kid had wanted to be a friend to the boss' son. And Frank Sanderson had felt the weight of his quirt. But shooting the boss' son was another matter. The Kid felt that he could not stand for that.

His hand slid into the saddle-bag. The eyes gleamed from the eye-holes eagerly. Frank Sanderson, working on the ranch under his father's eyes, cut off from dissipation and gambling, was desperate—desperate for money, and for a return to his old pursuits. But the Kid, well as he had learned to know the scallywag of the Bar-One, was surprised at this. He reckoned that it was the limit, even for the reckless, unscrupulous wastrel.

"Pronto!" snarled the voice, from the flour-sack.

The Kid's hand came out with a little leather sack in it. He tossed it into the grass at the feet of the hold-up man.

"You win," he remarked coolly.

"Now, keep your paws up, and ride!" said the hold-up man harshly. "Ride on to the ranch with your hands up. And if you even look back, you'll get a chunk of lead through your cabeza."

"It's your say-so."

With his hands above his Stetson, the Kid rode on.

The eyes from the flour-sack watched him. The rifle followed his movements. The Kid reckoned that it was want of sand that kept the scallywag from shooting him out of the saddle. Frank Sanderson had not come to that; he dared not shed blood. But he would have pulled the trigger had the Kid resisted the robbery. There was no doubt about that.

At a little distance the Kid suddenly spurred the grey mustang, and Side-Kicker leaped into speed. He dropped his hands to his reins, and dashed on at a gallop towards the ranch.

Crack!

A rifle rang behind him, but the lead whistled far from the galloping Kid. The Kid laughed aloud as he dashed on towards the distant ranch.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

### The Kid Delivers the Goods!

COLONEL SANDERSON, smoking a cigar in his rocker on the ranch-house porch in the sunset, glanced at the horseman who came galloping up to the gate, and smiled.

Only the colonel, of all on the Bar-One Ranch, knew that "Two-gun," the puncher, was in reality the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. And knowing it, he had sent him to Juniper to bring back six thousand dollars. The colonel figured that he knew a white man when he saw one; and he had no doubt about the dollars. He smiled as he saw the Rio Kid riding in.

The Kid stopped at the gate to speak to Yuba Dick, the horse-wrangler of the Bar-One. Yuba took his horse from him as he dismounted with one hand, and held out the other.

"You got it?" he asked.

The Kid shook his head.

"Carry me home to die!" exclaimed Yuba indignantly. "You allow you ain't got that tobacco when I asked you special to call at the store for it! You dog-goned bonehead—"

"Aw, can it, feller!" said the Kid. "I sure horned into the store at Jupiter and got that plug, but I kinder lost it on the tra' coming back. Don't you get a grouch, Yuba—I'll ride into Kicking Mule for it to-morrow."

And leaving Yuba grunting the Kid walked across to the ranch-house with a jingle of spurs.

Colonel Sanderson gave him a nod as he came up the steps of the porch.

"You got the roll?" he asked.

"What's the matter with Yuba, boy?" The Kid grinned.

"He sur-asked me to bring him a bag of tobacco, and I kinder lost it on the trail. I was held up coming back, sir."

"Held up!" ejaculated the colonel. "Sure! A guy with a foursack over his cabeza was waitin' for me on the trail, and he asked me for the roll, over a rifle."

The colonel's brow set grimly.

"That's a queer tale, Two-gun," he said quietly. "Nobody was wise to it that you was riding to Juniper for dollars—nobody but you and me and Frank."

The Kid's face flushed.

He looked at the boss.

"Say, boss," he said, with a touch of bitterness in his voice, "I told you fair and square that I was the Rio Kid, and you sure know what all Texas says about the Kid. Any guy in the Rio Grande country would have told you you was loco to trust the Rio Kid to fetch six thousand dollars from the bank; any guy could have warned you that the Kid would ride away with it or else horn in with a story of being held up for it on the trail!"

The colonel drew a deep breath.

"I ain't doubting you, Two-gun," he said. "But I'll say it's queer, a guy holdin' you up for the dollars when nobody was wise to it. How'd the man know you'd the goods on you?"

The Kid had no reply to make to that—no reply that he cared for the scallywag's father to hear. He stood silent.

It was some moments before he spoke again.

"We got to have this out, sir," he said quietly. "If you don't trust me it's time for me to mount and hit the trail again. I guess any guy in Texas would tell you you was a bonehead to trust the Rio Kid—and it sure did look like asking for trouble. But I reckoned you'd savvy that, outlaw or not, I never was the man to throw you down."

There was a pause.

"I'm trusting you, Kid," said Colonel Sanderson at last. "I'm sure trusting you. Don't say another word—you've lost me six thousand dollars, and I'm taking your word that you was held up for it. That goes!"

"Boss," said the Kid, "I always allowed you was a white man. You figure that you're taking my word, without proof?"

"It's a cinch."

The Kid smiled.

"You sure do me proud, sir," he said, "and here's the six thousand dollars in a roll, jest as I had them from the bank."

Colonel Sanderson started as the Kid laid a little leather sack on the arm of his chair. In silence he opened it and counted the wad of notes within.

Then he stared at the Kid.

"Here's the dollars, all O.K.," he said. "What you mean by allowing that you was held up for them, dog-gone you? Stringing me along to see if I trusted you, or what?"

"Not any," answered the Kid. "I sure was held up, and handed over the goods with a rifle lookin' me in the face. But you want to know, sir, that I had Yuba's bag of tobacco along with that roll in my saddlebag, and when I had to pony up it was Yuba's plug that I throwed over to the hold-up man!"

"Great gophers!" ejaculated the colonel.

"I reckon he tumbled to it after I'd left him," grinned the Kid. "He sure aimed to drop me with a rifle-shot—but I was goin' fast, and beat him to it. And here I am, sir, and there's your dollars!"

The colonel burst into a laugh.

"Say, I'd like to have seen that hold-up man's face when he opened Yuba's bag and saw the tobacco!" he chuckled. "But I reckon I'd have expected you to beat the prairie for that hombre, and give him his ticket for soup once you was away from his rifle."

"I wasn't hunting trouble, sir," said

the Kid. "I reckoned I'd hit the ranch with the dust, while it was safe."

"Mebbe you was right," agreed the Colonel.

He turned over the wad of bills in his hands, with a thoughtful frown on his face.

The Kid backed away to the steps. But Colonel Sanderson called him back.

"Say, Two-gun, you didn't know that hold-up man?" he asked.

"He was sure covered up with a flour-sack, sir, and I never saw nothing but his eyes."

"It's durned queer how he knew you had the dollars."

"It beats me to a frazzle, sir," said the Kid, as honestly as he could.

The colonel's keen eyes seemed to bore into him. Darker and grimmer grew his stern, grizzled face.

And the Kid, reading his expression, knew the thought that was working in the rancher's troubled mind. Beside the rancher and the boy puncher only Frank Sanderson had known that the dollars were coming from the bank at Juniper that afternoon.

Colonel Sanderson raised his head, and his eyes swept the plains—shadowy now with approaching nightfall.

"Frank ain't come in yet," he said, in a low voice.

"No, sir?" said the Kid carelessly.

"He's been out on his pinto most of the afternoon."

"It's a fine day for a ride, sir."

The colonel compressed his lips.

"Two-gun, you ain't wise to that guy in the foursacks? You sure you ain't wise to him?"

The Kid shook his head. He had guessed, but his guess was not proof. The Kid was glad that there was no proof.

"Nope! He sure was well covered up, sir."

The rancher made a gesture of dismissal. The Kid walked away to the bunkhouse, with a thoughtful shade on his brow.

He suspected beyond the shadow of a doubt that the man in the flour-sack had been the scallywag of the Bar-One, and the rancher suspected it—or half-suspected it, too!

## THE THIRD CHAPTER.

### A Thief in the Night!

THE Rio Kid sat up in the silent bunkhouse, and his sleepless eyes looked through the gloom.

He could not sleep.

In the other bunks tired cow-punchers slept the sound sleep of health; steady breathing came to the ears of the Kid in the darkness. The Kid, as a rule, slept well, though lightly. This night he could not sleep, and at last he stepped quietly from his bunk and dressed himself, taking care to awaken none of his comrades.

Quietly he let himself out of the bunkhouse.

His brow was clouded, his heart was heavy. He glanced back for a second into the dark interior of the bunkhouse, where slept his comrades of the range and the trail—men he had grown to like well, and who had grown to like him. Perhaps some misgiving, some premonition, crossed his mind at that moment—some intuitive hint that he was looking for the last time into the cheery bunkhouse of the Bar-One.

But if some such feeling throbbled for a moment in his heart, no such thought was in his mind. The Kid stepped away quietly towards the ranch-house, under the glimmer of the stars. He had little doubt that he would soon be returning to his bunk; indeed he called

himself a gink for having left it. For what, after all, could be happening at the ranch?

And yet—  
It was Frank Sanderson, the scallywag of the Bar-One, who had held him up on the trail for the six thousand dollars. The Kid had tricked him, and brought the dollars safe home. The waster was desperate for money—desperate, indeed, or he would never have ventured on a hold-up on the trail. And the dollars were now in the rancher's safe, in the office in the rancho, and Frank slept in the house. On the morrow the boss was taking the money over to the Joshua-A for a deal in cattle. After that, all would be O.K. But to-night—

The rancher's safe was a simple lock-up affair. Any man could open it with ease. The scallywag, who had failed on the Juniper trail, had only to come down from his room, and the dollars were at his mercy. That he was none too good to rob his father, the Kid knew only too well.

It was in the Kid's mind now, that, in the hours of darkness the dollars would be taken from the rancher's safe. True, in that case Frank Sanderson could not hope to conceal his guilt. He would have to run. But the Kid figured that the waster, fed-up to the back teeth with a life of orderly industry, was ready to run, if he could run with six thousand dollars in his pockets.

All was dark and quiet at the ranch-house.

The Kid breathed a little more freely as he noted it. There was no sign of stirring there.

After all, had he been uneasy about nothing? Was Frank Sanderson sleeping in his room? The dollars safe where the rancher had locked them up?

In the quiet, peaceful night, the Kid felt more at ease than he had felt while tossing and turning restlessly in the bunkhouse. Stars gleamed from the dark sky overhead; a soft breeze rustled the trees. From the shadowy plains came a faint murmuring from the herds.

The Kid started at a sound closer at hand. A horse had stirred, and a bridle faintly jingled. What was a horse there for? Where was it, and why was it there? With black suspicion in his mind again, the Kid crept along in the darkness in the direction of the sound. Under one of the trees close by the house, a horse was tied—saddled and bridled. The gloom did not deceive the Kid's keen eyes. He knew the horse at the first glimpse. It was Frank Sanderson's pinto.

There was a low whinny from the pinto. The Kid soothed it to silence, and stood silent himself, his heart heavy, his brow black.

Frank Sanderson was not sleeping. He had left the rancho secretly, brought his horse round from the stable, saddled and bridled it, and left it tied there ready! Ready for what? The Kid knew only too well. The pinto was ready for flight. And at any minute

the wastrel might come, with his father's money in his pockets, to ride away into the night. The last doubt was gone now.

For a long minute the Kid stood, thinking it out.

In those moments thievish hands were at work. He knew that when morning came, the rancher would know that his son was a thief and a fugitive—if the Kid did not intervene. Unconsciously, the Kid's hand dropped to the walnut butt of a gun.

But it was not gun-play that was wanted. That would not save the boss from the knowledge that would be more bitter to him than death.

The Kid moved at last. He untied

There was no arguing with that steady rifle. The Kid took the leather pouch from his saddle-bag, and flung it on the ground.

drive a bullet through your pizen carcass!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.  
The Scallywag's Last Chance!

FRANK SANDERSON panted. His eyes turned on the Kid wildly.

"You!" he breathed.  
"Me!" said the Kid.

"You dog-goned hound!" The scallywag's voice was a husky whisper of rage and terror. "What do you want? You dare—"



the horse, and led it away quietly to the stables, removed the saddle and bridle, and left it. Then he crept quietly back to the front of the house, to the window of the room where he knew Frank Sanderson must be. The wooden shutter was half-open, there was a glimmer of a candle in the room. Even as the Kid reached the window, the glimmer vanished, and all was dark.

Standing behind the half-open shutter, the Kid waited. In that room—the office of the rancho—was the safe, and he knew that Frank Sanderson had finished his work at the safe now. The extinguishing of the light showed that. He would be coming—

There was a sound at the window. A dark figure dropped over the low sill to the ground. The Kid heard a panting, suppressed breath. In the glimmer of the star-shine he had a glimpse of a white, set, scared face—the face of the scallywag of the Bar-One.

Frank Sanderson made one stride, and then a faint cry or utter terror dropped from his lips as a hand was laid on his shoulder, and the muzzle of a six-gun was pressed to his side.

"Quiet!" said the Kid softly. "You dog-goned thief, you're cinched! I've got you by the short hairs, you pesky coyote, and if you make a sound, I'll

"Can it!" said the Kid quietly. "I'm wise to your game, Frank Sanderson. You figure that I don't know it was you who held me up on the Juniper trail this afternoon?"

"It's a lie—a lie—"  
"Aw, can it! If I hadn't knowed it was you, you'd never have got away alive!" said the Kid contemptuously. "You all-fired coyote, you slipped up on that game, and now you've cinched the dollars under your father's roof. By the great horned toad, if you wasn't your father's son, I'd plaster that window with your brains!"

"It's a lie—a lie!" breathed the shrinking wastrel. "I—I couldn't sleep! I was—was going out for a—"  
"And you went out first, and got your horse ready, and tied him up?" jeered the Kid.

"You—you—"  
"I sure found your horse, you durned coyote, and he's back in the stables now."

Sanderson muttered a curse. "You've got six thousand dollars in your rags," said the Kid. "Your father's money! You durned thief, when you got in cahoots with Jas Cassidy's gang to lift your father's herds, I allowed I'd give you another chance, to make good. And this is what you've made of it! What you reckon you'd

get if I called the colonel down to see you now?"

Frank Sanderson shuddered.

"For mercy's sake!" he breathed.

"I guess I don't rightly know what to do!" muttered the Kid miserably.

"Give me a chance! I—I'll make good!" whispered Frank Sanderson. "I—I swear it!"

The Kid scanned his face in the glimmer of the stars. The terror in it was pitiable. Every nerve in the wretched scallywag's body was quaking at the thought of facing his father. The Kid wondered! It was possible that fear, if nothing else, might keep the rascal straight, after this—there was a hope of it, at least. And the Kid had to give him the chance. He had to, or else let the boss know the truth—the truth that would have bowed him down with shame.

The Kid drew a deep breath.

"Give me the roll!"

The wastrel's trembling hands passed

The Kid stood silent.

The dark look was gone from his face. There was a hope in his heart that the wretched wastrel would be as good as his word, that those moments of terror had given him a lesson he would not forget. After all, there was good in the fellow, if he gave himself a chance. The Kid's mind was easier.

He waited.

All he had to do was to keep the secret. When Frank Sanderson was back in his room, the Kid would enter and replace the roll in the safe, whence the scallywag had taken it. The rancher in the morning, would find that the lock had been meddled with; that could not be helped. But he would find the dollars there, he would never know that his son was a thief.

Five long minutes the Kid waited. Then he climbed lightly in at the window, and in the darkness, groped his way to the old iron safe behind the rancher's desk.

to the open door of the iron safe. From that, it went to the open window, then to the roll of bills in the Kid's hand.

He set the lamp on a table.

"You!" he repeated.

And the revolver was lifted again, bearing full on the Rio Kid.

#### THE FIFTH CHAPTER. The Sacrifice!

THE Kid stood silent.

His face was pale—growing paler, as he read the amazement the scorn, the bitter anger and contempt, in the face of the man he respected more than any other man in Texas.

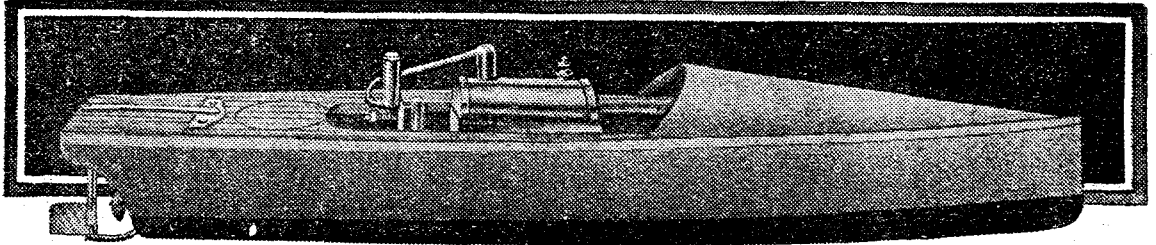
"You!" said Colonel Sanderson, and his voice cut like a whip.

"I—I guess—" stammered the Kid.

"You! I guess I'd never have figured on that! You told me you was the Rio Kid—the firebug that's hunted by half

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over the roll of bills. The Kid holstered his gun and examined the roll—he was not to be tricked. Frank Sanderson watched him in quivering silence.

"I guess," said the Kid slowly, "that I got to keep this dark, for your father's sake. If you get a rag of decency in you, Frank Sanderson, give this game a miss, after this, and try to run straight—as straight as you can."

"I—I swear—" muttered the wastrel.

"Git back to your room!"

"You—you'll say nothing—nothing?"

"Not a thing. Get back to your room."

The scallywag of the Bar-One leaned on the window shutter, trembling, breathing in gasps.

"I—I'll do as you say!" he muttered, at last. "And—and I swear that after this—after this—I'll sure give it a miss! I'll try—I'll try hard—I'll sure do the best I can. Only—keep it secret—"

"I ain't saying a word!" said the Kid quietly. "Keep to that, Frank Sanderson—keep to that! It's the best game you can play."

The scallywag of the Bar-One drew a deep breath.

"I swear it!" he said.

There was a ring of sincerity in his voice. Without another word, he climbed back into the window, and disappeared in the darkness within.

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A sound in the darkness made him start.

He set his lips.

Was the scallywag coming back? Had he been deceived, and was he, after all, to face a desperate man, gun in hand? If it came to that—

A door opened, and the light of a lamp glimmered into the room from the passage.

In the lamplight, a levelled revolver glinted. Behind it was the stern, bearded face of the boss of the Bar-One.

"Hands up!"

The rancher's voice rang sharply.

He advanced into the room, the lamp in his left hand, the revolver in his right, levelled at the startled Kid.

"Carry me home to die!" murmured the Rio Kid, in utter dismay.

He stood motionless.

"You dog-goned thief!" came the rancher's voice. "I reckon I heard you—and even if you're my own son, you go to jail for this—you dog-goned thief and waster! You—"

He broke off, as the light shone on the Kid's startled, dismayed face. For an instant there was silence, while Colonel Sanderson stared blankly at the face of the boy puncher.

"You!" he said thickly.

The revolver sagged in his hand.

His glance went from the Kid's face

the sheriffs in Texas—and I trusted you all the same. I trusted you!"

"You sure did, sir," muttered the Kid, "and I'm telling you, sir, that you was right—I'm telling you—"

He broke off.

There was nothing he could say, except that the rancher's son was the thief! And that he could not say.

"I trusted you," said the boss of the Bar-One. "I trusted you more than my own son! You came back from Juniper to-day with a tall story about bein' held up on the trail—and I figured—I sure suspected—that it was my own son that had tried for the dollars! I guess now that that was what you wanted me to figure!"

"It was the truth, sir, I told you—"

said the Kid huskily.

"What are you doing here, then?"

The Kid made no reply. His face was pale; it was growing almost haggard. But he did not speak.

"I've slept badly to-night!" said the rancher. "I been thinking about what I suspected of my son—Frank. And when I heard him moving in his room, I reckoned that he was coming down here—to rob me. Yes—I suspected my own son of that! And I came down, thinkin' to find him here—and found—"

you!"

The Kid could have groaned aloud. He could picture the feelings with



which the father, doubtful of his son, had lain wakeful through the long watches of the night. And it was Frank returning to his room that he must have heard—and he had come down—and the Kid could not tell him that he was there to replace the roll the scallywag had taken.

"What you got to say?" said the rancher harshly.

The Kid's lips moved; but he did not speak. The truth trembled on his tongue.

"Nothing?" said the rancher bitterly. "You durned lobo wolf, you got nothing to say! Listen, you skunk! I came down here, after what you let on to-day, thinking to find my son robbing me. If I'd found him, I'd have sent him to gaol, though he was ten times my son; and I guess that when he was there, I'd have blown out my brains, rather than let the Kicking Mule country point to me as a thief's father! That sure was what was in my mind."

The Kid drew a deep, deep breath.

The temptation to speak was gone now. He knew that he could not speak. The boss had been a white man to him; and it was up to the Kid to stand the racket, for the boss' sake.

"And I wronged him," said the rancher, in a trembling voice. "I wronged my boy—it was you, you scallywag, that was the thief! And I'd have trusted you with my life! I knew you was an outlaw, and I trusted you! By thunder, I don't know why I ain't shooting you up where you stand!"

"Shoot, if you want, sir!" said the Kid bitterly.

Colonel Sanderson laid the revolver on his desk.

"I ain't shooting you up," he said. "You sure deserve it a-plenty, but thief and outlaw as you are, you saved my life once from a road agent, and I ain't forgetting that."

His harsh face softened a little.

"I'll allow," he went on, "that you've tried to run straight while you've been on the Bar-One—I'll sure do you that justice. I guess you came here meaning to play a straight game."

"I sure did, sir!" muttered the Kid miserably.

The rancher nodded.

"But you couldn't stand for it, for long," he said. "That's the how of it. I guess I understand. You got tired of punching cows, and you reckoned you'd hit the outlaw trail again, and take a stake with you. I guess I understand. I ain't blaming you a whole lot—I reckon once an outlaw, always an outlaw."

The Kid said nothing.

Colonel Sanderson pointed to the window.

"You came in that way," he said. "You can go out the same way. Your cayuse is in

the corral. Take him and ride. I guess it's my duty to see the Rio Kid handed over—now I know that he never can run straight as an honest man! But you saved my life once—and I'll say that you've tried to ride a straight trail here, though you've slipped up on it at the finish! Put that roll on the table!"

The Kid obeyed.

"Now git!" The Kid, in silence, walked to the window.

There, he paused, and turned back. Colonel Sanderson watched him with grim eyes. There was something of pain, too, in the rancher's grim face; he had liked the Kid, and trusted him, and this was a blow to the old man. The Kid's face worked.

"Boss," he said, in a low voice. "I'm going—I guess I'll be hitting the trail instanter. I want to ask you, afore I vamoose, to think of me as well as you can; and—don't tell the bunch."

The Kid's voice almost broke. Mesquite Bill, Yona Dick, and the rest; the men he had ridden with, fed with, chummed with; to leave them thinking him an ingrate and a thief—

"I guess I ain't telling the bunch or anybody else," said the colonel. "Nobody won't ever know that the Rio Kid has been here, or what he did before he left. If you care about that, you can ride with an easy mind. Nobody's going to know this."

The Kid breathed more freely.

"I guess I thank you, sir, for that, and for all your kindness to me while I've been on the Bar-One," he said. "I guess I'll always remember you as the whitest man I ever knew. Good-bye, sir; and I hope you'll never be sorry for having been a good friend to a guy that's got a lonely trail to ride!"

He dropped from the window.

Galloping hoofs awoko echoes on the lonely prairie, far from the Bar-One ranch. The stars were paling into dawn; and Side-Kicker was still galloping, urged on by a rider whose face was pale and set.

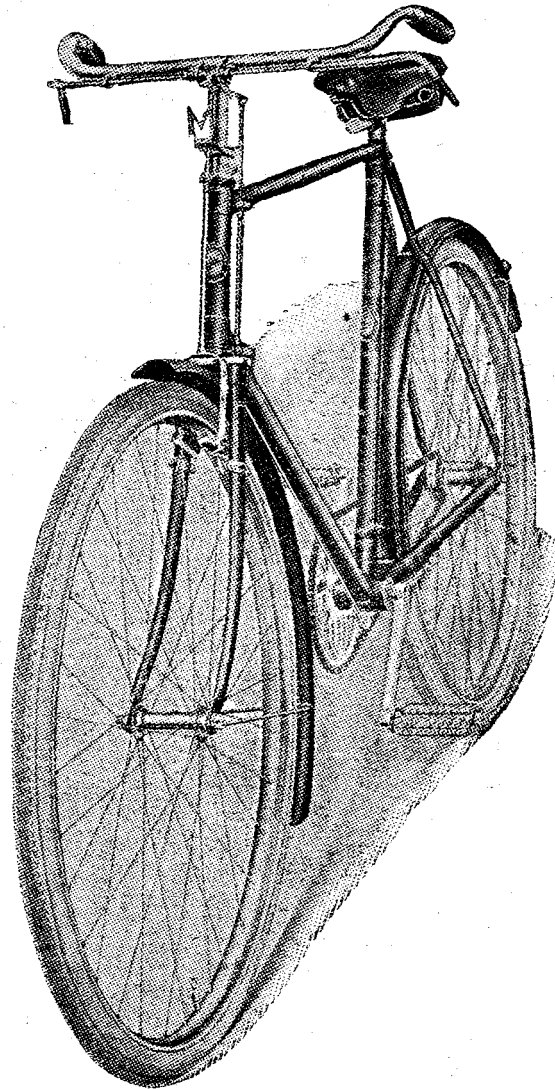
Dawn came up with a rosy flush in the sky. The Rio Kid pulled in his horse at last, on the summit of a grassy knoll, and looked back.

For some minutes the Kid sat in the saddle, looking back towards what had been home to him. Then, with set lips, he wheeled his mustang again, and rode away to the north, every stride of his steed bearing him faster and farther from the ranges of the Bar-One.

THE END.

(The Kid's on the lone trail again. After many happy weeks with the punchers of the Bar-One, Fate has stepped in and turned this young outlaw out into the plains again, amidst peril and uncertainty. But the Kid doesn't grumble, so long as he's got his six-guns and mustang. Meet him on the trail again next week.)

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