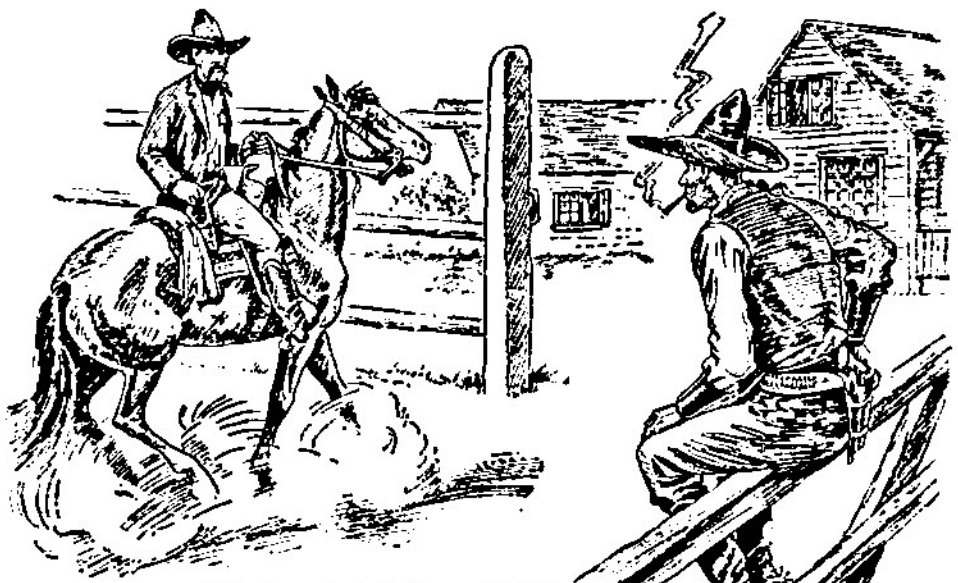


THE LUCK of the RIO KID!

RALPH REDWAY'S COMPLETE WESTERN YARN WITH A HUNDRED THRILLS!

Once more the luck of the Rio Kid holds good when the Sheriff of Packsaddle pays a visit to the Lazy O ranch. But to this luck must be added pluck, for without that the boy outlaw would never have won through!



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Buck Sidgers Wants to Know.

BUCK SIDGERS, marshal of the cow town of Packsaddle, came riding up the trail to the Lazy O ranch.

As he drew near to the ranch-house the marshal of Packsaddle hitched his holster a little closer to his hand and loosened the gun in it. A man who stood for law and order, as Buck did, in a wild cattle country like Packsaddle needed to keep a gun handy, especially when he was visiting a lay-out like the Lazy O. The Lazy O bunch had a juicy reputation up and down the valley of the Pecos, and they were the wildest outfit that ever rode into Packsaddle for a jamboree.

The gate was open, and Long Bill, the Lazy O horse-wrangler sat on it, smoking a Mexican cigar. He looked at the marshal grimly, under the broad brim of his Stetson, and, as Buck had done, he gave a hitch to his gun-belt.

Buck pulled in his horse in the gateway.

"Mornin', Bill!" he greeted.
"Mornin', marshal!" answered Long Bill, civilly but cautiously.

If the marshal of Packsaddle wanted one of the Lazy O bunch for some wild frolic in the cow town Long Bill was prepared to argue the matter with a gun in his hand. But if it was a friendly call the marshal was welcome to the hospitality of the bunkhouse.

"How's things?" asked the marshal.
"Fine!" answered the wrangler.
"How's things at Packsaddle?"

"Oh, so-so," said Buck. "The Bar-10 boys was shooting up the town last night. Jimmy Daco lost a wheel at the Bend, and his back went into an arroyo, and I allow it will want some pulling out. They say there's been cows rustled on the Sun-dancer ranch. Euchro Dick shot up young Parker at the dance at Henson's Barn; but the boys allow that young Parker pulled first, so there ain't nothing on Dick."

Having thus related the local news, the marshal sat at ease in his saddle, reached for the "making," rolled himself a cigarette, accepted a match from Long Bill, and smoked.

While he smoked, his keen eyes were looking over the ranch, as if in search of something. Long Bill smoked in silence, waiting for the marshal to speak.

"No trouble here?" asked Buck, at last.

"Not any."
There was another silence, and then the marshal of Packsaddle came to the point abruptly.

"What's happened to Mister Fairfax?"

Long Bill grinned. He understood now why the marshal had ridden the long trail from the cow town.

"I guess the boss is O.K.," answered the horse-wrangler. "You don't want to worry any about that guy."

"Say," said Buck, "that guy Fairfax is the seventh—or is it the eighth?—man that's bought the Lazy O. I guess every guy that's bought this ranch has bought trouble. Barney Baker has made it too hot for him. He's stayed foreman all the time, and he's put paid to every boss that ever moseyed along to this shobang. The bunch have backed his play all the time. In Packsaddle they figure that Mister Fairfax has been shot up on this ranch. I guess I've come out for a look-see."

Long Bill chuckled. "Mister Fairfax" was the first boss of the Lazy O who had made the grade at the ranch. But he had made it.

"You don't want to worry any about that guy," repeated the wrangler. "I guess if there's a guy in Texas who can look after himself it's Mister Fairfax. I ain't denying that the bunch was up agin him, marshal. We figured that Barney Baker was good enough for us, and we allowed we didn't want a boss cavorting around on the Lazy O. But that guy, Fairfax, is sure one man-sized galoot, and I'll tell a man the bunch are feeding from his hand now."

"You don't say!" ejaculated the marshal in astonishment.

"I should anilo!" answered Long Bill. "Say, there ain't a hombre in the bunch that wouldn't stand for Mister Fairfax now. 'Ceptin' p'Barney, Coyote Jensen—and, of course, Barney. He hit trouble here, and that's a fact. He fired Panhandle Pete and shot up Kansas

Jake, and Barney was laid out in an ambush he set for Mister Fairfax. He's lying in the bunkhouse yonder, now, all handaged up, though I reckon he could ride if he liked, but he ain't anxious to quit. But he's going, you bet your life. And Mister Fairfax is running this ranch, and the bunch are backing him."

"Sho!" said the marshal.
"Barney's madder'n a rattler about it," said Long Bill. "He was foreman so long, he figured that the ranch was his'n. But that guy Fairfax has made the grade, I'll tell a man. I guess he's only hanging on byer watching for a chance to double-cross Mister Fairfax. But there ain't nothing to it. His jig is up. Say, marshal, you sure don't want to worry about Mister Fairfax. I'm telling you, he's the goods. And I guess he's got this outfit jest where he wants it."

"Sho!" repeated the marshal. "I guess they'll sit up and stare in Packsaddle when I let on that the Lazy O has got a boss at last who can run the ranch, and who's put paid to Barney Baker. They sure will! Say, this here is good news. Where's Mister Fairfax now?"

Long Bill waved his cigar towards the grassy plains.

"I guess he's out on a pascar on that mustang of his'n—the cayuse that was the Rio Kid's."

Buck raised his eyebrows.
"How in thunder did Mister Fairfax get hold of the Kid's cayuse?" he inquired. "Say, you ain't seed that fire-bug from the Rio Grande around these parts?"

"Nope! I guess the Rio Kid is dead an' planted," answered Long Bill. "He had a long run, that fire-bug had; but I reckon he passed it up at last. The Texas Rangers hit this ranch trailing for the Kid, and they brought the mustang along. Jim Hall had rounded it. THE POPULAR.—No. 561.

up where the Kid was with it with a half-breed down the Pecos for feed. And when the rangers hit the trail he gave the cayuse to Mister Fairfax. He sure is some boss!" The wrangler's eyes glistened. "I'll tall all Texas there ain't a cayuse between the Grande and the Colorado that could keep a sight of Side-Kicker's heels in a race. Mister Fairfax is sure one lucky hombre to cinch that cayuse."

"Why did Hall give him the cayuse?"
"You can search me!" said Long Bill. "That ranger galoot, Hall, is a sour little cuss. But he sure seemed to cotton to Mister Fairfax, somehow. I guess he hadn't no more use for Side-Kicker, seeing as it's all Texas to a Mexican dollar that the Rio Kid has gone up; and I allow he was trailing along that mustang to help him find the Kid. Anyhow, he left the boss for Mister Fairfax, and the boss is sird riding him on the range this here morning."

"I guess I won't be seeing him if he's out on the range," said Buck Sidgers. "I'm sure pleased to hear that he's made good here. I met up with him at Packsaddle, and I reckoned he was a good little man, and I'd have been plumb sorry to hear that Barney Baker had run him off'n the ranch."

"Say, boss'n the Coyote," said Long Bill, as a man with his arm in a sling came across from the bunkhouse. "He's the only hombre in the bunch that don't stand for the boss; and I guess he's lighting out soon. He's got a pill in his fin that he cinched in gun-play with the boss."

Buck glanced at the Coyote as he came up.

"Say, marshal, Barney Baker seen you from the bunkhouse," he said. "I guess he wants you to step in and talk some."

"I ain't no objection," answered Buck, and, with a nod to the horse-wrangler, he rode on to the bunkhouse, dismounted there, threw his reins over the hitching-post, and strode in.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Forget it!

BARNEY BAKER was sitting on his bunk.

He still wore his bandages, though by this time the foreman of the Lazy O was very nearly mended. But, as Long Bill had said, Barney was not anxious to quit; and Mister Fairfax was allowing him to stay until he could sit a broncho.

His eyes glistened under knitted brows at the marshal of Packsaddle.

Buck gave him a nod.

There was a faint grin on the marshal's face. He stood for the law in Packsaddle; but the law in that wild section had never been strong enough to deal with Barney Baker and the Lazy O bunch. And Buck was glad that a man-sized guy had come along who was able to deal with them.

"Howdy!" said Buck cheerily.

Barney paid no attention to the greeting.

"Say, I've news for you, Buck," he said. "You've heard of that firebug the Rio Kid, who's raised Cain in nearly every part of Texas in his time?"

"I should smile," answered Buck.

"I guess you'd like to hear that he was around in this section, and to get a cinch on him."

"You bet!"

"I can put you wise to him," said Barney.

Buck's eyes glistened.

"You allow that the Rio Kid is

cavorting around the Packsaddle country," he asked.

"Sure!"

"You seen him?"

"I seen him."

"Then he ain't dead, like some guys allow?"

"He sure ain't."

"You put me wise to him, Barney, and I'll sure have him in the calaboose, at Packsaddle, so quick it will make his head swim," said Buck. "Where is he?"

"On this ranch," said Barney.

"Sho!"

"He calls himself Mister Fairfax!" added the foreman of the Lazy O.

The marshal of Packsaddle jumped.

"What you giving me?" he exclaimed.

"The goods," answered Barney Baker.

"I'm telling you, Buck, that I seen that guy, the Rio Kid, months back, when he was shooting up White Pine—seventy miles from here. I had a shot at him myself, when he was riding down Main Street at White Pine, with his guns going. And that's the galoot that's come to Packsaddle calling himself Mister Fairfax."

Buck Sidgers stared at him. His look was first of blank amazement and then of contempt.

"Carry me home to die," he said at last. "You figure that I'm going to swallow a yarn like that, Barney Baker?"

"It's the truth," said Barney hoarsely. "I never placed the guy when I first saw him in Packsaddle, but I knowed I'd seen him afore somewhere. And when I saw him this morning riding the Rio Kid's cayuse, Side-Kicker, I knew who he was. He's the Rio Kid!"

Buck's lip curled.

"And you ain't reckoned him afore, and you and him on the same ranch all this time?" he sneered. "You ain't tumbled to it that he was the Rio Kid, not till you slipped up in your gun-game byer, and had to get? Now you've come out at the little end of the horn, you allow that Mister Fairfax is an outlaw and a firebug, and you figure to put me on his trail. Aw, forget it, Barney!"

Barney gritted his teeth.

"I'll toll the world, Buck, that guy Fairfax is the Rio Kid!" he hissed.

"You got your duty to do."

"Forget it! Why, Jim Hall and the rangers has been here, and Mule-Kick Hall knows the Kid like the back of his own hand!" exclaimed the marshal of Packsaddle. "If he's the Kid why didn't Hall cinch him when he had the chance he's been hunting for for dogs' ages?"

"I don't rightly know—"

"I guess you don't!" jeered Buck. "Great gophers! I allow you are wild with Mister Fairfax for spoiling your game byer, Barney, but you want to think of something better'n that! It's too thin, old man."

"I'll tall all Texas—"

"You can tall all Texas, if you want," grinned Buck. "But it ain't no use telling me. Is that what you had to say?"

"Sure! And you want to cinch that firebug while you've got the chance!" hissed Barney.

"I guess I'd be plumb glad to cinch the Rio Kid, but I ain't cinching Mister Fairfax a whole lot," answered the marshal of Packsaddle. "You've got another guess coming, feller."

And with that the marshal of Packsaddle turned and strode out of the bunkhouse, with jingling spurs.

Barney Baker sat and stared after him, and curses fell in a stream from his lips.

Buck Sidgers had laughed at the accusation, and yet Barney knew that it was the truth. If nobody else in Packsaddle was wise to it Barney Baker knew that the new boss of the Lazy O was the Rio Kid. Recognition and knowledge had been slow in coming, but they came at last. Mister Fairfax was the outlaw for whom a reward of a thousand dollars was offered. Barney Baker knew it, and the marshal of Packsaddle laughed at the story.

Coyote Jenson lounged into the bunkhouse and cast a curious glance at the foreman.

"Buck don't take a lot of stock in it," he remarked.

"The dog-goned bonehead!" snarled Barney. "He's got a chance of cinching the worst firebug in Texas, and he's letting it slip."

"I guess it sounds a tall story, Barney. Jim Hall was here, and he saw Mister Fairfax. If he's the Kid why did Hall let up on him?"

"How'd I know?" snarled Barney.

"The Kid fooled him somehow, I guess."

"Jim Hall ain't so easy fooled."

Barney spat out a curse.

"I tell you I know he's the Kid! Soon as I seen him on Side-Kicker I knowed who he was. Buck Sidgers ain't taking it in, but the White Pine crowd would jump at it if they was here. There's a hundred guys in White Pine know the Kid, and want him."

The Coyote shrugged his shoulders. He was the one man in the Lazy O bunch who still stood for Barney Baker; but he only half-believed the foreman's story. He figured that malice and revenge had warped Barney's judgment a good deal.

"Buck Sidgers is a peaky bonehead," went on Barney. "The Kid's got him fooled, like he's got the bunch. But if Jake Nixon, the sheriff of White Pine, seen Mister Fairfax, he'd jump at him with both feet. And I guess Jake is going to see him."

"White Pine writes don't run in Packsaddle," said the Coyote. "Jake Nixon won't ride over his own border."

"I guess he would ride over the Rocky Mountains, and the Sierra Nevada afterwards, to get at the Rio Kid," said Barney. "I tell you, Jake got lead in his laig when the Kid was shooting up White Pine, and he still limps. He owes the Kid a game leg."

"What's the game, then?" asked the Coyote.

"I guess Buck Sidgers has got to be counted out. Jake Nixon of White Pine is the guy we want," said Barney, "and you're going to ride to White Pine, Coyote, and you'll make it in a day if you kill you, cayuse, and you'll give the sheriff word from me. Mister Fairfax won't cavort around the Lazy O, playing at ranch boss, after Jake's got his eyes on him. He sure will not. I done business with Jake at White Pine, and he's my friend, and he will sure allow I've got the right cayuse in the rope when I tell him that the Rio Kid is around."

"I guess I'm ready to hit the trail," answered the Coyote. "If you've got it right that firebug is sure fixed."

Five minutes later the Coyote, with a written note folded in his pocket, left the bunkhouse and walked to the corral. He roped his horse, saddled up, and rode away from the Lazy O to the west.

Barney Baker, in the bunkhouse, heard the beat of the horse's hoofs dying away along the trail, and drew a deep breath. He had been beaten in the fight for the Lazy O; but revenge was within his grasp, and when the outlaw rancher was in the hands of the sheriff of White Pine, who would stand between Barney

and the ranch that had so long been his own? Boss after boss had come to the Lazy O, and Barney had beaten him to it every time. The fight with Mister Fairfax had been the longest and hardest, and defeat had fallen on the foreman. But it seemed to Barney that he could now see victory ahead, at long last.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Hands Up!

"SAY, you want to hear the prize story?" asked Buck Sidgers, as he checked his broncho in the gateway, where Long Bill sat and smoked.

The marshal of Packsaddle was grinning widely.

"Shoot!" said the horse-wrangler.

"I guess it's the best I've heered!" chuckled Buck. "Barney Baker allows that your new boss, Mister Fairfax, is the Rio Kid."

Long Bill almost fell off the gate.

"Barney Baker does?" he gasped.

"He sure does!" grinned Buck.

The boss of the Lazy O was mounted on Side-Kicker, the Rio Kid's mustang. A handsome figure he made as he rode the cayuse that was known all over Texas for his speed and endurance.

A strange look came into Buck's eyes as he drew nearer to the rancher. He had never seen the Rio Kid; but he had heard many a description of him, and he could not help feeling that there was something in the rancher's looks that gave ground for the foreman's suspicion. Little more than a boy in years, with his handsome face and blue eyes, the boss of the Lazy O certainly was not unlike the descriptions of the outlaw of the Rio Grande; save for the little

ridden the grey mustang on the prairie trails that sunny morning. Only Side-Kicker had been wanting to complete his happy satisfaction in his new life; and now he was riding Side-Kicker.

Life seemed good to the Kid—and the wild days of outlawry far behind!

"Mornin', marshal!" he greeted "You been to my ranch?"

"Sure!" said the marshal. "I reckon



FALLEN! The Rio Kid sat on a grassy knoll and stared gloomily at the man who lay in the thick grass at his feet. The sheriff of Packsaddle made no movement. But it was not for this that the boy outlaw looked so bitter. He was thinking of his ranch, of the outlaw life he had tried so hard to bury, only to have it brought up against him by the law. And the law of Packsaddle lay at his feet! (See Chapter 4.)

"The Rio Kid! Search me!" ejaculated Long Bill. "Why, I guess the galoot must be plumb loco."

Buck chuckled loudly.

"That's what he allows, and I guess he wanted me to cinch Mister Fairfax for the Kid! Ha, ha, ha!"

And the marshal of Packsaddle, with a wave of his hand to the astonished wrangler, rode away laughing across the prairie, leaving Long Bill staring after him blankly.

Buck was still grinning as the Lazy O ranch dropped out of sight behind him, and he cantered across the rolling prairie towards the distant cow town. Not for an instant did he figure on believing the wild accusation that the disgruntled foreman had made against his boss. It seemed to Buck that only the sincerest revengeful malice could have induced Barney to make such a charge. So far from believing a word of it, Buck was intending to relate it in Packsaddle as a screaming joke.

"Gee, that's Mister Fairfax!" ejaculated Buck, as he sighted a horseman on the prairie, and he turned off from the trail to ride towards the new boss of the Lazy O.

His eyes dwelt curiously on Mister Fairfax as he approached him. The boy rancher, sighting him at the same time, rode to meet him.

moustache that adorned his upper lip. The Rio Kid, it was well known, never sported a moustache. But a thought came into Buck's mind that a moustache was easy enough to grow in the months that the Rio Kid had been hidden from all knowledge.

Nobody, as far as Buck knew, had seen the Kid since the time when the Texas Rangers had nearly cinched him in the Mal Pais.

"Gee-whis!" muttered Buck. "There ain't nothing to it—there sure ain't nothing to it! I guess nobody in Packsaddle knows where Mister Fairfax came from—and he sure looks like he might be own brother to the Kid—but there ain't nothing to it! Barney was jest shooting off his mouth promiscuous, because Mister Fairfax horned in and spoiled his game!"

Mister Fairfax rode up to the marshal of Packsaddle and drew in his mustang. The Rio Kid's face was bright and cheery that morning.

Danger, in the shape of Jim Hall and his Rangers, had fallen on the Kid in his new role as a rancher; but the danger had passed. He had made his compact with Hall, and the rangers had ridden away in peace, leaving him in possession of his beloved Side-Kicker. There was now, so far as the Kid could see, no cloud on the horizon; and it was with a light heart that he had

I was plumb glad to hear you've tamed the bunch, Mister Fairfax!"

The Kid smiled.

"They're good boys," he said. "I guess they ain't a bunch of tin angels, nohow; but they're plumb white! I sure reckon I'm going to pull wall with that outfit, marshal."

"Not with Barney Baker, I reckon!"

"Barney's hitting the trail pronto," answered the Kid. "I guess he feathered his nest while he was running the Lazy O; and I ain't no use for a foreman of Barney's heft."

The marshal nodded. His eyes were on the Kid's mount. Somehow, the grey mustang, so celebrated as the cayuse of the Rio Kid, made it seem likelier that there was something more than hot air in Barney Baker's accusation. True, the rancher had got it from Jim Hall, the ranger, and Mule-Kick Hall was the last man in Texas to let up on a fire-bug like the Rio Kid. Still, the sight of the grey mustang and the rider's evident pride in his horse and affection for it, brought strange thoughts into Buck Sidgers' mind.

"Say, that's some cayuse!" he remarked.

The Kid stroked the glossy neck of his favourite.

"You've said it," he agreed.

"It's the Rio Kid's cayuse; Long Bill

Bill's told me about it," said the marshal. "Say, it was sure handsome of Hall to give you that cayuse."

"Hall's a white man!" said the Kid. "You don't figure that the Kid will be after that cayuse again, if he's alive?" asked the marshal.

Mister Fairfax laughed. "I'm sure taking the chance!" he answered.

"Folks allow that that cayuse never would let any guy mount him, 'cepting the Kid, without giving a heap of trouble," said Buck. "But you sure can ride him with a loose rein, Mister Fairfax."

The Kid's smiling face tensed a little. With his old instinct for danger, born of his wild life, he realized that something lay behind the marshal's words.

His blue eyes narrowed a little, and his gaze at the marshal was as keen as the edge of his bowie. But he still smiled.

"I sure do handle this cayuse easy," he assented. "He seemed to take to me, marshal, he sure did. But I guess there's poskey few cayuses that I can't handle if I want."

"You ever seen the Rio Kid?" asked Buck.

"I sure seen him!" "Folks allow that he's a dog gone, all-fired scallywag," said Buck. "They allow he's shot up more guys than he's got fingers and toes."

"I guess folks shoot off their mouths a lot about that hombre," said Mister Fairfax, smiling. "Mebbe he ain't so black as he's painted!"

"Heard of him in the Packsaddle country?" asked Buck.

His eyes were sharply on the rancher. He had laughed at Barney's story in the bunkhouse. Yet, somehow, as he sat in the saddle gazing at the boy rancher on the Rio Kid's mustang, that story had ceased to seem so wild and unfounded. Buck was a horseman and a lover of horses, and he could have sworn at sight that this was not the first time that Mister Fairfax had ridden the Kid's horse before the rangers brought the cayuse to the Lazy O.

The Kid shifted a little in his saddle as if for ease as he sat and talked; but that shift brought the butt of the gun in his holster a little nearer to his hand. And the eyes of the Packsaddle marshal narrowed almost to pin-points.

"Any guy allow he's seen the Kid in Packsaddle?" asked Mister Fairfax carelessly.

"Yep!" "Who's the guy?" "Barney Baker!" The Kid started.

More than once, it had seemed to him that he had seen something like struggling recognition in the eyes of the foreman of the Lazy O. He had wondered whether Barney had ever seen him before as the Rio Kid.

"If Barney Baker's wise to that fire-bug, I guess he can put you on to a thousand dollars reward, marshal!" said the Kid, laughing.

"He allows he's seen him evorting around the Lazy O," said Buck Sidgers slowly.

"Sho!" said the Kid. "Not one of my bunch?"

"You!" said the marshal of Packsaddle.

The Kid's heart almost missed a beat! It had come at last, then!

"Me!" he repeated mechanically.

"Jest you!" said the marshal, and his face was grim. "That's what Barney Baker allows, Mister Fairfax. He allows that you're the fire-bug of the Rio Grande—the outlaw that's wanted by half the sheriff's in Texas. But I

reckon you'll be able to prove up that you're Mister Fairfax, like you say; you'll be able to bring witnesses from the part of Texas you hail from. You've got friends, and mebbe relations, who'll swear that you ain't that poskey fire-bug, the Rio Kid."

The Kid sat still and silent in Side-Kicker's saddle. It had come at last like a bolt from the blue! Like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky! When all seemed set and fair, the Kid's past had another kick coming.

There was more than suspicion in the grim face of the Packsaddle marshal now. There was something like certainty. Buck Sidgers liked Mister Fairfax, and admired the man who had tamed the Lazy O bunch. But if that man was the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw of Texas, he was Buck's game. The marshal's hand slid towards his revolver.

"I reckon you'll ride into Packsaddle with me, Mister Fairfax," he said. "I guess you'll be glad to make it clear that there ain't nothing to what Barney Baker allows."

"I guess I ain't hitting Packsaddle this morning, marshal," answered the Rio Kid quietly.

"Not to prove that you ain't that fire-bug, like Barney Baker allows?"

"Nop!"

"You got another guess coming," said Buck Sidgers grimly, and his gun came out as he spoke. "I got my duty to do—hands up, Mister Fairfax."

Bang! There was a roar of a six-gun as the Kid fired from the hip, and the marshal's hand slid towards his wide and wild, as Buck Sidgers pitched out of the saddle and crashed head-long into the grass.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Luck of the Kid!

THE Rio Kid sat on a grassy knoll, staring gloomily at the man who lay in the thick grass at his feet. Close at hand, the marshal's broncho and the Kid's mustang grazed peaceably. The burning sun of Southern Texas blazed down on the scene.

In the high grass the group would have been invisible at a distance. Twice, as he sat there, the Kid had seen a passing horseman—one of his own bunch at the Lazy O. But the puncher had not looked towards him, and had passed on unseeing; for which the Kid was thankful.

Buck Sidgers lay at his feet, his tanned face white, a streak of blood across the bronzed skin. No sound or movement came from the marshal of Packsaddle.

The Kid, sitting the grassy knoll, with clouded face, was thinking. His thoughts were bitter enough.

They called the Rio Kid a fire-bug, a scallawag, a desperado who would shoot up a guy without thinking twice about it. Wild tales were told of him in every cow town in Texas, at every round-up camp and rodeo. Fables had gathered about the name of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. The Kid was thinking bitterly that it would have been well for him, had he been as black as his enemies painted him. For Buck Sidgers' life was in his hand, and he spared it, and if he spared the marshal of Packsaddle, it was for his own destruction. That hasty shot from the hip had not been fired to kill, it had stunned the marshal of Packsaddle, "creasing" him as a cowpuncher creases an obstinate steer that will not come to the rope. Buck Sidgers lay senseless at his feet—his life the Kid's to take or spare. And the Kid knew

that he was going to spare it, and that in consequence his game was up in the Packsaddle country. Nothing remained for Mister Fairfax of the Lazy O but to mount and ride.

It was bitter luck.

He had escaped the peril of the rangers, and it had seemed to him that the trail was clear ahead, the Rio Kid dead and buried, Mister Fairfax alive in his place, the future rosy. But always at the back of his mind had been the lurking doubt that the past would rise against him once more, as it had risen in the days when he had found refuge on the Sampson Ranch in the San Pedro country. The name of the Rio Kid might be blotted out, but while the Kid lived, the past could not die.

The malice of the rascal who had sought to rob him of his ranch, had brought this new peril on him. And—the Kid realized it—his possession of Side-Kicker. He had been wise to leave the mustang at a safe distance, when he started his role of a rancher in Packsaddle. Buck, he figured, had not believed Barney's story, but the sight of Side-Kicker had somehow cinched it in his mind. And now, if Buck Sidgers died there in the high grass, the Kid's game was not up. Barney Baker he could deal with—he would know how to silence his envious tongue. But Buck Sidgers was not going to die there in the high grass, unless the Kid let drive a bullet through his heart, and that the Kid could not do.

It was useless to kick against fate, the Kid reflected. He was an outlaw, and only outlaw trails were open to him. He had dreamed of a law-abiding life on a ranch—a ranch bought with his own money, hard earned in the gold-mines of Arizona. But it was only a dream—and now came the waking. Unless—

Blacker and gloomier grew the Kid's brow, as he looked down at the senseless man in the grass, and his hand dropped to the butt of his gun.

Why should he give up everything—why should he go back to the wild life of the trails and the chaparral? A man's life stood in the way—and life was cheap in the Packsaddle country. They called him a fire-bug, a gunman, a desperado—and if he chose to live up to it he was safe. The Rio Kid's grasp was almost convulsive on the walnut butt of the gun. Not till that bitter hour, had he realized how dear his new life had come to be to him—how passionately he longed to throw outlawry and reckless defiance of the law behind him.

Buck Sidgers' eyes slowly opened.

The Kid's hand dropped from his gun. He was only fooling himself with those black thoughts, he knew that he could not do it. Why had he not shot the marshal dead, when he pulled on him? Buck had had a gun in his hand, and it was an even break, few men in Packsaddle would have blamed a guy who had shot to kill, when the other man had a gun drawn. Yet the Rio Kid, outlaw and fire-bug, had not pulled the trigger to kill. And now it was too late—now it would be murder. Better to mount Side-Kicker, and hit the trail, leaving his new life behind him, than that.

The marshal of Packsaddle stirred. His dazed eyes fixed on the Kid's moody face, unseeing at first. He groaned faintly, and his hand went to his head. There was the crease of a shot under the thick hair, and the marshal's fingers came away reddened.

But he knew that he was not badly hurt. A headache and a slight loss of blood—that was all. He was dazed and

dizzy; but his mind cleared. Recollection came back, and Buck dragged himself to a sitting posture, still staring at the Kid.

He fumbled at his belt. But his gun was gone; he was disarmed.

The Kid grinned at him sourly. "You ain't got yours, feller," he growled. "I guess you'll be spy as a gopher in a few minutes. I jest creased you, feller—you sure was going to do some damage with that gun of yours."

The marshal of Packsaddle still stared blankly.

"You're the Rio Kid!"

It was not a question, but an assertion. If the marshal had doubted before he was certain now.

The Kid nodded. "Right in once," he agreed. "I guess you're wise to it. But I ain't taking any close-up view of the inside of Packsaddle calaboose, feller."

"You got me," said Buck, eyeing him curiously. "They say the Rio Kid never missed a man—but you sorter missed me, Kid, though I allow you was lightning on the shoot."

The Kid laughed derisively. "Forget it, hombre," he said. "Ain't I shouting that I jest creased you, like I used an ornery steer on the old Double-Bar? I guess you'd have got that pill where you do your thinking if I'd wanted."

"And why didn't you want?" asked the marshal.

The Kid did not answer.

"I laughed at Barney Baker when he allowed you was the Rio Kid," said Buck slowly. "I reckoned it was all

hot air. Somehow I tumbled to it, when we was talking byer. I guess that cayuse of yours helped—he sure did seem to know you a whole heap well, seeing as you allowed you'd only jest got him. I reckon that was how."

"Side-kicker is some cayuse," said the Kid, with an affectionate glance at the grey mustang. "He's saved my life more'n once; but this time I guess he's given me away, the poor old cayuse."

The marshal of Packsaddle staggered to his feet. He stood a little unsteadily, his hand to his head.

His glance was still strangely and doubtfully on the Kid.

"Beat it!" said the Kid. "I ain't pulling on you, marshal! Beat it—and put Packsaddle wise that the Rio Kid's around. The Lazy O will want a new boss again, I reckon. But it was good while it lasted, and I ain't got no kick coming."

"You ain't answered me yet," said Buck quietly. "You had me where you wanted me, Kid, and you let me live I sure want to know."

"Aw, eas it," grunted the Kid. "How'd I know? You're a good man, Buck, and I like you—you're a white man, and I ain't never spilled lead on a guy 'cept to save my own skin."

"You're testing me, right?"

"Don't I keep on a-shoutin' it?" exclaimed the Kid impatiently. "There's your critter—hump yourself on him and beat it!"

Buck Sidgers called his horse.

"You allow I'm a white man, Kid," he said. "I guess you're one, too. I'm hitting Packsaddle, pronto, with my

mouth shut. You're Mister Fairfax, boss of the Lazy O—and a guy I admire. I don't know nothing about no Rio Kid. You get me?"

The Kid looked at him silently.

"I don't know nothing," repeated Buck deliberately, "about no Rio Kid. If I knowed anything, I've forgot it, owing to getting a crack on the cubera. So-long, Mister Fairfax!"

Buck Sidgers mounted his horse, and with a wave of his hand, rode away towards the cow town.

The Kid, standing waist-deep in the high grass, looked after him.

"Gee!" said the Kid.

All was not lost. He knew what Buck Sidgers meant. Buck was going to forget what he knew, and Mister Fairfax was still Mister Fairfax, boss of the Lazy O—unknown to the Packsaddle marshal by any other name. The Kid drew a deep, deep breath.

"That guy is sure a square man!" he muttered. "He sure is, I'll tell the world!"

The Kid's heart was light as he mounted Side-Kicker, and he hummed the tune of a Mexican fandango as he rode away towards the Lazy O.

THE END.

(Is the Rio Kid's reign at the Lazy O Ranch coming to a close? It seems so, with so many enemies out to corner him. But the Kid is a dangerous man to crowd, as many a foe has discovered to his cost. Don't miss: "BARNEY BAKER'S LAST TRAIL!" next week's roaring Western yarn.)

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Saved from Sacrifice!
(Continued from page 22.)

The other started at the recognition. "I am no Arab. I come from the East, where the friends of the Gwigi live.

Joe's patience was now run out. "Don't you believe him, king. He's an Arab slave-dealer—like those who have taken thousands of your men and women away to the coast, and sold them to the big ships on the sea. If he's the medicine-man he claims to be, let him wash his body in water. The white will come off and show that he lies! There is the test. Let it be done."

"Is what the white man says true, O witch-doctor?" he asked, turning to the Arab.

"It is not true," he answered swiftly; and then, seized by a happy thought, added: "Have not I cured hundreds of your people?"

"Cured them, yes," mocked the sailor. "But how? I will tell you, king. Among my possessions was a case filled with the bark of the cinchona-tree. We call it quinine in our country. It is a certain cure for all fevers of the forest. There was no magic about it. He gave your people quinine, and they became well."

The chief seemed impressed. "Let all the live prisoners be brought before me and I will hear them all," Spageli said.

The sailor started. "There were but four, O king," he explained. "Myself, my two white friends, and a boy of your own colour."

The king shook his head.

"There were five in all—three whites and two black. See, each has been kept under separate guard."

And he pointed his spear in turn to the five butts.

In a flash Joe understood. As the descent on their camp had been carried out in darkness, the chief's men had made a prisoner of Nobi, his own son.

"They have not yet seen the light of day since they were brought to my village. Now they shall stand before me," Spageli went on.

Joe, however, raised his hand.

He swung round again and pointed to the waiting Arab.

"The villain here says he is an African witch-doctor!" he cried contemptuously. "He claims to have worked great marvels. Very well, chief, I accept his challenge. I will work a greater wonder than he."

"And that is?" questioned the king.

"I will produce your own son!" shouted Joe.

The old man shook his head.

"No; that cannot be, for my son went away, seized with the sickness, many suns ago. He wandered in the great forest. And now he is dead."

"But I will bring him here before you," persisted the sailor. "If I fail, then will I and all who came with me die. But if I succeed, then that man shall be my prisoner!"

And he pointed an accusing finger at the astounded Arab.

The thought of having his son restored to him was too great a temptation for Spageli to resist.

"The white man has spoken well," he cried. "It shall be even as he says. O great white man, perform this miracle!"

"Not while that fellow is near," said Joe. "He must be taken away, under guard, as I was."

The king nodded, and summoned his bodyguard, who led the Arab away.

Directly he was gone Joe turned a beaming face to the chief.

"Let your warriors surround me and take me to the bats," he said, pointing to where Dick, Frank, and Pie were lying captive.

A minute later Joe had passed from one to another without a word to the surprised boys.

In the last hut he came upon the prone form of Nobi, still bound. In the darkness no one had recognized him. He was brought into the light of day, and a mighty shout went up.

"It is Nobi, the king's son!" was the cry that rose from a thousand throats.

No one was more surprised than the chief himself to see his son again. Nobi lost no time in telling his father of the good which the white men had shown to him.

"Let them be freed at once," commanded the overjoyed king. "And now, O white man, he whom you claim is yours!"

Joe Tremorne gripped the hands of each of the boys in turn.

"Come on, you young rascals! I'll give you the surprise of your lives!" he said, pointing to the hut in which the Arab was imprisoned. "I'm going to show you El Hajar, dressed up and nowhere to go, as a medicine man!"

But the promised treat was never given. When the door of boughs was pushed wide the sunlight streamed through an opening in the back.

El Hajar had cut a way through, and so had made his escape.

THE END.

(Thus ends another episode in the Four Chums' thrilling journey through the African jungles. That they have not seen the last of their enemy, El Hajar, is proved in next week's thrilling tale: "THE PRICE OF TREACHERY!"