THE KID ON THE RUN!

"Cowmen stand by cowmen" is the motto practised up in the wild Squaw Mountain. And it's fortunate for the Rio Kid that this is so, for the chase is hot on his heels, and the Kid is a stranger in a strange land!

The RIO KID! by RALPH REDWAY

ANOTHER ROARING LONG COMPLETE TALE OF WESTERN ADVENTURE.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Ranch on Squaw Mountain.

THE Rio Kid looked round him with interested eyes as he rode the rough trail up Squaw Mountain.

Seen from a distance, as the Kid had seen it the day before, Squaw Mountain looked a steep and almost inaccessible mass—a mighty mountain blocking out the sky on the south side of the Squaw River. But close at hand the great mountain took on a different aspect. There were easy trails on the rugged sides of the mountain—deep arroyos, where rich grass grew on the banks of running streams, fertile valleys, where big cedars shut off the blaze of the sun, and aspens trembled in the breeze, and bunches of cattle grazed and found ample sustenance. In his own land of Texas the cow country was not like this. There it was a country of rolling prairie and boundless mesa. The Kid had wondered how the cowmen scratched up a living in a country like this, but he could see now that there was rich feed among the rocky slopes of Squaw Mountain. With the practised eye of a cowpuncher, he counted hundreds of head of cows on his way up to Jud Starbuck's ranch.

Cows always interested the Kid. A landscape was nothing to him if it showed no grazing herds. But it was not only the herds that the Kid looked at as he rode up the hoof-marked trail, the broad, trampled way by which the drives came down from the upland ranches. The Kid was on the watch for foes—and he needed to be on the watch. The cowmen he passed in the shacks or in the fields were friendly enough to any man who wore the chaps and high-heeled boots of a puncher; but the sheriff's men from Pawnee Ford were hunting him high and low, and the cowmen of Squaw Mountain, though they might wish him well, could not defend him against the sheriff and his men. They would hide him and take risks to keep him hidden. But the Rio Kid was not the man to hide.

But the sheriff's men, though he knew they were still hunting him, did not appear on the open cattle trail. Perhaps they did not expect the puncher who had escaped from the calaboose, in Pawnee Ford, to ride in the open, in the broad light of day. And when the sun was almost at the zenith, the Kid drew in his horse on the verge of a fertile valley, and guessed that he had reached his destination.

This week:

"THE COWMEN OF SQUAW MOUNTAIN!"

Hundreds of cows fed in the valley, and he could see two or three mounted punchers in the distance. Far beyond a ranch-house stood, and he had a glimpse of a figure in the shady veranda there—far distant. One of the punchers sighted him and came riding rapidly across the grass to meet him, with suspicion in his looks and his hand very near the gun in his belt. Visitors, apparently, were looked upon with suspicion at that ranch high up Squaw Mountain.

The Kid watched him as he rode up, sitting in his saddle with a cheery smile on his face. His own guns were handy if he wanted them, but he did not expect to find trouble on Squaw Mountain from the cowmen who lived there—only from the sheepmen from Pawnee Ford, and of them there was no sign.

The puncher came up with a clatter of hoofs, drew in his cow-pony only a couple of yards from the smiling Kid, and looked him over.

"Puncher?" he asked.

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

"No hands wanted on this ranch. I guess we don't take in strangers. You want to beat it."

"Sho!" said the Kid. "I guess I'll beat it lively, feller, if I've come to the wrong shebang. Ain't that Starbuck's ranch?"

"Sure!"

"Then I figure on riding on to the house and calling on Jud," said the Kid amiably. "Any objections to raise, feller?"

The man eyed him intently.

"I guess you're the galoot the sheriff was arter this morning," he said. "He's been up here with his men."

"The very galoot," assented the Kid. "I guess I had a close call in Pawnee Ford last night, and I had to say good-bye to a necktie partly in a durned hurry. That's why I'm hyer, feller."

"That's the sheriff's hoss you're riding," said the Starbuck puncher abruptly. "He was up here on that cayuse this morning."

"You keep on guessing right," smiled the Kid.

"You rustled that critter?"

The Kid's eyes gleamed.

"I guess I've never rustled a cayuse in my life, feller," he answered. "You don't want to talk that-a-way, or my gun might go off!"

The Starbuck puncher dropped his hand on a Colt in a holster at his belt.

"Don't you get fresh!" he warned.

The Kid eyed him curiously.

All the way up Squaw Mountain, by trail and arroyo and valley, he had met with nothing but help and goodwill from the cowmen he had come upon. A puncher in flight from the sheepmen had a passport to their sympathies, as a matter of course.

But here, where the Kid had taken it for granted that he would be more welcome than anywhere else, he seemed to be met with suspicion.

From the looks of this puncher and the others in the distance, the Kid figured that the Starbuck outfit were a rough bunch. But the rougher the bunch were, the more they might have been expected to be up against law and order as represented by the sheriff of Pawnee Ford.

"You wasn't expecting me here, feller?" asked the Kid, puzzled.

He had not doubted that Jud Starbuck would have warned his outfit to be on the look-out for the puncher who had saved his life by lending him his mustang.

"Nope."

"Jud Starbuck ain't told you?"

"He sure ain't."

"I guess he forgot it," said the Kid. "I'll sure remind him that he owes me a mustang, feller."

"You claim to know the boss?"

"I've met up with him," grinned the Kid. "Didn't he come up here yesterday on a grey mustang with a black muzzle?"

"Yep."

"Well, that was my cayuse that I lent him when the sheepmen were on his trail and his critter had been shot," explained the Kid. "I've come up here for that cayuse. I guess I ain't humped it all the way up this pesky mountain for the pleasure of making your acquaintance, feller. So if you'll get out of the way, I'll ride on to the ranch."

The range rider, without stirring, called to another of the Starbuck punchers, who came galloping up.

"Hyer, Buck, this jasper allows that he knows the boss and lent him the cayuse he came home on yesterday," said the first rider. "He's the man all Pawnee Ford are yelling for, and he's rustled the sheriff's hoss to get here. I guess the boss won't be jumpin' for joy to see him on this ranch. He don't want trouble with the sheriff. But——"

"He don't," agreed Buck. "He's warned us about that. But cowman stands by cowman, and I guess the boss won't say no to that, Hank."

"He's on a rustled hoss."

"I guess I'll put you wise," said the Kid. "I borrowed this hoss from the sheriff, and his guns, too."

"The sheriff lent them to you?" ejaculated Hank.

"He sure did. He's an obliging little man when a galoot holds a six-gun to his cabeza."

"Great gophers!" said Buck. "I sure don't savvy what the boss will say to holding up the sheriff and rustling his hoss and guns. And they want you in Pawnee Ford for shooting up Billy Ward, too."

"Oh, come off!" said the Kid. "It was your boss that shot up Billy Ward, and that's why the sheepmen were after him when I lent him my cayuse. The Pawnee Ford galoots got after me by mistake."

"If that's true, the boss sure has forgotten to mention it to anybody," grinned Buck.

"He sure has!" said Hank. "You've got some gall, stranger, to come up hyer with a yarn like that!"

The Kid's brows grew grim.

"You galoots shoot off your mouths too much," he said. "I guess I'm going on to the ranch to see Jud Starbuck."

The Kid pushed his horse onward.

The two Starbuck riders looked at one another and wheeled their horses, evidently to ride to the ranch-house with him.

"I guess we'll take you to the boss," said Buck. "I sure don't care a Continental red cent if you've shot up half the sheepmen in Wyoming. But we'll see what Jud says about it."

"We sure will!" agreed the Kid.

And he rode on to the ranch between the two punchers, much perplexed by this greeting at Hidden Hollow, and realising that it looked as if he had fallen among foes rather than friends.

———

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Friend or Foe?

JUD STARBUCK, the rancher of Squaw Mountain, was the man the Kid had seen in the distance in the veranda of the timber building. He came down the steps as the riders approached and stood looking at them, a deep cloud on his rather handsome face. They came up with a clatter of hoofs, and halted.

The Kid nodded cheerily to the rancher.

"Morning, Mr. Starbuck! I've got here, you see."

Starbuck eyed him.

"I see you've got here," he answered. "And what in thunder have you got here for?"

"What?"

"I don't know you from Adam!"

"You don't know me from Adam?" repeated the Rio Kid. "You don't know the man who lent you a cayuse yesterday to get away from the sheepmen?"

"That's the yarn he's spinning, boss," said Buck, with a grin. "He allows it was you shot up Billy Ward, and they got him by mistake. He's rustled the sheriff's horse to get hyer."

"Borrowed it, you galoot!" said the Kid. "You want to pick your words more carefully, feller, unless there's to be a vacancy in the bunch hyer."

"Enough of that!" said Starbuck abruptly. "You 'uns get back to the herd; I'll see to this galoot, and see what he wants."

Buck and Hank rode away reluctantly, with backward glances. But they went at once.

Starbuck did not speak till they were at a distance.

The Kid sat his horse, watching him. His face was growing grim.

"Spill it, feller!" he exclaimed at last. "I want to know what sort of a game this is."

"I reckon this ain't a matter to be shouted out before the whole bunch," said Starbuck surlily.

"I don't see why for not. You ain't keeping it a secret up here that you shot up Billy Ward down at the town?"

Starbuck bit his lip.

"I ain't denying you helped me some now we're alone," he said. "They'd sure have had me dead to rights if you hadn't lent me your cayuse. But that's between you and me. I ain't mourning over Billy Ward; he got too fresh, and I let him have what he was askin' for. But the sheepmen are sure mad at his being shot up. I knew that nobody saw me close enough to know that it was me drilled him; and I ain't telling all Wyoming who it was. Savvy? That's got to be padlocked."

"I've heard in Pawnee Ford that the galoot wasn't given a fair break," said the Kid. "I reckoned when I helped you that it was a fight; but they say it was a murder."

Starbuck shrugged his shoulders.

"All the more reason why I shouldn't howl out that I was the man who shot him up," he answered. "They got you for it, it seems. And that goes. I ain't spilling what I know about it."

The Kid's eyes gleamed.

"You're leaving it to me?"

"Yep! I guess you can ride out of this country, and you won't be any the worse for it," said Starbuck. "Listen here! There's a range war on between us cowmen and the sheepmen down on the plain. But we don't stand for shooting a man up in Wyoming. I guess I was pretty mad with Billy Ward when I pulled on him. He drove a herd of my cows out of a pasture I'd used for years, and I let him have it. I guess he'll never drive any more of my cows. But the whole country will be up to get the man who shot him; and I guess I ain't spilling anything. All they know is that a cowman shot him; and they're sure that you're the cowman that did it—and that goes."

"By gum!" said the Kid.

His eyes glittered.

"I ain't denying you helped me some," said Starbuck. "But you can sure bank on it that I ain't stepping into your place, feller, and asking them sheep-herders to put a rope round my neck. No, sir! They want the man who shot up Billy Ward, and they've got the law on their side. And the man they want can't hide in my ranch."

"Sho!" said the Kid.

He eyed the man grimly.

When he had heard of the range war in the Squaw River district between cowmen, and sheepmen the Kid's sympathies had gone out at once to the cowmen by instinct. It was for that reason that he had helped Starbuck to escape from his pursuers. But he had suspected even at the time that there was a yellow streak in the man. The "yellow" was very prominent now.

"I ain't turning you down, puncher," went on Starbuck. "I allow you helped me some. Your cayuse is in the corral, and you can have him as soon as you like. But you want to beat it pronto. I don't blame you none for rustling the sheriff's hoss to get away from a necktie party, but this ranch can't shelter a hoss-thief. Get off that cayuse, and I'll let one of the boys take him back to Pawnee Ford and tell them that he was found wandering. I'll get your mustang."

The Kid breathed hard.

"You durn yellow coyote!" he said. "This is what I get for keeping your neck out of the rope and putting my own in it! I guess you'd have been better pleased if they'd got home with the lynching last night at Pawnee Ford. That would have seen you clear."

Jud Starbuck shrugged his shoulders.

"Chewing the rag won't buy you anything," he answered. "You want to get off that cayuse and get on your own and hit it."

"With all the country hunting me," said the Kid. "You are sure wise to it that if I ride down Squaw Mountain again they'll rope me in."

Starbuck did not answer that.

"I reckoned I'd lie doggo here for a time," said the Kid. "You've put me into your place, and you ain't got the sand to stand by the man who saved your life."

"You can't lie doggo in this hyer ranch," said Starbuck. "Forget it!"

"I guess I wouldn't put a foot in your durned shebang to save my life," answered the Kid. "But I ain't quitting Squaw Mountain yet awhile. Keep your durned ranch, you coyote! I guess I can find cover on Squaw Mountain till the coast is clear."

Starbuck's jaw set grimly.

"They'll make out that we're hiding a murderer here," he said. "I don't stand for that, puncher."

"They sure are hiding a murderer here!" flashed the Kid. "And you're the man! If I'd been wise to it that you shot up Billy Ward without giving him a chance I'd have seen you over Jordan before I'd have lent you my cayuse to get away on. You sure get my goat, you skunk!"

"You want to be careful how you talk," said Starbuck. "It would pay me better to rope you in here and now and hand you over to the sheriff. And if you shoot off your mouth too much that's what I'm going to do!"

The Kid, eyeing him, realised that the man was capable of treachery even to that extent. He realised that he had made the mistake of his life when he helped Jud Starbuck to escape what was coming to him. This man, who had shot down a rival of the range without giving him a chance for his life, was thinking of nothing but keeping the rope from his own neck. There were a score of cowmen on Squaw Mountain who would have taken risks to help a fugitive puncher, but the man who had brought the danger on the Kid was not one of them.

The Rio Kid dismounted from the sheriff's horse.

"Hand over my cayuse and I'll hit the trail," he said. "I guess I've had enough of you, Jud Starbuck!"

The rancher went into the corral, and led out the black-muzzled mustang, who whinnied with pleasure at the sight of his master.

The Kid joyously smoothed the glossy muzzle of his mustang.

"I guess I was plumb loco to part with you, old hoss!" he said.

He saddled the mustang, and Starbuck brought out the slicker pack and the other fixings. With a sullen face he watched the Kid mount.

"You're hitting the trail?" he asked.

There was something of shame in the rancher's face, though his mind was quite made up to get rid, as quickly as possible, of the man who had saved his life.

"I sure am!" said the Kid. "Squaw Mountain is big, and I guess there's room for me."

"You want to beat it out of this country, puncher!"

The Kid's lip curled.

"I guess I'm wise to you now, you coyote," he answered. "You'd sure like to see me roped in by the sheriff's men and hanged out of your way, you durned pesky scallywag! But I reckon that ain't comin' to me. I'm for Squaw Mountain till I see a safe trail out."

Starbuck's brows darkened.

"I can't stand agin the law," he said doggedly. "If you hang on around hyer they'll git you——"

"I'm chancing that."

"I guess not!" snapped Starbuck angrily. "I give you one hour to clear, puncher, and after that I'm sending word to the sheriff at Pawnee Ford where you're to be looked for. I got to stand in with the sheriff. If you're wise you'll beat it while the way's open."

The Kid gave him one scornful glance, wheeled his black-muzzled mustang, and rode away.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Doggo!

IT was good to feel himself on the back of his own horse again, his old Texas saddle beneath him. But the Kid, as he rode away from the ranch, and the building dropped out of sight behind a fold of the ground, thought over his situation and wrinkled his boyish brows. He told himself that he had been a moss-head to get mixed up in this range war in the back country of Wyoming at all; and yet he could not blame himself for having horned in to help a cowman who had been fleeing for his life. He regretted it now he knew the kind of yellow galoot Starbuck was, but only for that reason. Anyhow, regrets would not buy him anything, and the Kid wasted little time on them. He had to deal with the present, not the past.

The sheepmen knew that he had taken refuge on Squaw Mountain, and every path would be watched for him. Amid rocks, and arroyos, and deep draws he might hide for weeks, likely enough; but escape from the mountain was quite another matter. The scattered cowmen on the mountain might help, though Jud Starbuck had turned him down. The Kid had his horse, and he had the sheriff's guns and cartridge-belt, but he had no money, his roll of six thousand dollars had been taken from him in the calaboose at Pawnee Ford; and to travel without money was not easy. The Kid had much more cached safely away, in a place that only he knew, but that was out of reach now—many a long league out of reach.

"It's us for Squaw Mountain, old hoss!" the Kid told the black-muzzled gray mustang.

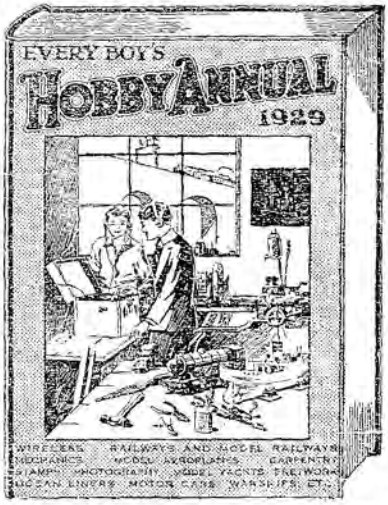
Starbuck had advised him to beat it while the way was open, but the Kid knew, and suspected that the rancher knew, that every way would be guarded. Not for some days, at the very least, would there be a chance for the Kid to ride away from Squaw Mountain, even under cover of night. Those days he had expected to pass at Hidden Hollow, but after Starbuck's reception of him the Kid would have disdained to bed down under the traitor's roof. He was done with Jud Starbuck, unless the rancher kept his threat of joining up with the sheriff against him. At that thought the Kid's eyes glittered like steel. If that happened, Jud Starbuck was likely to repent it.

Thud! Thud!

The Kid looked round at the beat of hoofs as he was riding out of the valley. It was Buck, the range rider, who was galloping after him.

The Kid swung round in the grass and sat his horse, waiting for the puncher to come up, his hand very near a gun. But Buck showed no sign of hostility as he rode up.

Here We Are Again!



The New Edition of this Popular Annual will be making its appearance on the market in a few weeks' time!

He grinned at the boy puncher from Texas.

"The boss has sent me to see you safe off his land," he said. "You ain't no objection to register?"

"To see that I clear off the Starbuck ranch, you mean?" queried the Kid.

"That's about the size of it," admitted Buck.

"I sure don't want to hurt your feelings, feller," said the Kid, "but your boss is the durndest yellow coyote that I've struck since I rode out of Texas. He sure is the limit, and I'm half sorry that I didn't plug him before I quit."

"I guess you'd have found him quick on the draw," grinned Buck. "He's some shooter."

"I'm some shooter myself, feller. But never mind Starbuck; I guess he leaves a bad taste in a galoot's mouth. He shot that sheepman, Ward, and he's scared stiff to stand for it, and he's getting busy putting it on me, like them looped galoots down at the Ford."

"Say, is that straight?" asked Buck.

"Straight as a string."

"The boss has been in trouble before for shooting too free," said Buck. "These ain't the old days in Wyoming, when a feller packed a gun and used it. They make an all-fired fuss now when a sheepman is shot up. That man, Ward, drove our cows, and I guess the boss had it in for him; and he's a bad man when he's roused. But if he killed Ward he won't let on, you can bet your boots, and all the country thinks you did it by this time. You want to keep outer sight."

"I'm wise to that," assented the Kid.

"I'm going to see you off the ranch, same as the boss ordered, but I can show you a safe place to lie up in for a few days. I've hid a man there afore who had trouble with the sheriff. Jud is scared of more trouble with the law, but this hyer bunch ain't turning a cowman down. Even if you shot up Ward I ain't holding it agin you. You foller on and I'll put you wise."

The Kid eyed the man intently, but he decided very soon that Buck was square, whatever his boss might be.

He assented, and rode with the cattleman, and from the open grassland of the valley they entered a wide, shallow canyon.

Further on, the canyon narrowed, and the way became steep, and the horses' hoofs rang and clinked on the hard rock and loose stones.

Buck halted by a thicket of aspens.

"Hyer's the place!" he said.

He dismounted and hitched his horse to a sapling, and pushed a way through the thicket.

The Kid followed, leading his mustang by the bridle.

The thicket grew against what looked like a solid wall of rock, almost as perpendicular as the side of a house. But in the rock, when the thicket was traversed, a deep cave was seen to open.

Buck led the way into the cave.

"I guess the sheriff won't run you down hyer in a month of Sundays," he said confidently. "There's no trail left on them rocks, and you only want to mind your eye. But I tell you, feller, you want to lie close; there'll be a hundred men hunting for you. You ain't got a mosquito's chance if they hit your trail."

The Kid nodded.

"I guess I can bed down hyer safe enough," he remarked. "But I sure can't live on open air and aspen branches, feller."

"You bet I'll see that you have plenty of grub from the cookhouse at the ranch," answered Buck. "I'll fix you up with blankets, too, and all you want. I tell you the Starbuck bunch ain't letting a cowman be took by the sheepman if they can help it, though, of course, we can't pull guns to keep them off. The boss wouldn't stand for that."

"You're a white man," said the Kid. "They got my roll down in Pawnee Ford, and I'm busted to the wide; all I got in exchange is the sheriff's guns. But I guess there ain't nothing to buy on Squaw Mountain."

"Nix! And my bunch wouldn't take nothing for sheltering you, neither," said Buck. "Cowmen stand by cowmen. According to your say-so, you stood by Jud, and he's let you down. I guess I believe you. It's like the boss to pull a gun hasty, and then be scared of what he'd done. But don't you reckon he'd give you away to the sheepmen; if he did I reckon none of this bunch would stand for it, and we'd sure drill him full of holes. I guess I'm foreman of this layout, and what I say goes with the boys. The bunch ain't fighting no sheriff's posse, but they'll stand together as thick as fleas to keep you hid."

"I reckon your boss will get up on his hind legs and yaup, all the same," said the Kid.

SECRET HIDING-PLACE! The Kid followed the cowboy, leading his mustang. The thicket grew against what looked like a solid wall of rock. But in the rock, when the undergrowth was traversed, a deep cave was seen to open. "I guess the sheriff won't run you down hyer in a month of Sundays!" said Buck. *(See Chapter 3.)*

"I reckon not," answered the Starbuck foreman indignantly. "I allow he's dead scared to have you at the ranch, but he will stand in and willing to keep you hid. All Squaw Mountain will stand by a cowman agin the sheepman, I'll tell the world."

The Starbuck rider left the Kid in the cave, and rode away back to the valley.

The Kid, in a thoughtful mood, watched him go.

He had to lie doggo for a time, that was certain, and if the Starbuck bunch stood by him, it was easy. But his doubts of the Starbuck boss were strong. Jud's threats were still in his ears. The man was in fear for himself so long as the Rio Kid was in the vicinity, and free. The Kid could not help believing that Jud would have been glad had the lynchers succeeded in stringing him up at Pawnee Ford that wild night. It would have covered up his own tracks and left him secure.

"The durned coyote!" growled the Kid.

An hour later Buck came riding up with a pack on his horse, and handed out blankets and bacon and beans and other supplies.

"There's water at a spring a little way up the canyon," he said. "I guess you're fixed hyer all right, puncher. And I've told the boss, and he's standing in—so long as you don't show up at the ranch and get him on the wrong side of the sheriff. Sabe? I guess Jud ain't the all-fired coyote you allow he is, puncher; though he sure allows that he ain't the man who shot up Billy Ward."

"He allowed he was yesterday, when I lent him my cayuse to hit the trail on," said the Kid.

Buck eyed him dubiously.

"Waal, I ain't settling that," he said. "That ain't none of my business, nohow. But we're seeing you through this, and the boss is standing in, and you're all right if you keep quiet. And we'll sure put you wise when all's clear for hitting the trail away from Squaw Mountain. You ain't the first cowman we've stood by, neither, and seen safe away." He grinned. "So-long, puncher! You'll see me along to-morrow with more grub."

And Buck rode back to the ranch, leaving the Kid alone.

The Rio Kid built a camp-fire at the mouth of the cave, and cooked bacon and beans, as he had been wont to do in his camps on the grassy plains and shadowy chaparrals of Texas. Buck had brought him feed for his horse, and he fed the grey mustang. Then he sat for a long time on a boulder, looking down the canyon towards the verdant valley below, with a deep shade of thought on his brow, cogitating. The Rio Kid, in his present situation, had plenty of food for thought.

"Old hoss," he said at last, "I guess these punchers are white men, as cowmen sure ought to be; they're a rough crowd, but they're the bunch to stand by a cowman in trouble. But their boss, old cayuse, is sure a yellow dog, and a double-crosser from the toes up. Far as the bunch is concerned, you and me are safe hyer till the cows come home; but far as Jud is concerned, we sure ain't. And I guess we're looking for another camp at sundown, old hoss, where a pesky traitor won't be able to point us out to the doggoned sheriff."

And in the sinking sunlight, the Kid led his mustang, with his supplies packed in the slicker on its back, across the canyon, taking care to leave no trail, and camped down in the midst of a stack of high rocks, screened with scrubby mesquite, opposite the aspens that hid the cave. And in that rocky eyrie the Kid rolled himself in his blankets and lay down to sleep, knowing that he would awaken at the first sound of danger.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The Traitor!

THERE was a clatter of hoofs before the Starbuck Ranch. The sun was down, and a silver crescent of moon glimmered softly over Squaw Mountain. The outfit were in the bunkhouse, except for the riders on night duty among the herds; and the bunkhouse door flew open at the clattering of hoofs, as more than twenty men rode in a bunch up the trail from Pawnee Ford. At the head of them was the sheriff, and by his side Jim Ward, the brother of the sheepman who had been shot-up, who had taken the leading part in the attempted lynching of the Rio Kid.

The punchers poured out of the bunkhouse, all of them with guns in their hands. Dark looks were cast at the crowd of horsemen who had halted before the ranch. The power of the law was on the sheriff's side. But there was no love lost between the Squaw Mountain cowmen and the men from Pawnee Ford.

The sympathy of every man in the Starbuck bunch was on the side of the cowman of whom the sheriff came in search, with hardly an exception. So strong was that feeling all over Squaw Mountain that Jud Starbuck, who wanted to stand well with his men and his neighbours, as well as with the law, had not dared to give his outfit orders to drive the Rio Kid off his range, as he would gladly have done. That order would not have been obeyed, and it would have made Starbuck an outcast among the men he knew and lived with.

Starbuck aimed to be the leader of the cow community on the mountain, and he was the chief in many raids on the sheep pastures, when flocks of sheep had been driven over precipices, and sheep-herders beaten or wounded. But that part of Jud's activities was known only to his friends. It was his game to stand well with the law at the same time. He carried on the range war under safe cover.

Starbuck came out of the ranchhouse, and gave the bunch a warning glance, as they stood scowling at the halted horsemen. Gun-play on his ranch against the forces of law and order was the last thing that Jud desired. Twenty years before, the sheriff's posse might have been ambushed and shot up on the

wild mountains; but those days were long past.

"Evening, sheriff!" he said coolly. "Keep cool, boys, there ain't no call for trouble hyer. We stand for the law at this ranch. Light down, sheriff, and step inside."

"I guess I ain't no time," said the sheriff of Pawnee Ford surlily. "I'm after that firebug that shot up Billy Ward, and robbed me of my horse and guns."

"I guess I sent back your hoss, sheriff."

"Sure, and I want to know where you found him."

"One of my riders roped him in, jest wandering on the range," said Starbuck. "Knowing he was your cayuse, I sent him back."

The sheriff eyed him suspiciously. He did not fail to see the grin on many faces among the ranch outfit.

"Waal, that means that that firebug came up hyer," said the sheriff. "I'm sure wise to it that every galoot on Squaw Mountain would hide him away from the law if he could."

"Find him if you want him, sheriff!" growled Buck. "I guess no man hyer is going to help you!"

And there was a murmur of assent from the outfit.

"I guess I've got enough men with me to eat you galoots, if you give trouble!" snarled the sheriff. "I guess I strongly suspicion, Mr. Starbuck, that that Texas puncher is lying doggo up here on your range, and I sure want him, and want him bad."

"Nobody's seen him hyer, sheriff," answered Starbuck. "I guess he's hoofing it over the hill afoot. That's how I figure it out."

"Why didn't you hang on to him when you had him, sheriff?" asked Hank, and there was a laugh from the punchers.

The sheriff of Pawnee Ford scowled.

"I'll hang on to him tight enough when I rope him in next," he said, "and I'll make him squeal, and get the names of all the galoots who were in that shooting business with him."

"You're welcome to camp here, sheriff, and if you like to ride over the range, I'll ride with you and help you all I can."

There was a grin among the outfit. They had no doubt that the "boss" was ready to ride with the sheriff and lead him on a false scent.

"I'll take that offer, Jud Starbuck," said the sheriff gruffly.

Starbuck called for his horse, and mounted, and the outfit stood grinning as he rode away in the moonlight with the crowd of horsemen from Pawnee Ford. They noticed that he led them in a direction exactly opposite from that of the canyon where the Rio Kid lay doggo.

"I guess the sheriff won't get much change out of the boss!" grinned Buck. "They won't rope in any cowpuncher from Texas if they keep on hitting that trail."

But out of sight of the bunkhouse Starbuck drew his horse close alongside the scowling sheriff. He spoke in a low voice.

"I sure want to help you all I can, sheriff. I don't stand for runaway gunmen coming up Squaw Mountain and giving this cow-country a bad name. I guess if that firebug is on my range, I want you to rope him in, and rope him in quick!"

The sheriff gave him a suspicious look.

"But I ain't shouting it out for all the bunch to hear," said Jud. "I sure wouldn't be popular on Squaw Mountain, and I guess you're wise to that."

"Sure!" assented the sheriff.

"I guess my own outfit would pull guns on me if they were wise to it that I'd helped you rope in a cowman," said Starbuck. "A galoot's got to mind his step on Squaw Mountain, sheriff." He sank his voice to a whisper. "I ain't telling you anything. I sure can't. But I'm going to ride through a canyon on the west side of this hyer valley. If you ride after me, you'll see a thicket of aspens back agin the canyon wall. I reckon if you nosed through those aspens you'd find a cave on the other side, right in the canyon wall. I guess that's a likely place for a firebug to lie doggo. You don't want me to say any more than that, sheriff."

The sheriff's face set grimly.

"I guess I savvy a heap," he said. "I ain't yowling it out to all Squaw Mountain if you put me wise, Starbuck. Ride on."

Jud Starbuck rode on in the moonlight, making a wide detour of the valley before he struck to the west. The Pawnee Ford posse rode on his track. It was an hour later that Starbuck rode into the canyon, and the hoofs of twenty horses rang on the rocks behind him as he pushed on. With a clatter and a jingle the party drew rein opposite the thicket of aspens that hid the cave.

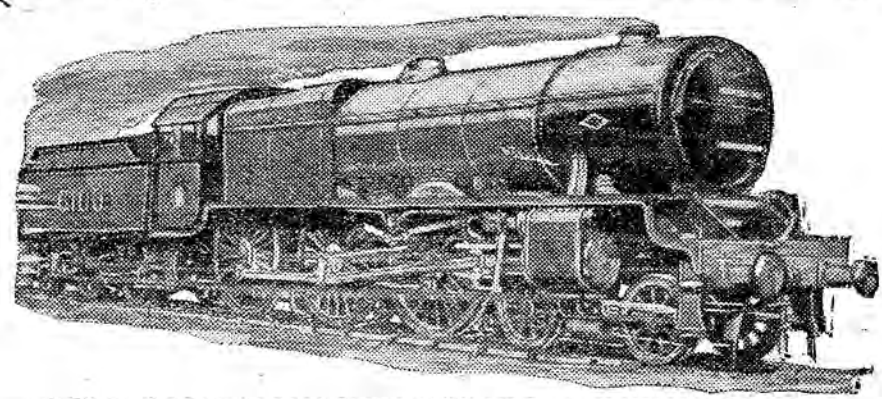
And on the other side of the canyon the Rio Kid, awakened from his light slumber by the beating of many hoofs, crouched among the rocks and watched, a glitter in his eyes and a six-gun in his hand.

THE END.

(The Kid has been let down by a cowman, and when that happens the Kid sure loses his temper. Read how he gets out of this particularly tight corner in next week's Roaring Western Yarn.)

FREE

Superb Metal Model, brightly coloured and correct in every detail, of Britain's Giant Express Engine, "ROYAL SCOT," whose brilliant performance of over 400 miles non-stop run London to Glasgow set the whole world a-talking



A Reproduction in miniature of this week's handsome FREE GIFT!

This grand souvenir is GIVEN AWAY FREE with every copy of—

The GEM 2D LIBRARY

ON SALE WEDNESDAY, AT ALL NEWSAGENTS.