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THE RIO KID'S ENEMY— BLACK GEORGE— SHOWS UP UNEXPECTEDLY!

(See this week's Roaring Western yarn.)

Week Ending February 1st, 1930.

No. 575 (New Series).

HERE'S THE RIO KID, YOUR FAVOURITE ADVENTURER, IN ANOTHER THRILLING STORY OF THE WEST!

THE MYSTERY OF THE MARSHAL!

By Ralph Redway.

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

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Face at the Window!

THE Rio Kid looked happy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Whether the name he gave was his own nobody knew or cared; there were plenty of galoots in the Kicking Mule country who did not carry the name they were born with. And it was not on the Kid's conscience that he could not put them wise to his true identity. He had never wanted to be an outlaw; but Fate had been too strong for him. They welcomed him as a puncher, and a puncher the Kid really was, and wanted to be.

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

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

Not a man in the Kicking Mule country knew him, or dreamed of guessing who he was—not even Seth Starbuck, the marshal, who would have given much to have such a handle against the boy puncher who had defeated him in gun-play.

The Kid smiled at that thought.

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

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

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

"Say, the boss is sure mending," said the wrangler. "I been up to the house and seen him. He's sure on the mend."

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

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do is to get after that skunk Black George!"

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

"Me!" said the Kid.

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

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

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

The Kid's brow was thoughtful.

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

"Four years," said Mesquite.

"And how long's Starbuck been marshal?"

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

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

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

"Who was the four?" asked the Kid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He moved swiftly.

Swift as he was, the bullet that whizzed across the bunkhouse missed by only a fraction of an inch; it grazed the Kid's sunburnt cheek as it passed.

"Great gophers!" roared Mesquite, in astonishment and rage. "Black George, by thunder!"

He leaped across to his gun-belt that was hanging on the wall. The Kid made a rush for the door, grabbing a gun from his belt over the bunk with lightning swiftness.

But the black face at the window had vanished instantly.

As the Kid rushed out of the bunkhouse he caught a momentary glimpse of a shadowy figure vanishing in darkness, and fired after it.

But the fleeing figure was gone, and a moment later, the beat of horse's hoofs rang through the night.

Mesquite rushed out after the Rio Kid, almost stuttering with rage.

"Black George!" he gasped. "The durned skunk! Black George hyer, on the Bar-One! Horses—say, you guys—hosses—get after him! You hear me *yaup! Get after him!*"

The crowd poured out of the bunkhouse, guns in hand. Desperate and daring as the black road-agent was known to be, his audacity in venturing on the ranch astonished the Bar-One outfit. Yet the attempt on the Rio Kid had been safe from its very daring. The road-agent had skulked in the darkness to the bunkhouse window; he had stayed for only one shot, and his horse had been at hand. He was galloping away into the blackness of the night before the punchers had a chance at him.

The Kid rushed to the corral and called to Side-Kicker. He was the first to mount, without waiting for saddle or bridle. On the bare-backed mustang he leaped the fence and galloped in the direction taken by the fleeing road-agent. Fast after him came a dozen men of the Bar-One, though not so fast as the Kid.

But the pursuit, prompt as it was, was in vain. Darkness and the lonely ranges had swallowed up the road-agent, and after a long and futile hunt the punchers rode savagely back to the Bar-One, disappointed. Black George had come, and he had gone, leaving in the timber wall of the bunkhouse the bullet that had been intended for the Rio Kid.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The Kid's Hunch!

COLONEL SANDERSON, leaning back in a rocker on the ranch-house porch in the morning sunshine, nodded and smiled to the Rio Kid as he came up the shallow wooden steps and raised his Stetson respectfully.

"'Mornin', sir!" said the Kid. "Mendin', I hope?"

"Mending!" agreed the rancher. "I guess that scallywag, Black George, gave me a close call. But I'm beating him to it. I'll say I'll be in the saddle in a few days from now."

"I'm plumb glad to hear it, sir," said the Kid. "Yuba allowed last night in the bunkhouse that you wanted to see me this morning."

"Sit down, boy," said the rancher.

The Kid sat on the pinewood rail, facing the boss of the Bar-One in his rocker. His face was bright. It was good to know that the boss was getting over his wound, which, but for the Kid, would have been the finish for him.

"I sure owe you my life, boy," said the rancher slowly. "That fire-bug would have riddled me with lead if you hadn't been there—and I guess it was lucky for me you signed on to the Bar-One. I'd have gone up, sure, if you hadn't been riding with me that night."

"You've said it, sir," said the Kid. "But it was your own kindness, and taking me on trust, that did it."

The rancher smiled.

"Black George nearly got me, anyhow," he said, "and now I'm mending I reckon I'm going to get Black George before he puts in again. Mesquite told me he horned in on the ranch last night, and handed you a pot-shot from the bunkhouse window."

The Kid rubbed his cheek.

"Jest that, sir," he said, "and it was a close call. That scallywag sure has got it in for you and me."

"He don't seem a whole lot afraid of the marshal," remarked the rancher. "He ain't ever tried to shoot up Seth Starbuck."

The Kid grinned.

"Colonel Sanderson, sir," he said, "I guess I got a whole heap to get off my chest about that marshal."

"Shoot!" said the colonel.

"I been thinking a whole lot, sir, while I've been riding with your bunch these days," said the Kid, sinking his voice a little, "and I guess I suspicion that marshal guy a heap."

"How come?" asked the rancher, eyeing him, puzzled.

"All the section's wise to it that that nigger trail-thief has got a side-pardner who puts him wise," said the Kid. "Starbuck aimed to put that across me, figuring that he'd fit me with a rope necktie if he could get Kicking Mule to believe it. Nobody knows who the double-crossin' skunk is; but there ain't no two ways about it—Black George don't dare show his black face in any cow-town. But he gets all the news, and he can't get it only from a white man in cahoots with him."

"Correct!"

"Well, you know I followed the trail of that coon, sir, in the hills, and I'll say it led me right into Kicking Mule," said the Kid. "That's why I struck the town. It was Black George's hoss I trailed into Kicking Mule; and I guess it must have had Black George's side-pardner on its back. I put the marshal wise to it, him standing for the law in the town—and he was sure hoppin' mad, and he pulled his gun on me. I guess you know how he's tried to put it across me since. Well, that marshal guy is a gun-man, and a hard case. But I keep on asking myself why did he pick on me special? And I guess I've asked myself further—was it because he figured that I was dangerous to Black George?"

Sanderson started violently.

His eyes opened wide at the Kid.

"You mean?" he gasped.

"Look at it as it stands, sir," said the Kid quietly. "That ain't the whole jugful, either."

"Go on," said the rancher, in a low voice.

There was a strange look on his face, and it told that the Kid's words had started a wholly new train of thought in his mind.

"Starbuck's been marshal of Kicking Mule nigh on four years, I'm told. Black George has been cavorting around about the same time. All the section groused because the marshal ain't never got that fire-bug. Looks like he never wanted to get him."

"Mebbe!" said Sanderson. "Mebbe! But he's gone after that thief, many a time, after a hold-up or a murder."

"And every time Black George was wise to it, and hunted cover," said the Kid. "And that ain't the whole jugful, either. When that Ranger guy was sent for, to pick up sign on Black George, ain't it true that only four men knew—you and two other ranch bosses, and the marshal."

"That's a cinch."

"I guess it wasn't you, or Carter or Hanson who put that road-agent wise to it," said the Kid. "But he knowed

—he laid for the Ranger on the Juniper trail and shot him up. Who let the rabbit out of the bag?"

"That's puzzled me a whole lot," said the rancher. "A galoot might have dropped a word here or there—I'd figured that it was the marshal that talked too much in town."

"I sure guess it was the marshal that talked too much, in town or not," said the Kid.

"Sho!" murmured Sanderson. "Is that the whole jugful?"

"Not yet, sir," said the Kid. "That night you was shot up—the marshal knew you was riding home that night late, for I heard you speak of it when he was in the Golden Mule. And Black George was sure waiting ready on the trail for you with his gun."

The rancher nodded.

"Mind, I ain't worked it all out yet," said the Kid. "There's suthin' in the game that puzzles me a whole lot. I don't rightly understand how that nigger hides away in the hills, never showing up near a town, and all the while sticking to this same section. He's sure roped in thousands of dollars all the time he's been cavorting around Kicking Mule; but what's he done with it? A white road-agent would blow the dollars on a jamboree in some town where he wasn't known or looked for; but that coon couldn't dare show up—he's been seen a hundred times, and his black face is too well known—he don't look an ordinary coon, either. But it beats me to a frazzle, a man risking his neck every day for dollars that he don't dare to spend, and living like a wolf in the hills all the time. There's suthin' in it that beats me."

The Kid paused, a wrinkle in his brow.

"If he wasn't a coon," he went on quietly, "if he was jest a road-agent with a mask on his face, I'd say that Starbuck was the man, and that he jest took his mask off when I trailed his hoss that day into the town. But that's no cinch, for Starbuck sure ain't a coon, though I guess his heart is as black as Black George's face. I figure that that marshal guy is in cahoots with him, squeals to him about what goes on in Kicking Mule, puts him wise, and takes a share in his plunder. I ain't giving you this for gospel, sir—but that's the big idea."

Colonel Sanderson sat silent in the rocker.

His brow was dark with thought.

Seth Starbuck, the marshal, glanced suspiciously back over his shoulder at the Mexican. Little did he realise, however, that this Mexican was none other than the Rio Kid in disguise!

The Kid had started a new train of thought in his mind—a new line of suspicion.

Long the rancher sat deep in thought, silent.

The Kid waited for him to speak. He broke the silence at last.

"I guess you've given me somethin' to chew on, Two-gun," said the rancher. "What you've said never came into my mind before, not for a minute, but now you've put it there, I guess I can think of a whole lot of things to back it up. By the great horned toad, if Starbuck's that nigger's side-pardner, we'll run him down and hang him over the door of his own office. But how're we going to get the proof? If he's a double-crossin' polecat like you let on, he's cute; he covers up his trail like a Yaqui Injun. He sure won't be easy to cinch."

"I ain't looking for an easy trail, sir," said the Kid. "But if he's the guy we want, we'll get him, soon or late. And I ain't shoutin' this out all over the town. We don't want to put him wise to what we're figuring. Only you knows what I figure, sir, and you won't be talking about it."

"Not a word," said the rancher. "I reckon I'll chew on it with my mouth shut. But you've some idea, back of your mind?"

"Sure!" said the Kid. "And I'm asking you to give me leave from the ranch to see if I can work the riffle."

"Take all the leave you want," said Sanderson, "and all the bunch to help you, if you like."

"I guess I'm goin' on a lone trail," said the Kid. "I got to get wise to that marshal guy, and that's to be done in Kicking Mule."

"You'll sure get shot up in town, boy," said the rancher, shaking his head. "Starbuck's likely to shoot on sight, and I wouldn't put it past him to draw a gun on a guy from behind."

"Starbuck won't know me when he sees me next time, sir," said the Kid. "I got that all cut and dried."

The rancher listened, with surprise growing in his face, as the Kid unfolded his stunt. He raised no demur, but there was a dubious expression on his face as he watched the Kid ride away from the Bar-One a little later in the day. The boy puncher was riding on a perilous trail, and it was in the rancher's mind that, as like as not, he was looking his last on that member of his outfit.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Half-Breed!

THE Mexican half-breed had slumped down by a wall near the door of the marshal's office, and Seth Starbuck glanced at him carelessly, as he stood in his doorway looking out up Main Street in Kick-

ing Mule. Mexican half-breeds were not uncommon in the town, and there was nothing in this specimen to draw a second glance, unless it was his obvious state of inebriety. His ragged shirt, his patched calzoneros, his dark, dirty face with its ragged black moustache shadowed by an immense ragged sombrero, told of nothing that was unusual in that half-breed. The marshal of Kicking Mule did not give him a second glance, though he was worth it, if Seth Starbuck had known.

Starbuck stood looking up the street, bright and dusty in the morning sunshine. If he thought anything about the Mexican, it was that he had got drunk very early in the day. He had seen the man before, loafing about Alcazo's Mexican dive down the street, guzzling pulque. Now he fairly reeked with the Mexican native drink, and the way he slumped down by the wall looked as if he was helplessly overcome. A faint snore from the wretched, dilapidated figure reached the marshal's ears as he looked up the street watching a horseman who was riding in from the prairie trail.

Mesquite Bill from the Bar-One, pulled in his broncho and saluted the marshal curtly. Starbuck gave him a brief nod. They were not friends, and had been less so than ever since the time Mesquite had horned in to save the Kid from lynching. But the foreman of the Bar-One had business now with the town marshal.

"Mornin', marshal!" he said gruffly.

"Mornin'," grunted Starbuck. "How's the boss?"

"Mendin' fine! He's been in the saddle to-day."

"That's good!" said Starbuck.

"I'll say it is," agreed the cow-man. "That durned fire-bug meant to make it the last sickness for him, and I guess he'd have done it, too, if that kid puncher hadn't been along."

The marshal scowled.

"That puncher on the ranch?" he asked.

"Sure, and I'm telling you, marshal, Black George horned in on the ranch a few nights back, and aimed to get him from the bunkhouse window."

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

"I'll tell a man!" answered Mesquite. "Say, you ain't on the trail of that fire-bug yit?"

"He don't leave a trail as broad as a remuda does," said the marshal sarcastically. "And I guess I ain't the only hombre in Kicking Mule that can't put salt on his tail."

"You've said it. I got a message from the Boss," said Mesquite, changing the subject which was reckoned to be a sore one with the marshal.

"Spill it!"

"You've said it. I got a message from the bank at Juniper to-day, to pay the bunch," said Mesquite. "The colonel figures that he won't have it sent on the stage, because that scallywag, Black George, is as like as not to hold up Jerry Cook somewheres between Juniper and this burg. The boss has fixed it for them to send the dust by a guy on a cayuse."

The marshal's eyes glimmered.

"It's being kept dark," continued Mesquite. "But you know as well as the boss does, how that scallywag George gets wise to things. Like as not he's going to get wise to this and lay for that man from the Juniper bank."

"I wouldn't put it past him," said the marshal.

"That's what the colonel reckons, and he figures that you want to keep your eyes peeled on the Juniper trail this afternoon," said Mesquite. "The guy from the bank will quit Juniper an hour after the stage pulls out, which is at three. If Black George goes for Jerry Cook's hearse, the boss figures that the trail will be clear arter, but you never can tell with that coon."

"You've said it!"

"I guess if the boss was in my boots he'd send a bunch of Bar-One boys to ride with the guy from the bank," said Mesquite with a grunt. "But Sanderson sure thinks you're the man to look for that road-agent, and he's the boss. If you want a chance at Black George, marshal, you want to be riding the Juniper trail this afternoon with your men handy where you want them. That's what the boss says."

"How'm I going to ride the Juniper trail this arternoon, when I got business over at Post Oak?" demanded the marshal surlily. "There's been horses rustled over to Post Oak, and the guys sure look for me to get a holt on them rustlers. Black George ain't the only pebble on the beach, I'm telling you."

"Waal, I give you the boss' message," said Mesquite, preparing to ride on.

"A guy can't be in two places at once," grunted the marshal. "I got a suspicion of them Post Oak rustlers, and I got to look into it. But you can tell your boss that I'll put three deputies on the Juniper trail to keep their eyes peeled for Black George."

"I'll sure tell him."

Mesquite rode down the rugged street, to drop in at the Golden Mule before he hit the trail back to the ranch. The marshal stood looking after him.

He went back to his office at last.

The Mexican half-breed, slumped by the wall, had not stirred. Through the sunny, dusty noontide he remained where he was. Mesquite Bill passed him again a little later on his way to the prairie trail and the Bar-One. A playful puncher, pausing to stare at the sleeping man, tilted his big sombrero over his face and walked on grinning. The half-breed stirred enough to shift the broad hat back into its place, grunted, and composed himself to slumber again.

He was still there when the marshal of Kicking Mule led his horse from behind the building and mounted in the street. The marshal rode out of Kicking Mule at a canter.

As he rode away, the dirty, dusty Mexican stirred at last, dragging himself to his feet, and rubbing his eyes. Those eyes, under the shade of the sombrero, were singularly sharp and wide awake for a half-breed soaked with pulque. They gleamed at the burly back of the marshal as he rode, and the half-breed moved along to Alcazo's Mexican dive, unhitched a tough-looking burro from the post, slumped into the ragged saddle, and rode out of the town in the direction the marshal had taken.

Outside Kicking Mule, Seth Starbuck glanced over his shoulder at the sound of hoof-beats on the trail behind him.

The suspicious gleam died out of his eyes, however, at the sight of the Mexican, swaying clumsily on the back of the burro.

The marshal rode on till he reached the spot where the trail forked, one way leading over the hill towards the Juniper stage trail, and the other by the prairie towards Post Oak.

It was the former that the marshal took.

As he passed the fork, he gave his horse the spur, and in a few minutes vanished from sight among the woods that grew on the slopes of the hill.

The Mexican half-breed jogged on, on his tough-looking burro, to the fork of the trails.

There he pulled in the donkey, as if uncertain of his way. If the marshal looked back from the wooded slopes of the hill, all he saw was a drunken half-breed swaying in the saddle and staring blearily about him. Finally the man reeled so wildly that he slumped out of the saddle and collapsed into the trail. The burro cocked up its ears, stared for a moment or two at its fallen master, and then ambled away back towards the town, leaving the Mexican sprawling on the earth.

But that half-breed as he sprawled, was communing with himself. His eyes scintillated under the shadow of the big sombrero.

"I guess if that guy's watching from the hill, he ain't wise to this baby!" murmured the half-breed, and the voice that murmured was the voice of the Rio Kid. "Snakes! That galoot allows that he's got business at Post Oak this afternoon, and so he can't ride the Juniper trail and keep his eyes peeled for Black George! But he sure has given the Post Oak trail a miss, and gone over the hill toward Juniper. He sure has!"

The Kid grinned under the walnut-juice that stained his face beyond recognition.

"That marshal guy ain't hitting for Post Oak a whole lot!" he murmured. "He sure ain't! He's hitting for the Juniper stage trail—the way the guy from the bank will come, according to what Mesquite let on."

The drunken half-breed rolled out of the trail into the brush, as if to seek shelter from the sun.

But, once hidden in the brush, he rose to his feet, and all pretence of drunkenness dropped from him like a cloak. Never had the Rio Kid been more alert.

Far away on the wooded hillside a distant sound of cracking twigs came to his ears. The marshal of Kicking Mule was riding fast up the ascent, through the brush. The Mexican half-breed—with no sign of slackness or slumping about him now—picked his way through trees and bushes on foot, following the trail of the marshal's horse.

If matters were as the Kid suspected, the marshal of Kicking Mule had one object in view now—he was going to meet up with Black George, and put him wise to the plunder on the trail. The horseman left little sign behind him; but the faintest sign was enough for the Rio Kid. Softly and swiftly the Kid followed up the trail.

The sound of the horseman ahead died away in the distance. On the wooded hillside it was impossible to gallop; but the marshal was making good speed—too good a speed for a man on foot to keep pace with him. But the Kid, patient as an Indian followed on, with the certainty now in his mind that the trail of the marshal of Kicking Mule would lead him to Black George, the road-agent.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The Secret of the Cave!

"SHUCKS!" murmured the Kid.

He was perplexed.

Screened among rocks covered with ferns and trailing juniper, the Kid lay and watched.

Long minutes had passed—lengthening to an hour, and the Kid was more and more puzzled.

Faithfully as a bloodhound the Kid had followed the trail of the marshal's horse, winding through brush and scrub

up the hillside. He was far behind the marshal—a long way behind, he figured; but unless the Kid missed his guess, he had run the guy down. And yet—the Kid was beginning to feel that he was beaten to it, and he did not know how.

Where he lay, he was watching a deep cleft, a cave, in the hillside, which at that spot rose sharply like a cliff. The trail of the marshal's horse had led him there, and if there was anything in signs, Seth Starbuck had ridden to that cave half an hour, perhaps, ahead of the Kid.

He had ridden up—and away, for a return trail came from the cave, winding away down the hill. The marshal, evidently, had entered that lonely cave high up the hill, and left it again, before the Kid reached the spot.

There was no doubt about that; the sign could not lie, and the Kid's eyes did not deceive him.

So far, it squared with what the Kid had figured. The marshal had ridden to that lonely cave to meet up with Black George, and put him wise to the loot that would be on the Juniper trail that afternoon. Then he had ridden away.

But there was no other trail leading from the cave. If, therefore, the marshal had met up with Black George there, Black George was still in the cave.

That was a cinch.

With the caution of a trailing Indian, deep in cover, the Kid had examined the whole of the ground round the cave, and satisfied himself that no trail led from it but that of the marshal's horse. Neither was any sign to be picked up leading to it, except the marshal's; but if the road-agent was there, his trail might be an old one, obliterated by wind and weather. He might have been days in the cave, if that was his hiding-place. There was nothing to that.

As the Kid figured it, the marshal had talked to Black George in the cave, and ridden away again. Why else had he lied to Mesquite about a pretended business at Post Oak that afternoon, and then ridden from town to that secret and hidden den in the trackless hillside?

He had some business there, that was a cinch, and what else could it be? Satisfied of that, and that the black road-agent was there, the Kid was content to wait for him to appear. He could not be long, if he aimed to hold up the man from the Juniper bank on the stage trail that afternoon.

Yet he did not emerge.

It perplexed the Kid.

An hour had passed, and it was now the time that the bank messenger would be leaving Juniper. It was time for Black George to be on the stage trail waiting for him, if he aimed to hold up the dollars from the bank.

The Kid waited patiently, but with growing doubt and trouble in his mind. He had fixed up that scheme with Colonel Sanderson, and it had looked as if the marshal of Kicking Mule was caught in the trap. If the road-agent was there, the Kid had no doubt of getting him as soon as he showed up, and there would be no doubt left that Starbuck was his secret confederate.

But as the long minutes passed, the Kid began to doubt whether the black road-agent was there at all.

He waited controlling his impatience, till another hour had passed. It passed slowly; when it had elapsed it was too late for a man to ride down from the cave on the hill, and lay for the bank messenger on the stage-trail. It looked as if the Kid had been led, step by step, on a false trail. Yet, if the marshal had not gone to that solitary cave to meet up with Black George, why had he gone there?

It puzzled the Kid sorely.

But he was fed-up with waiting at last. Leaving his cover, gun in hand, eyes on the alert, he approached the opening of the cave.

Still, he more than half-expected a shot to greet him. But no shot came, and he stood in the opening of the cave, unassailed.

"Carry me home to die!" murmured the Kid, in wonder and perplexity.

He stepped into the cave, still on the alert; but he knew now that no one was there. It extended back into the cliff a dozen feet or so, widening. It was strewn with loose rocks and stones. Here and there, in the dimness of the interior, the Kid picked up sign of riding-boots—the marshal's boots, he reckoned. But there was no faintest sign of any other tread.

The Kid breathed hard and deep.

The marshal had met no man at the cave. Black George had not been there!

That was certain now. But why, in the name of the great horned toad, had Starbuck gone there at all? A thought came into the Kid's mind that brought the crimson to his cheeks. Had the marshal known that he was watched and followed—had he been leading his tracker on a wild-goose chase, laughing in his sleeve?

But the Kid shook his head. Starbuck was not the man for that. Had he known that he was trailed, he would have met the trailer with a bullet from behind a tree. That was Starbuck's way, the Kid figured.

But why, then, had the marshal gone there? Not to meet up with Black George, that was certain now. Why?

That there was some secret in the cave the Kid could not doubt. And, with grim determination he searched for it—and found it. In a hollow of the rocky floor, hidden by a great boulder that the Kid rolled aside in his search, lay a large can of black paint! The Kid stared at it blankly. The Kid knew the use of paint for disguising a horse; he was an old hand at that game.

That, then, had been the marshal's game—he kept the paint in that solitary spot, and he had used it to turn his pinto into a black horse. A black horse! The road-agent, as the Kid remembered, rode a horse as black as night. But what was the connection?

The Kid did not like to admit himself beaten; but the puzzle of it was too much for him. He felt that he had his finger fairly on the clue to the mystery, and yet somehow he could not get it. The marshal of Kicking Mule had ridden miles up a steep hillside, to a lonely spot far from the haunts of men, and there he had disguised his horse. Why? What was his game? And what was his connection, if any, with Black George, the road-agent?

The Kid emerged from the cave at last.

"You dog-goned bonehead!" he said to himself savagely. "You pesky, pie-faced son of a gun, that gol-darned guy has got you beaten to a frazzle."

He glanced at the marshal's downward trail, winding away through shadowy trees and brush. But it was useless to follow it now, after the lapse of hours. Whatever the marshal's game had been, it was likely that he was back in Kicking Mule by this time.

Savagely discontented, the Kid hoofed it. But he did not take the direction of Kicking Mule. The Mexican half-breed was not seen in the cow-town again, and it was the Rio Kid who arrived at the Bar-One Ranch—in a worse temper with himself than he had ever been before.

THE END.

(Does the Rio Kid stop looking for Black George? Or does he still keep on the trail of this very elusive road-agent? See next week's topping Western yarn: "TRAPPING AN OUTLAW!"

HERE THEY ARE—OUR WONDERFUL PRIZES!

1st PRIZE
A REX-ACME MOTOR-BIKE

THE ideal machine for the fellow who is just taking up motor-cycling, this VIOC model Rex-Acme is a lightweight motor-bike with a 1½ h.p. two-stroke engine, made by the famous firm of Villiers, makers of the finest engines of this type. It is ever so easy to handle and yet powerful enough to haul its rider over all but impossible roads. It's nippy, too—capable of 45 m.p.h. on the level. For economy of upkeep there is not a motor-bike on the road to beat it. The engine will run for not far short of 200 miles on every gallon of petrol, and a cupful of oil will suffice for the same distance. You could run this splendid machine at a cost of about a 1/- for every hundred miles!

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prizes in our Big New Competition this week! Length, 25½ inches; span, 23 inches. Fitted with 10-inch hand-carved and balanced propeller, patent double-bearing and shock-proof silk with identification discs. Weight and wind resistance are reduced to a minimum in this splendid model, giving the utmost duration of flight.

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ALL PRIZES MUST BE WON

—and you can enter now!

AND 50 MODEL PLANES

(See page 7.)

Warneford "Demon" Tractor Planes supplied by Messrs. Wm. Appleby, of Newcastle-on-Tyne.

THIS is the second week of our grand new competition in which every fellow has an equal opportunity of winning the superb first prize—*which is nothing less than a* "Rex-Acme" Motor-Cycle—ready for the road. If you are a New Reader, you can still join in by obtaining last week's POPULAR (dated January 25th) which contained the opening puzzle-set and Key List of Names.

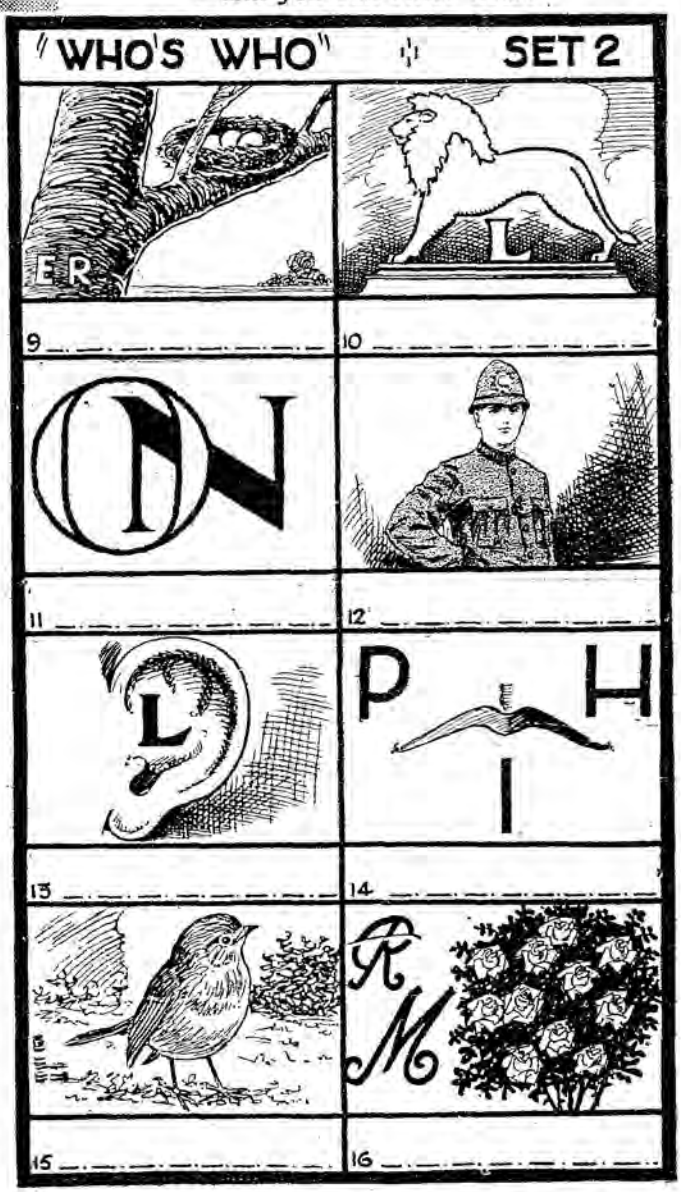
The contest is as simple as A B C. As before, all you have to do is to solve a few easy puzzles denoting boys' Christian names; names which boys use every day in speaking to one another. They are all quite easy, but, to make sure that every boy has the same fair and equal opportunity of winning, we gave last week the Full List from which all the names represented in the competition have been taken. So, you see, you really only have to fit the right name to each picture.

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

RULES (which must be strictly adhered to.)

THE "Rex-Acme" Motor-Cycle will be awarded to the reader whose solution of the four sets of "Who's Who" Puzzles are correct or most nearly correct, the 50 model Aeroplanes following in order of merit.

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

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

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