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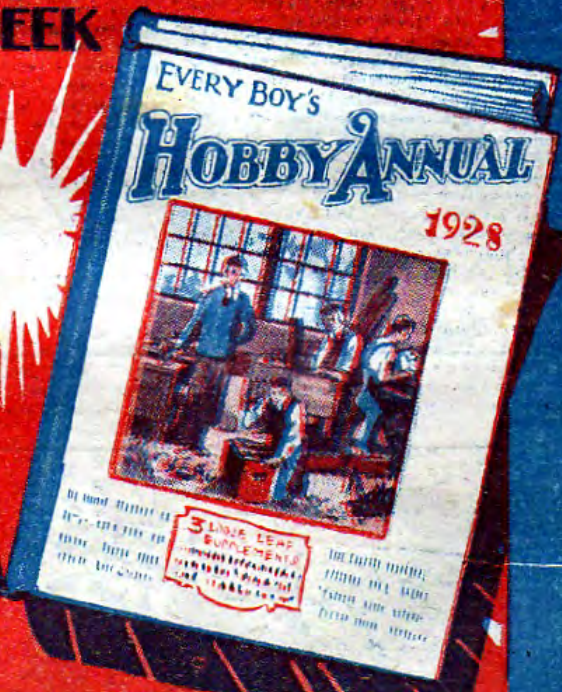

THE GREATEST OFFER OF THE YEAR!

THE KID'S GOOD DEED!

It's just like the Kid to go out of his way to help a fellow-cowpuncher in dire straits. But he doesn't expect to be made a scapegoat for his pains. That's what actually does happen, however!

The RIO KID!

By RALPH REDWAY

A ROUSING LONG COMPLETE TALE OF THE WEST, FEATURING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
A Surprise for the Kid!

THE Rio Kid had ridden south from Montana with the intention of hitting the sheep country. The Kid, like every true cowpuncher, hated sheep, and all they stood for—the barbed-wire fence and the eaten-up range. Sheepmen he detested, on principle. In his own country of Texas he had seen many a wide llano, once a sea of tossing horns, turned into an ocean of woolly backs. But Wyoming was not his own country, and if they raised sheep instead of cows in Wyoming, it was no concern of his, and he had no kick coming on the subject.

The Kid told himself that he was hitting the sheep country because there men did not pack guns, and the two walnut-butted Colts, that had seen service—perhaps too much service—in his hands, would be allowed to rest unused in the leathern holsters.

But perhaps he had another reason for striking southward, that he did not tell himself. It was a far cry from Montana to Texas; but Wyoming lay on the way, and with long hundreds of miles in front of him, he still felt that he was nearer home. The grassy plains of Texas, the murmur of the Rio Frio, drew him. He was an outlaw in his own country, and there men hunted him for his life; and yet the longing for his own country was drawing him homeward. But the Kid hardly realised that. He was going to see the sheep country, anyhow.

It was characteristic of the Kid that his way lay by the Squaw River and the Squaw Mountains, where no railroad had penetrated, and the telephone wires stretched across country uninhabited for many a long mile. Railroads and paved towns he disliked; but he was likely to find neither in the wild region of the Squaw River And there was cow country by the headwaters of the Squaw—not the cow country he knew, grassy plains extending farther than the eye could reach, dappled with dark chaparral; but the cow country of the uplands, little fertile valleys and mountain pastures. And local gossip by road and trail had told him of trouble between the cowmen of Squaw Mountain and the sheepmen of Pawnee Ford.

This week:

"THE SCAPEGOAT!"

Knowing nothing of the rights and wrongs of the trouble, the Kid's heartfelt sympathies went out instinctively to the cowmen. But he had no hunch to mix himself up in the trouble. He had come to the sheep country to dodge trouble.

Pawnee Ford, the sheep town, was the Kid's destination now, as he rode the black-muzzled mustang by a dusty trail in the sunset. There were several roads to Pawnee Ford; and the Kid chose a hoof-marked trail in preference. He could see the town in the distance, backed by the mighty mass of Squaw Mountain—a mountain that looked steep, inaccessible, in the distance, but the sides of which were split into canyons, gulches, and deep valleys where there was rich pasture. The Kid was not three miles from his destination, when he made the sudden discovery that sheep country might be as perilous for unwary travellers as cow country. Something that fanned his sunburnt cheek flew from a thicket of aspens by the side of the trail, and the report of the firearm followed.

"Shucks!" ejaculated the Kid in surprise.

It was poor shooting, for he knew by the report that the marksman was not more than thirty yards distant. But the Kid did not give him a chance for doing better with a second shot. The report had not died away when the Kid was off his mustang, and in cover of a knoll on the other side of the trail. There, through the opening of a bunch of sassafras, he watched the trail, in rather amused surprise.

The man who had taken a pot-shot at him was hidden in the aspens. He had used a .45 Colt, as the Kid knew by the report. That was a cowman's weapon—it was the gun to which the Kid himself was accustomed. The Kid, as he bent in cover, cursed the sheep country and his own folly. They had told him that men did not pack guns in the sheep country; and just now the Kid was not packing a gun. The two walnut-butted, notched guns, carried in the low-slung holsters, that proclaimed the gunman, had been left in safe keeping; and the Kid's only weapon was the little derringer he carried in the pocket of his chaps.

The Kid was not punching cows now, and he was in a sheep country; but he rode as a cowpuncher, in high-heeled boots, chaps, silken neckscarf, and Stetson hat. Cowmen, he had been told, were unpopular round about Pawnee Ford, and he wondered whether some ireful sheepman in the aspens had taken a pot-shot at him simply because he obviously was a cowpuncher. If it was just a hold-up, the hold-up pilgrim was drastic in his methods, firing on a man from cover without giving him a chance to put up his hands.

The Kid's face set grimly as he fingered the little derringer in the pocket of his chaps. It was a weapon he despised; but the Kid had not been able to reconcile himself to riding entirely weaponless, even in sheep country, and he was glad of it now. At a short range, the little derringer was as deadly in his hands as a .45.

The grey mustang with the black muzzle lay down behind the knoll, at a sign from the Kid. The unknown marksman was not likely to shoot his horse, but the Kid was taking no risks of that. He waited for the man to show himself—as he had to do if he wanted to push the matter farther. The open, hoof-trampled trail lay between the Kid and the thicket of aspens, and the man had to cross it to get a bead on him again. And when it came to that the Kid had no doubt how the affair would turn out. He had left the walnut-butted guns behind him, but not his skill in the use of a gun.

There was a trembling in the aspens, and the Kid's eye glinted as he noted it. A Stetson hat came into view, and under it a dark, almost haggard face,

with a pair of keen, glinting eyes that looked across the trail.

The Kid could have shot the man down with ease; but he did not raise his weapon yet. The man in the Stetson stared across the trail, and up and down, evidently put to a loss by the Kid's sudden vanishing into cover. The Kid grinned as he watched him.

Slowly, uneasily, the man pushed out of the aspens into the trail. There was a revolver, still smoking, in his hand, and a look of savage intensity on his face.

It was a clean-cut, rather handsome face; but the expression on it at that moment was savage and malignant. There was a streak of crimson on one of the cheeks, as if a bullet had grazed there. But what struck the Kid at the first glance was that the man plainly was a cowman—boots and spurs and Stetson hat and baggy chaperejos showed that. It was a cowman who had fired that shot from cover, and the Kid did not like the idea at all. He would much rather have discovered that the pot-shot came from some disgruntled sheepman.

The cowman stepped out into the open trail, and with a crouching, creeping gait, crossed it, evidently to seek the vanished Kid in his cover. The Kid allowed him to come within a dozen paces, and then he was on his feet in a flash, and the little derringer was at a level.

"Put 'em up!" said the Kid pleasantly.

There was a hoarse ejaculation from the cowman; and in spite of the warning and the levelled derringer, he flung up his gun to fire.

Crack!

The gun spun from the cowman's hand, and there was a spurt of blood with it. He gave a fierce yell and staggered back, the gun falling at his feet. The Rio Kid was on him the next second, and the cowman went with a crash into the grass, and the Kid's knee was planted on his chest, and the Kid grabbed up the fallen gun. The muzzle of the hold-up man's own gun looked down into his distorted, infuriated face, and over it grinned the handsome face of the Kid.

"How about it, feller?" drawled the Kid.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Ride, Cowboy!

"YOU'VE got me!"

The words came in a husky gasp.

"I sure have!" grinned the Kid. "Any reason to give why I shouldn't hand out your ticket for soup, you dog-goned coyote?"

The cowman's teeth set, and his eyes flashed defiance at the handsome face bending over him.

"Shoot, and be durned to you!" he said. "You've got me; and I may as well go out now as hang at Pawnee Ford! Shoot!"

"Search me!" said the Kid.

He removed his knee from the man's chest, and rose, allowing the other to rise, but keeping him covered with the six-gun.

They want you in Pawnee Ford?" he asked.

"Yep."

"You're a cowman, I reckon?"

"Yep."

"Same here," said the Kid cheerily. "And what do you mean by loosing off a bullet at another cowman without warning, durn your hide?"

"I wanted your horse."

"I guess that wasn't the way to ask for the loan of a hoss," said the Rio Kid chidingly. "I guess I've a hunch for refusing requests made in that-away. What do they want you for in Pawnee Ford?"

The cowman shrugged his shoulders.

"The sheepmen are up agin us cowmen in this section," he answered. "I reckon you're a stranger hyer if you don't know."

"Sure," assented the Kid. "I'm from Texas."

The man's look of savage, sullen defiance changed, and he eyed the Kid searchingly.

"You're a cowman," he said. "I was desperate, or I wouldn't have pulled on you for your horse. It's a necktie party if they get me in Pawnee Ford. I guess I'm expecting to hear their horses at any minute—I dodged them in the valley, but they're after me. You won't hand over a cowpuncher to be strung up by sheepmen."

"Not on your life!" said the Rio Kid promptly.

He paused.

A puncher in flight from sheepmen, dismounted and desperate, appealed to all the Kid's sympathy, and he could see that the tale was true; it was plain that the man was a hunted and desperate fugitive. The Kid was the man to help him escape, at any risk, without asking questions, willing to take it for granted that the sheepmen were the aggressors, or, at least, had deserved anything that had come to them. But he did not like that shooting from cover. The Kid had been a fugitive himself more than once, and perhaps was too willing to make allowances for lawless methods in such a plight; but shooting an unwary man down for his horse was "yellow"—it was the kind of thing that got the Kid's goat. The fellow was a cowman and up against the sheepmen, and so far, so good; but there was a yellow streak in him to make him act as he had done.

And so the Kid paused and thought it out.

From somewhere in the distance came the echoing of horses' hoofs. The cowman gave a sudden, convulsive start.

"They're coming!" he said hoarsely.

That settled it, for the Kid.

"You sure played it low-down, feller, when you pulled trigger on a galoot without warning," he said. "We don't stand for that in Texas. But I ain't handing over any cowpuncher to sheepmen to be strung up. I'm lending you my horse."

The cowman's eyes blazed.

"You're a white man," he panted. "I tell you I'm a dead man if I don't get a cayuse to carry me to Squaw Mountain. You come up there any day and you'll find your horse safe and sound—ask any galoot in Squaw Mountain for Jud Starbuck."

The Kid smiled whimsically. He had been three or four days in the sheep country, and already he was mixed up in the range war. He had parted with the walnut-butted guns too soon! But he nodded.

"I guess I'll remember! Take care of that cayuse—he will carry you as far and as fast as you want, so long as you don't use whip or spur; if you do, look out for his teeth; he's some fighter. Here's your gun, and I guess you'd better beat it lively."

Starbuck stood quite still for a moment, as if unable to believe in his good luck. But the Kid pushed him impatiently towards the horse.

"Ride, cowboy, ride!" he exclaimed.

Starbuck threw himself into the saddle and grasped the reins. The grey mustang did not stir. His dark eyes turned in surprised inquiry upon his master. But a pat and a word from the Kid made him understand, and with a bound he was gone with his rider. They plunged headlong through the aspen thicket, and vanished from sight; but for several minutes the shaking of the aspens told the way they were going. Then for a moment the Kid caught a glimpse of a Stetson hat as the rider vanished into a deep draw. Hoofbeats echoed back for a few moments, and then all was silent. The Squaw Mountain cowman was gone—mounted upon a horse that was likely to show his heels to any cayuse in Wyoming.

The Kid stood for some minutes in thought.

He was quite aware that he had acted unwisely. He had trusted the grey mustang—his constant and faithful comrade—into the hands of a stranger who, as he knew, had a yellow streak in him; he had helped a fugitive to escape pursuit, without knowing why he was pursued. But he did not regret what he had done. There was a range war between cowman and sheepman, and the Kid's Texan heart went out to the cowmen in the struggle—all the more because he knew that in that section they were outnumbered and likely to come off worse in the struggle. What had Jud Starbuck done to bring the Pawnee Ford citizens on his trail Shot up a sheepman, perhaps; and if it was a fair break what was the matter with shooting up a sheepman? The Kid made a wry face as he remembered that treacherous shot from the aspens. A man with a yellow streak in him might not have given the other man a fair break—certainly he had not given the Kid a fair break. The Kid whistled softly.

"You're a durn fool, Kid," he said. "You're some gink, you are, sure. You hit the sheep country to dodge trouble, and you horn into the first trouble on the trail. You're plumb loco, Kid—that's what's the matter with you. But"—he grinned—"the sheepmen ain't lynching a cowman so long as I can take a hand in the game, they sure are not."

The Kid pursued his way—on foot!

Going afoot was detestable to him, as to all cowpunchers, and the cowman's high-heeled boots were made for riding, not walking. But the Kid had three miles to walk, and he swung on his way with jingling spurs. He was going to bed down that night at Pawnee Ford, and on the morrow he would have to hire a cayuse to ride up into Squaw Mountain and reclaim the lent mustang. And in Pawnee Ford it would be wise not to say a word about what had happened on the trail. If the sheepmen had wanted to lynch Starbuck, they were likely to be equally keen on lynching a puncher who had helped the man to escape them. The Kid was rather keen to reach Pawnee Ford and to learn what all the trouble was about, anyhow.

The hoofbeats he had heard in the distance, while talking to Starbuck, had died out; the horsemen were not coming down the trail. But from several directions the Kid could hear distant echoes of galloping, and once he heard faintly from afar the crack of a rifle. More than one party was out, he figured, in search of the cowman from Squaw Mountain. The Kid began to wonder whether the man would get clear after all, well-mounted as he now was. He had to make a wide circle to get to Squaw Mountain and the cover of the hilly canyons and draws there. The Kid wished him luck, and, fed-up as he was with walking, he did not regret that he had lent the cowman his horse. But the

Rio Kid was not destined to finish his journey to Pawnee Ford on foot. Suddenly from a fold of the plain a bunch of horsemen dashed out into the trail, and at sight of the Kid three or four guns were levelled.

"We've got him, sheriff!"

"We sure have!" A bronzed man, with the silver star of office dangling over his grey shirt, pushed his horse closer to the Kid. "Put up your hands, puncher, we've got you sure!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Scapegoat!

THE Kid reached his hands above his head, with a rather amused smile on his tanned face.

Sheriffs, in Texas, the Kid had disliked to meet; but sheriffs in Wyoming knew not the Rio Kid, or his name and fame along the Rio Grande. This was not a hold-up; this was the sheriff of Pawnee Ford and his posse; and the Kid had nothing to fear—at least, so he figured. Four guns were lifted to shoot him down if he touched a weapon, and if the Kid had wanted to make a fight of it, there was only one bullet in the little derringer in the pocket of his chaps. But the Kid was not looking for trouble with Wyoming sheriffs.

He held up his hands with the meekness of a lamb, and smiled at the hard-faced horsemen circling round him on panting steeds. Every face held a threat; but threats did not daunt the Rio Kid.

"This hyer is a little surprise party, I reckon," he remarked pleasantly. "Anything I can do for you, gentlemen?"

"You can keep your paws pointing to the sky, if you don't want your cabeza blown into little pieces," grunted one of the riders.

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

"Rope his hands, Peterson," said the sheriff.

The Kid's eyes glinted.

"I'll tell a man!" he said. "Ain't you going to mention what you want? I guess I ain't aware of having trodden on any of your toes since I hit this country, sheriff."

The bronzed man watched his face keenly.

"You're the man we want," he said. "You fit the description! I guess we're going to show your Squaw Mountain crowd that you can't shoot down citizens of Pawnee Ford."

"Search me!" ejaculated the Kid. "Is it any good telling you that I've never seen Squaw Mountain till this afternoon, and I've never been nearer than I am this minute?"

"No good at all," answered the sheriff. "You can tell that tale when you come to trial for the murder of Billy Ward."

"I sure neve heard the name before, sheriff."

"Can it," interrupted one of the riders. "What's the good of that, puncher? You're the man, and we've got you!"

A looped rope was thrown round the Kid's elevated wrists. For a second his eyes blazed, and he was tempted to draw the derringer and make a fight of it. It was not because all the chances were against him that the Rio Kid gave up that idea. These men were making a mistake—they were hunting for a cowpuncher, whom evidently they did not know by sight, and they had mistaken the Kid for their quarry. It was a mistake that could be set right.

The next minute it was too late. The rope was drawn to a knot, and the Kid's hands were bound, and he was a powerless prisoner. The horsemen sheathed their guns, but kept round the Kid, the man Peterson holding the end of the rope that was fastened to his wrists.

"Take him on your horse, Peterson," said the sheriff. "We want to get him gaoled before dark."

"Ain't you going to listen to a galoot?" complained the Kid. "I keep on telling you I ain't the man you want. Don't you know the galoot you're after?"

"We're after the Squaw Mountain cowman who shot up Billy Ward," answered the sheriff, "and I kinder reckon we've got him."

"Oh sho!" ejaculated the Kid. It came into his mind like a blaze, that the sheriff's posse was in pursuit of Jud Starbuck. That was what the cowman had done—the Kid knew now. He had shot a Pawnee Ford sheepman. The Kid's face grew serious.

"But sure you've got witnesses who know the firebug by sight, if you're after him," he urged.

"We know it was a puncher," said the sheriff. "Five or six can swear to that. We know his horse was shot at the ford, and he got away on foot. When we find a cowpuncher on foot, I guess we don't want to know any more. If you ain't the man, where's your cayuse?"

The Kid was silent.

THE PRISONER! An hour later the door of the cell opened, and the sheriff stood in the doorway. He had a gun in his hand, while the gaoler brought in food and drink for the Kid. (*See Chapter* 4.)

He had lent his cayuse to the man the sheriff was after; but he was not saying so. But a cowpuncher proceeding on foot was uncommon enough to justify suspicion, at least, that he was the fugitive puncher whose horse had been shot. The sheriff glanced down at the Kid's handsome boots.

"You ain't walked fur in them boots," he grinned. "They ain't got much of the dust of the trail on them. I reckon you was mounted not long back, puncher. Where's your hoss, if you ain't the man we want?"

"I guess I traded him to a galoot way back on the trail," said the Kid. Starbuck was far enough from pursuit now, he reckoned. "A galoot with a gun in his grip asked for him, sheriff, and I was too plumb polite to refuse."

"Can it!" said Peterson.

The sheriff eyed the Kid again.

"I guess it might be true—if the man happened on him," he said. "I guess he wouldn't be pertickler how he got a hoss. If we ain't got the right man yet, I guess we'll get him; and jest now, stranger, you're going into the calaboose at Pawnee Ford to make sure. You'll have a fair trial, and if you ain't the man, you're all right."

"I ain't the man, sure!" said the Kid cheerily. "But I'll be glad of a lift to town. I never had any hunch for walking. I guess I'll take that lift on your cayuse with pleasure, Mr. Peterson."

Peterson grunted.

"Git on!"

"Any cuss in this bunch lending me a hand?" asked the cheery Kid. "I sure ain't a frog for hopping!"

One of the horsemen swung the bound puncher to the back of Peterson's horse, behind the rider.

"Beat it," said the sheriff.

The posse turned back on the trail towards the town. The sheriff's eyes lingered on the Kid doubtingly, though the other members of the party seemed to have no doubt that they had the man they wanted. The Kid caught his glance and smiled.

"You've sure roped in the wrong bronc, feller," he said. "If I was the man that shot up one of your citizens, do you reckon I should be walking into town, like you found me?"

The sheriff nodded.

"You sure was heading for town when we got you," he said. "I guess I was thinking of that."

"Them Squaw Mountain punchers have sure got gall enough for anything," grunted Peterson. "I reckon he was looking for a chance to steal another horse."

"Yep; that would be it!" agreed the sheriff.

"Not on your life," said the Kid. "I keep on telling you that I'm a stranger here, and not the firebug you want!"

"You say you traded off your hoss to a galoot with a gat in his grip?" the sheriff asked.

"C'rect."

"If that's the straight goods, that galoot is the man we want. Where did it happen, and what way did he take? Take us to the place and put us on his trail."

The Kid did not answer.

"Play up to that, you durned liar!" growled Peterson. "If you've handed out the straight stuff, make it good!"

It was a fair enough offer; but the Kid had not helped the cowman to escape only to put his enemies on his track. He made no answer, though he knew that silence meant condemnation.

"Is it a cinch?" demanded the sheriff.

"Nix. I guess I don't want to lose this lift into town," said the Kid pleasantly. "I'm sure plumb anxious to get a look at a sheep town when it's got its little back up. I never reckoned that sheepmen had anything like a big kick in them."

There was a growl of anger from the party—all of them sheepmen. The sheriff clicked his teeth hard.

"That cinches it—you're the man we want, and a pesky liar, too! Shut up your bean box."

And the party rode into Pawnee Ford with their prisoner, and the Kid, cheery and cool as he still looked, realised very clearly that he was in as tight a corner as he ever had been, even when he had been hunted for his life on the banks of the Rio Grande.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Lynch Law!

"LYNCH him!"

"String him up!"

"Oh shucks!" murmured the Rio Kid, with a grin. "They're sure a bunch of ferocious sheepmen in this section."

Pawnee Ford was in an uproar. The town was crowded with men on foot and men on horseback, all wildly excited, and there was a buzz of fierce voices—which gathered to a roar when the sheriff's posse was seen riding in with a prisoner—and that prisoner a puncher. Wild and fierce faces surrounded the party as they pushed their horses slowly through the crowded street towards the timber gaol. Fists were shaken at the Kid on all sides; fierce eyes glared threats at him. Thicker and thicker grew the crowd, till the party were proceeding at a slow walk.

"Lynch him!"

A hundred voices roared out.

Apparently, the man who had been "shot up" by an unknown puncher was popular at Pawnee Ford. The Kid hated the thought that a cowman had shot up a sheepman without giving him an even break; but the thought was forced into his mind. It was for murder, and not for a fatal fight, that the unknown puncher was wanted at Pawnee Ford; the Kid began to understand that.

Yet, as the exact identity of the culprit was evidently unknown, it was likely that a mistake had been made. The shooting-up could only have been seen from a distance. Billy Ward, the sheepman, had fallen, but it was possible that Starbuck had only beaten him to it; the Kid fervently hoped so. Only, as he remembered that pot-shot from the aspens, he was troubled. He did not like to think that he had saved a man who had shot down even a sheepman without giving him a chance. One cowman was bound to stand by another, especially in a sheep country where the cowmen were in a minority; but there was a limit.

A burly man with a gun in his hand shoved forward, and stood in front of the horsemen, his face dark and fierce.

"Hand him over, sheriff!"

"Step it lively, Jim Ward," said the sheriff. "We're for the calaboose."

"Hand him over!"

"Lynch him!"

"This here puncher allows he ain't the right man," said the sheriff. "We got to give him a chance to prove it."

"What chance did he give my brother, Billy, when he shot him? Billy never had a gun on him!"

The Kid flinched. It was as he had feared; Jud Starbuck had shot down a man without giving him a chance. The Kid repented him of the hasty sympathy that had induced him to help a red-handed gunman to escape what was coming to him. It was a murderer who was riding the black-muzzled mustang into the wild recesses of Squaw Mountain; safe now from pursuit, while the Kid stood the racket for him. The mob roared and swayed, and surged round the halted horsemen.

"Hand him over, sheriff! We're going to string him up right now!" roared Ward.

"I guess not!" said the sheriff. "I guess he's my prisoner. Stand aside!"

"Have him off'n that hoss, boys!" shouted Ward.

"Gents," said the Rio Kid coolly, "give your sheriff a chance. I ain't the man that did the shooting. I ain't packed a gun for days and days. I never reckoned I should want a gun in the sheep country. You don't want to lynch the wrong galoot, gents. When you figure it out afterwards that you've made a mistake, what about me?"

"I guess you're the man," snarled Ward, "and you're a puncher, anyhow, and you Squaw Mountain galoots are too free with your shooting-irons!"

"But I ain't a Squaw Mountain galoot," protested the Kid. "I never set foot on Squaw Mountain. I'm from Texas."

Ward eyed him savagely.

"If you're from Texas, you're another of the gunmen that come to hide at Squaw Mountain because the law's after you," he said. "There's too many of them in this section now!"

"Lynch him!"

"He's the man, right enough," said Ward. "I tell you, we're going to string him up, sheriff!"

"I guess not," said the sheriff. "Ride on, men—stand out of the way, Ward, and if you lift that gat, look out for mine!"

The sheriff had a gun in his hand now. Jim Ward hesitated a moment, but he stepped aside.

"Pack him in the gaol, if you like!" he snarled. "I guess we'll have him out before the sun rises again!"

The posse pushed on their way to the timber building, the crowd roaring and swaying round. Two or three shots were fired, but into the air. The mob, so far at least, were not prepared for a desperate affray with the sheriff and his men. The sheriff gasped with relief when the Kid was taken from Peterson's horse and led into the gaol.

"This town is sure some excited," said the Kid, as he was led into a room with iron-barred windows. "Looks like there'll be a necktie party in Pawnee Ford to-night, feller I sure don't cotton to the idea."

"I reckon it's likely enough," growled Peterson, "and, I guess, there ain't many will try to stop them, arter the way you shot up Billy Ward, you durned fire-bug!"

"And I never saw the galoot, and never heard tell of him till an hour ago!" sighed the Kid.

"Oh, can it!"

The sheriff closed the door of the gaol against the roaring mob. Outside, they roared and surged, yelling threats—threats which, the Kid knew very well, would not take long to be translated into action. He had seen lynch mobs before, and he knew how likely they were to wait for proofs; indeed, how completely indifferent they were to proofs. What they wanted was a victim; blood called for blood, and the fact that the prisoner was a cowman was enough for them. The long hostility between cowmen and sheepmen on the Squaw River had come to a head with the killing of a sheepman. Any Squaw Mountain puncher who had ridden into town that day would have been in danger of lynching. And the fact that the sheriff had arrested this young puncher on suspicion, was proof enough for the mob, so far as they wanted any proof.

The Kid's hands were unbound when he was safe in the barred room, and the sheriff "went through" him with care. He found the little derringer, and there was a growl from his men as it was seen.

"He sure said he never packed a gun!" growled Peterson.

"I don't call that a gun," said the Kid lightly. "Was the galoot who was shot up, pilled by a derringer, say?"

"He was shot up with a Colt," said the sheriff.

The Kid knew that. He had come near being shot up by the same Colt on the trail to Pawnee Ford.

"Well, if you find a Colt about me, I'll eat it, gents, and swallow that derringer after it," offered the Kid.

They found no Colt about the Kid, but they found the wad of bills in his belt. There was a buzz as the sheriff counted the roll, and announced that they amounted to six thousand dollars. Blacker suspicion was in every face round the Kid now.

"You a puncher, and riding with six

(*Continued on page 28.*)

THE RIO KID!

(Continued from page 6.)

thousand dollars in your belt!" said the sheriff grimly. "You sure got high pay on your last punching job. I'll tell the world!"

The Kid grinned.

"I never got that wad punching cows, sheriff," he answered.

"You got it in a hold-up, I reckon!"

"Guess again! I got it fossicking down in Arizona," the Kid explained. "I sure struck luck in the gold country."

"If you can prove it up, all O.K. for you," grunted the sheriff. "I reckon if you made that roll in the gold country, you made it by sticking up the man who owned it, feller!"

The Kid's eyes flashed.

"You can sure talk as you durned like, when you're five to one with guns in your hands!" he said. "I guess I'd make you talk turkey if I had a gat in my grip. Anyhow, I never made it raising sheep—I'd sure punch cows on grub stakes before I'd make a fortune in sheep!"

"You sure have got sass," said the sheriff, while the sheepmen round him growled at the cowman's defiance. "You'll need it all to see you through, before Pawnee Ford is done with you!"

And the door was shut and locked on the Kid, and he was left alone.

"You're sure for it, Kid!" he said, communing with himself. "I guess you deserve it for coming into a sheep country—sheep is pizen, and sheep-men is dog-goned geeks. I'd sure give all the dollars I've got cached away, to be riding up the Rio Frio again, even with Sheriff Watson on my trail." The Kid sighed as he thought of the Texas plains, and the old Double-Bar ranch, came into his mind. He had pulled out of Texas to find peace, and to get on the right side of the law, and this was where the trail had led him. Stronger than ever in the Kid's heart grew the longing for his own country—which he was never likely to see again. He knew what that savage roar round the gaol meant; he had heard it when he was a prisoner in the calaboose at Frio, but this time there was no Double-Bar bunch to ride to the rescue. That night there would be a lynching in Pawnee Ford—with the Kid playing the leading part. And the sheriff could not save him for trial, even if he would. It was too late now to wish that he had made a fight for it on the trail, but the Kid wished it from the bottom of his heart.

An hour later the door of the cell opened, and the sheriff stood in the doorway. He had a gun in his hand, while the gaoler brought in food and drink for the prisoner. There was a troubled look on the sheriff's face. He, like the Kid, knew what the menacing roar of the mob meant. The Kid glanced past him, and saw two or three armed men in the outer room. He read aright the expression on the sheriff's tanned face.

"They're coming for me, feller?" he asked.

"I reckon so!" answered the sheriff reluctantly. "I'll save you for trial if I can. But——"

"But you don't figure on getting home with it?"

The sheriff shook his head.

"Nope! You'd better make up your mind to it, puncher; you're a gone coon. Before midnight there'll be five hundred men howling for you—they're riding in from all parts."

"It sure is going to be some circus!" said the Kid easily. "They make a big fuss of strangers in this town, sheriff. I guess I never savvied that sheepmen had all that gall. You're going to let them horn in and take your prisoner, feller?"

"I'm going to stop them all I can," said the sheriff, shrugging his shoulders. "But don't bank on it. They want the man who shot up Billy Ward, and I guess that all the sheriffs in Wyoming couldn't stop them when they get their mad up. You asked for it, puncher, and you're sure going to get it!"

The door closed on the Kid again.

"Yep!" mused the Kid, "I sure asked for it when I lent that galoot Starbuck my hoss—I sure did! I guess them galoots don't care a continental red cent whether they get the right man or not, so long as they string up a puncher to a cottonwood branch. Kid, they've stacked the cards agin you, and you want all your luck to get out of this with your neck!"

Crash!

A thundering blow shook the door of the timber gaol. A deafening roar followed the crash. The lynch mob was at hand!

THE END.

(You'll be missing a treat if you miss next week's Roaring Tale of the Rio Kid, entitled: "The Kid's Close Call!")

TROUBLE ON TRAMP!

(Continued from page 11.)

startling scene in utter bewilderment.

Tom Merry jumped up, panting.

"Wot the thunder——" gasped Mr. Greggs.

"We've got them, sir," said Tom. "You'll find your safe busted, but the stuff's all here—in that sack! And we've got both the burglars."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, my eye!" said Mr. Greggs. He picked up the sack in a dazed way. "There was three hundred pounds in that there safe——"

"Wathah lucky for you we camped outside your gates, sir!" chuckled Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, my eyes!" said Mr. Greggs. "I—I—I—ahem!—I—I—I'm sorry! I'm real sorry, and—and—and——"

"Pway don't mench!" said Arthur Augustus. "If you will get these wascals locked up somewhah, we will wetire fwom your gwounds, sir. We weally have no desiah to twespass."

And Mr. Greggs actually blushed, probably for the first time in his life.

. . . . . .

Mr. Parkinson and Pimples spent the remainder of the night in a room at the farm, with Towser watching them. In the morning they were driven off to the police station. And Mr. Greggs, greatly penitent, fairly begged Tom Merry & Co. to camp on his land as long as they liked, and they graciously consented to do so. And Mr. Greggs did not utter a word of grousing when the extent of Solomon's thievings in his kitchen garden was discovered. Solomon had not been wasting time while Tom Merry & Co. were busy with the burglars. He was a wise donkey, and always made the most of his opportunities. What Mr. Greggs would have said in other circumstances was unimaginable. But in his gratitude to the schoolboy adventurers he said nothing. And he was hospitality itself while Tom Merry & Co. remained in camp, though perhaps he was not inconsolable when he bade good-bye at last to the seven schoolboys and Solomon!

THE END.

(There will be another topping long complete story of the St. Jim's chums in next Tuesday's issue. Look out for "Just Like Cardew!")

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The BUNTER BROTHERS

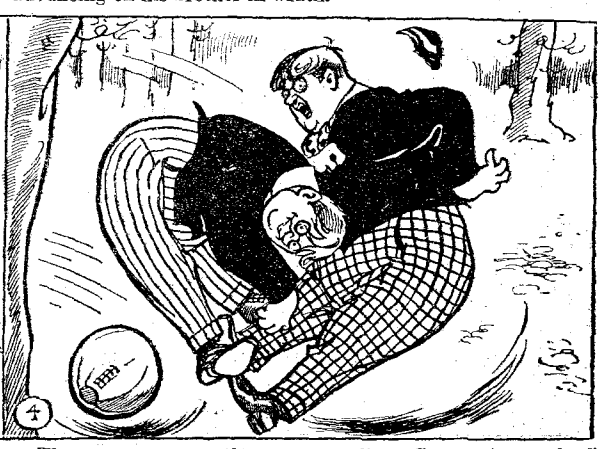
— Merry Mirthmakers. —

ON THE "BAWL"!

Sammy Bunter had just received a new football, and he was about to try it out, when his brother, Billy, came bouncing up. "Hi! Give me that ball, Sammy!" he bawled. "You can't kick a footer for nuts. You watch me play!"

But Sammy did not intend to give up his new footer to Billy. He backed away against a tree, and held the ball behind him, out of his major's grasping grasp. "You go and eat coke, Billy!" he cried. "It's mine!" "Rats!" snorted Billy, advancing on his brother in wrath.

"All right!" snapped Billy. "Take that!" And he landed out a podgy fist, and sent Sammy staggering back against the tree. Biff! Notice the ball between Sammy and the trunk. Now what's going to happen?



The next moment, there was a yell as Sammy bounced off that footer right into Billy's manly lower chest with a crash. "Oooooch!" gasped Billy, and he lost his foothold. "Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Sammy. "Now it's your turn to bawl!"

Having bounced off the tree on to Billy, Sammy bounced back again, and so righted himself. But Billy subsided like a pricked balloon on the ground. "Oh, my stars!" he gasped. "I'm winded!" "You can whistle for the ball, now," said Sammy, breezily.

And whilst Billy was still trying to get his breath back, Sammy captured his footer and dribbled it off in triumph. "I reckon I got the best of old Billy that time!" he warbled, as he bounced away after that bouncing ball through the trees.

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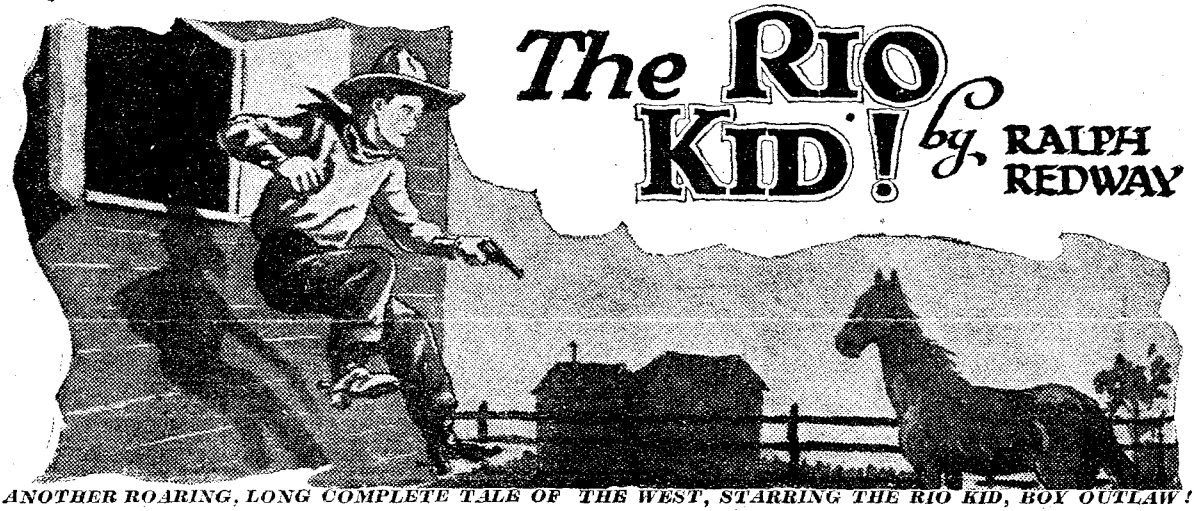
IN A TIGHT CORNER!

With bars and locks bolted against him, and a lynch mob howling outside his prison, it looks as though the Rio Kid has ridden his last trail. But this amazing boy outlaw has been in tighter corners than this AND managed to dodge out of them!



The RIO KID! by RALPH REDWAY

ANOTHER ROARING, LONG COMPLETE TALE OF THE WEST, STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

His Last Chance!

"LYNCH him!"

"Sho!" murmured the Rio Kid.

"Have him out!"

"Lynch him!"

It was a deafening roar round the timber calaboose in the town of Pawnee Ford.

Night had fallen—a soft, starry night. A myriad stars glimmered and twinkled over the Squaw Mountain and the Squaw River of Wyoming.

For hours the mob had growled and shouted round the gaol, and at nightfall the growl became a deep, threatening roar, mingled with the cracking of revolvers fired in the air or at the timber walls of the calaboose. Round the little building the sheepmen of Pawnee Ford and the surrounding country were crowding, howling for the life of the cowpuncher within. The Rio Kid, in a little room ten by eight, between a barred window and a locked door, listened to the voice of the mob.

The Kid was cool as ice, but his handsome, sunburnt face was serious. He had heard the roar of a lynch mob before, but never had he been in so tight a corner as now.

"It's a cinch this time, Kid!" he told himself. "I guess it's you for the long trail, sure!"

He shrugged his shoulders. The Rio Kid had escaped the sheriffs of Texas, and many a peril by sierra and llano, to find his fate at last in a little sheep town in the sheep country. That was the unkindest cut of all; the Kid felt that was an unnecessary gibe of Fate. Sheepmen he disliked and despised; sheep towns he detested. And it was a mob of sheepmen who were going to lynch him to the branch of a cottonwood in the street of that little sheep town in the back country of Wyoming. Had they been a mob of punchers, the Kid would not have hated it so much. But to fall at the hands of sheepmen got the Kid's goat.

"Lynch him!"

The roar was fiercer and deeper; there were hammering blows on the door of the calaboose.

In the outer room—there were only two rooms in the little building—were the sheriff of Pawnee Ford and several

This Week:

The Kid's Close Call!

of his men. It was the duty of the sheriff, and of his men, to keep off the lynchers and to save their prisoner for trial. That was a duty they were not likely to perform. Men had ridden into Pawnee Ford from all parts during the afternoon, and there was a mob of hundreds surging round the gaol now. If the sheriff and his two or three men resisted, their resistance was certain to be swept away.

"If a galoot had a gat in his grip!" sighed the Rio Kid.

Crash! Crash!

The stout timber door shook and creaked under the hammering blows from without which made the whole building shake.

"Open this here door, sheriff!" It was the voice of Jim Ward, the leader of the lynch mob. "Open this here door before we make splinters of it!"

The Kid heard the sheriff's voice reply.

"You ain't coming in, Ward! Look out for my gun if you bu'st in that door!"

The sheriff's threat was an empty one, and the Kid knew it, and the lynchers knew it. The sheriff would not shoot, not that shooting would have stopped that wild mob.

The door of the gaol shook and groaned again under crashing blows.

A key turned, and the door of the Kid's cell was opened. In the outer room a lamp burned, shedding a dim light; against the light the burly figure of the sheriff of Pawnee Ford loomed up, staring into the Kid's room. The Kid stood in the darkness, save for a faint glimmer of the stars at the barred window.

"They're coming, hombre," said the sheriff. "I reckon you gotta make up your mind to it. I can't stand off that crowd."

"You sure can't, feller!" assented the Kid. "And you sure ain't got the sand to try, neither!"

The sheriff scowled. It was his duty to defend the calaboose against a lynch mob at the cost of his life, as he well knew. But to go down under the bullets and trampling feet of the crowd was not to the taste of the sheriff of Pawnee Ford. Neither was he disposed to pull trigger on his fellow-citizens, men he knew and lived with, for the sake of an unknown cowpuncher. Cowpunchers were not popular in the sheep town, anyway, and this particular cowpuncher was accused of having shot up a sheepman. The sheriff was going to let the mob work their will unresisted, but he had a sense of shame in doing so and he was glad of an excuse to be angry.

"That sort of talk won't do you no good, puncher!" he snapped. "You sure asked for it when you came to Pawnee Ford. I reckon it was you who shot up Billy Ward for sure, and they want you, and they're going to have you!"

"I guess I never shot up a sheepman in my life, feller, though I sure would like to shoot up a few now!" said the Kid. "You going to open the door to them jaspers?"

"Sure! They'll bu'st it in otherwise."

"You're sure some sheriff, ain't you?" said the Kid admiringly. "Good enough for a sheep town, I allow."

"That's enough of chewing the rag!" snarled the sheriff. "You've got a couple of minutes, puncher; I guess you won't have ten seconds arter that crowd git in hyer. Make the most of it!"

Crash!

The outer door shook and rattled.

"They sure sound as if they mean business," said the Kid coolly. "I never was wise to it that sheepmen had so much gall. They're sure an ornery bunch of herders in this hyer little ten cent town of yourn. With a gat in my hand, and half a dozen punchers to help me, I'd undertake to clean up this camp and wipe it off'n the map, sheriff. I sure hate to see sheepmen getting their ears up in this style."

"You're a cool cuss!" said the sheriff. "Keep up your sass, if you want, till they string you up. I—— Oh!"

The sheriff broke off with a gasp.

The Kid was standing six feet from him, his hands hanging idly by his sides, his manner cool and unconcerned. The sheriff was armed; there were armed men in the outer room behind him. But with a spring like that of a mountain cougar, the Kid suddenly crossed the space between him and the sheriff, and the burly man reeled in the Kid's grip.

"You——" he panted.

His hand grabbed at a gun in his belt.

A clenched fist that was like a solid rock crashed in the sheriff's face, and he dropped like a log at the Kid's feet. His gun was in the Rio Kid's hand the next moment.

Bang!

Peterson, in the outer room fired. But the Kid dropped on his knees in the dark cell as he gripped the gun, and the bullet flew over him.

He returned the fire the next instant, and Peterson dropped with a bullet through his shoulder.

There were two other sheriff's men in the room, but, with their hands on their guns, they paused as the Kid leaped out into the lighted room with his revolver raised, and his eyes gleaming over it.

"Hands up!"

He spat out the words.

There was a moment's pause, and then their hands went up. It was only just in time to save them.

Crash! Crash! came the hammering on the outer door. But, as yet, the stout timber was holding.

"Get into that cell!" the Kid rapped. "Take that galoot with you! Pronto's the word!"

"You durned cuss——"

"You tired of life?" asked the Kid unpleasantly. "You dog-goned gink, I'd shoot you up as soon as look at you. This hyer town is going to see some fireworks before they string me up, and don't you forget it. If you don't want a front place in the funeral, step lively!"

The two Pawnee Ford men eyed him like wolves, but they obeyed, the levelled gun and the gleaming eyes over it daunted them. And they had not the slightest doubt, too, that in a few minutes the reckless puncher would be in the grasp of the lynch mob. They picked up Peterson and tramped in furiously, and the Kid slammed the cell door after them, locked it, and dropped the key into his pocket.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
For Life or Death!

"SHUCKS!" murmured the Rio Kid.

He knocked over the lamp in the outer room, and the interior of the Pawnee Ford calaboose was plunged into darkness.

Crash! Crash! Crash! came on the outer door.

The Kid did not lose a second.

The firing in the gaol had apprised the mob without that something was wrong, and in a few moments, at the most, enraged men would be yelling from the barred window of the cell to tell them what had happened, to warn them that the puncher was in the outer room and armed.

But a few seconds were the Kid's.

He had given one swift glance round before knocking the lamp out; one glance was enough for the Kid.

At the back of the long room, facing the door, was a window, shuttered, and the shutters secured with wooden bars in iron sockets.

That window looked out of the back of the building; the raging mob was gathered in front.

What lay beyond the Kid did not know, and cared little; there lay, at all events, a chance of escape and life.

He dragged the bars from their place, and dragged open the shutters. There were no sashes or glass to the window.

Outside, under the window, lay a fenced corral, and in the corral was grazing a broncho; the horse that the Kid had seen the sheriff riding that day, when the posse had roped him in on the trail.

The Kid's eyes danced.

One rapid spring carried him through the window into the corral, and he ran for the horse.

The animal threw up its head and shied, but the Kid's grasp was upon it in a moment. Saddle and bridle there were none, but it was not the first time, by many a one, that the Kid had ridden bareback. He leaped upon the back of the startled broncho.

"Now you hit it lively, hoss!" grinned the Kid.

There was a roar of voices, a sound of running feet. Yelling voices from a barred window had warned the lynchers, and they were spreading round the calaboose on either side, running along the fences of the corral, or clambering over them.

"Hit it, hoss!"

The broncho obeyed the hand of a master. With his knees gripping the broncho's flanks, the Kid drove him to a mad gallop down the corral, to the fence at the further end.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Men had sighted the wild rider, and were firing furiously, but the hasty shots flew wild round the fleeting figure in the starlight. Some of the lynchers, realising that the puncher was escaping, rushed for their horses. Others swarmed over the fences into the corral, yelling with rage. Almost in the twinkling of an eye, the Kid reached the fence at the further end of the long corral, and with his knees gripping, put the broncho to the leap. It was a six foot fence, and the broncho fairly flew over it, and came crashing down with thundering hoofs on the other side. The Rio Kid was on the outskirts of Pawnee Ford now, close by the bank of the Squaw River, beyond which rose the mighty mass of Squaw Mountain against the starlit sky.

Crack! Crack!

Bullets whistled through the air, and there was a thundering of hoof-beats behind. Already a number of the lynchers had got to their horses and were giving chase. Pawnee Ford was a pandemonium of men riding and running, roaring and firing.

The Kid drove on the broncho fiercely. He gripped with his knees to guide the horse, in the manner of a cowpuncher, and he had a gun in either hand as he galloped.

The wide waters of the Squaw River stretched before him; and to ride along the bank was to be cut off by the swarming mob behind. Without a second's hesitation, the Kid put the horse to the river, and plunged headlong in. That plunging leap took him far out from the bank, and then the horse swam desperately onward in deep water. The Kid shoved the guns into his belt now, he needed all his care to make that desperate swim in safety. Round the base of Squaw Mountain, the river ran hard in a deep bend. Somewhere there was a ford, from which the town took its name, but the Kid had not struck the ford. In deep water he fought and struggled onward.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Men were on the bank behind him now, rifles as well as revolvers rang out in a deadly hail. Bullets spattered in the water round the dim figure in the starlight.

There was a sudden scream from the bronco, and the animal sank under the Kid. Two bullets had struck it at the same moment, and the next instant the bronco was floating away half-submerged, leaving the Rio Kid in the water.

He plunged on desperately towards the further bank. The swim was nothing to the boy puncher who had swum the waters of the Rio Frio in flood. But round him as he swam the bullets pattered on the water, and further down the river, at the ford, a bunch of horsemen rode hard to cut him off when he landed.

With set teeth, the Rio Kid dragged himself out of the stream, up the steep bank that rose towards Squaw Mountain. Once he gained the deep arroyos and draws of that wild and broken hillside, he would be safe—and without a second's pause, the Kid ran on.

Strong and sturdy as he was, the Kid was sobbing for breath, when he plunged into a deep rocky draw, a few hundred yards from the river, and dropped breathless into a clump of mesquite.

Hoof-beats rang on the rocks. The lynchers had lost sight of him in the shifting shadows of the broken country, but they knew the direction he had taken, and they knew that he was on foot now. Five or six horsemen came thundering furiously down into the draw, and the Rio Kid lay low in the bunch of mesquite as they thundered by. There were two guns in his belt, but they were soaked with water, and he had no fresh cartridges. He lay silent, while the horsmen rushed past the mesquite.

Horsemen, and more horsemen, came sweeping into the draw. Another bunch began to spread round among the rocks and bushes in the draw, realising that the fugitive might have stopped and taken to cover. Then the Rio Kid stirred. Softly as a panther he crept away, keeping in cover of rough rocks where it was difficult for a horseman to follow. From rock to rock, and thicket to thicket, the Kid glided, stealthy as an Apache. It was an old game to the Rio Kid, which he had played for his life many a time in Texas, with enraged sheriffs and their men on his trail. The trampling of hoofs and the shouting of the disappointed lynchers sounded fainter and more afar. From the rocky draw the boy puncher gained a rough and broken hillside, too steep for horsemen, where there was cover for a hundred men among the rocks and stunted bushes. And there, at last, he stopped, even his iron strength worn down by his efforts, and threw himself down in a deep crevice between two huge boulders to rest, and wait for the hunt to slacken.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
On Squaw Mountain!

THE Rio Kid grinned breathlessly as he lay in the crevice of the rocks, resting, gazing up at the starry heavens, and the towering mass of Squaw Mountain. He could hear sounds of search and pursuit, but in the far distance. It was obvious that the enemy had lost all track of him, and they were not likely to find it till daylight. Sheepmen, he reflected, would never be able to pick up a light trail over rocky ground at night. Even an experienced plainsman might have been perplexed to pick up the Kid's trail, as a matter of fact.

For the present, at least, he was secure from pursuit; and he lay there resting, content, with a cheery grin on his face, waiting for the dawn. At the first gleam of daylight he intended to pick his way up the mountain, where a refuge awaited him among the cow-

men who were at almost open war with the sheepmen of the low country. The breathless peril through which he had passed left no effect on the Kid, save to make him smile. Sheepmen were not fated to get the Texas puncher; he snapped his fingers at the whole sheep country.

At dawn he would try finding his way to the cow-country higher up the great mountain. Along trails he had heard many stories of the cowmen of Squaw Mountain, and their feuds with the sheepmen. Most of the stories, it was true, were to the discredit of Squaw Mountain and its denizens—the men of the plains looked on them as a nest of gunmen and border ruffians. But the Kid did not believe all he heard, all the more because his sympathies naturally ran to the side of the cowmen. Cow-country on those rugged mountain slopes was not the cow-country the Kid knew, of vast grassy plains and endless mesas. Little valleys and patches of pasture at the bottom of arroyos fed the scanty herds of the Squaw Mountain cowmen; right or wrong they had been driven from the low plains by the all-devouring sheep. It was said on the trails that Squaw Mountain was the refuge for desperadoes from all parts, evading the law; but if it was so, the Kid had no kick coming on that subject.

He was an outlaw himself in his own country. The Squaw Mountain punchers were said to pack guns and to be only too ready on the draw; but the kid could find excuses for the wrath of the cowmen who saw the ranges eaten up by sheep, and beef driven out by mutton.

He grinned as he thought over the situation. He had left his own walnut-butted guns behind when he rode into the sheep country—a peaceable country where he did not need to pack a gun. And this was the outcome of that! He had lent his horse to Jud Starbuck, the puncher of Squaw Mountain who had shot up a sheepman and was hunted for his life, and had been arrested in the place of the fugitive—and all Pawnee Ford was still hunting for him with deadly intent. If this was the peacefulness of the sheep country, the Kid opined, it hadn't much on the cow country. But he told himself that it was just his luck to be riding through the sheep lands when a range war was on, and to get mixed up in it. If there was any trouble stirring, the Rio Kid seemed fated to horn into it, whether he liked it or not.

He was more than fed up with sheep and sheepmen, and he asked nothing better than to ride out. But first he had to reclaim the black-muzzled mustang, which he had lent Starbuck to escape upon. And not till dawn could even the keen-eyed Kid pick his way up the mountain and find out Starbuck's ranch. So he lay and rested, and listened to the distant sounds of pursuit far into the night, till they died away at last, and all was silent save the wailing of coyotes in the brush—though the Kid was quite assured that the hunt was still going on, and would go on for a long time yet.

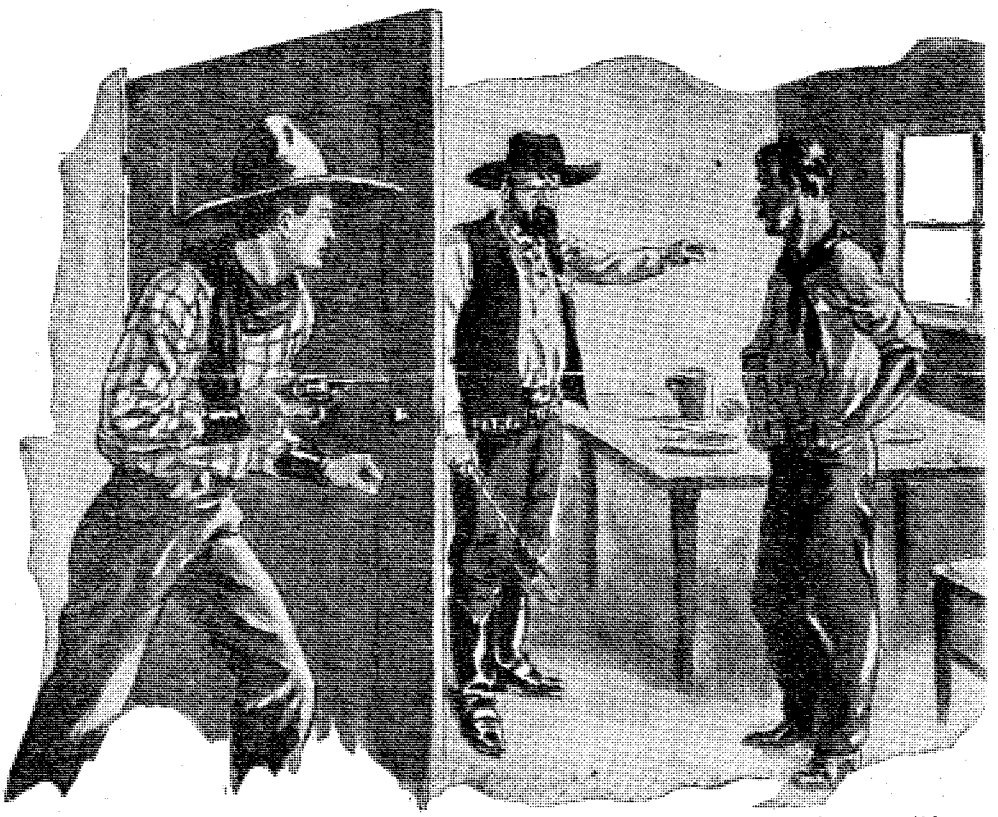
Starbuck of Squaw Mountain, had shot up Billy Ward the sheepman, and the Kid was wanted for the shooting; they had the Kid's description, and not Starbuck's. What had happened at the calaboose could not fail to convince all Pawnee Ford that the boy puncher was the right man; they had more than half believed it to begin with, and now they would be certain. Once more the Kid was on the wrong side of the law, hunted by the sheriff; and he told himself that he might as well have stayed in Texas, where matters were no worse.

But that reflection did not dash the cheery spirits of the Kid. Under the stars, he lay at rest, and did not stir till dawn was glimmering from the eastern sky. Then, in the earliest light, refreshed by his rest, the Kid rose, and shook himself, and started up the mountain, keeping in all the cover he could, and with his eyes warily about him.

It was not long before he struck a well-marked trail; the trail of countless hoofs of cattle. This was the way, he figured, that the cattle drives came down from the ranches on the mountain uplands; and it was therefore the way to the ranches. It was certainly also the way by which pursuit would be made from Pawnee Ford, and the Kid was very wary as he tramped onward and upward.

When he looked back, he could see the great plains spread below, and the Squaw River winding, a streak of silver in the distance under the rising sun. Pawnee Ford was a collection of shacks that looked like toy buildings in the distance. Moving dots in that direction were horsemen, he knew. Pawnee Ford had awakened to an excited morning; and scores of men were out in all directions hunting for the puncher who had so narrowly escaped the lynch mob; and the Kid guessed that it would be shooting on sight if they found him—even the sheriff was not likely to make a prisoner of him, after his handling in the gaol. And the Kid unarmed, save for two useless guns which he regarded with a sorrowful shake of the head.

Higher up the trail, which ran up a wide valley that split the mighty side of the mountain, the Kid began to pass bunches of cattle—evidently belonging to the Squaw Mountain ranchers. There were no sheep on the uplands; the cowmen, driven from the low ranges, still had the mountain slopes. Bunches of pasturing cows gladdened the Kid's eye; in the clear sunny morning he would have been happy, had he been astride a horse. But no puncher could be happy on foot. He came suddenly in sight of a building—a ranch, he reckoned these north-country galoots would call it; it was what the Kid called a shack. It was a rough building of boards, nailed to beams, repaired here and there with more boards taken from packing-cases; here and there even with flat sheets of tin, cut from old beef-cans. A spring bubbled and rippled near the building—the reason for its location there. There was a rude fence and a tumbling gate before the shack; and past it ran the trail up the mountain—and on the trail, as the Kid did not fail to observe, were the fresh prints of hoofs. Horsemen had ridden past the shack before him;



LOOKING FOR THE KID! The sheriff stepped into the doorway. Of the Rio Kid he saw nothing—the open door hid him. "You seen anything of that firebug?" asked the sheriff. The Rancher shook his head grimly. "Mind how you talk, my man!" cautioned the sheriff. "I guess I've seen the trail of a cowman's boots jest outside your gate, which weren't there this morning." *(See Chapter 3.)*

which meant to the Kid that Pawnee Ford pursuers were ahead of him, doubtless knowing full well what refuge he would seek.

The Kid paused at the gate, and looked across at the shack. He was hungry and thirsty; and this was a cowman's shack; and no cowman would hand over a fugitive puncher to sheepmen, if all he had heard of Squaw Mountain was true. The sun was well up now, and the window of the shack was open, showing that the occupant was astir; and the Kid vaulted over the shaky gate and walked up to the building.

"Say, fellers!" called out the Kid.

A bearded face looked from the open window, and a shotgun aimed at the Kid. He grinned at the ranchman.

"Put it away, feller," he said, good humouredly. "You don't want that shotgun, sure. I figured that I should wake up a cowman here, and I was sure right."

The ranchman eyed him doubtfully, but the chaps, the Stetson, the high-heeled boots and spurs of the Kid, all proclaimed the cowpuncher, and he lowered the shotgun at last.

"You the galoot they're after?" he asked.

The Kid did not need to ask who "they" were. He nodded and grinned.

"Sure!" he assented. "Seen 'em pass?"

"The sheriff of Pawnee Ford and six men rode by at sun-up," said the ranchman. "They stopped to wake me and ask arter you. They searched the house afore they went on. You shot a sheepman?"

"They figure that I did," answered the Kid. "It's a gol-darned mistake, but I guess they don't want a lot of proof before they string up a cowman at Pawnee Ford."

"You've said it," grunted the ranchman. "You step right in, stranger; but I tell you, you ain't safe here; they'll hunt hard for the man who shot up Billy Ward, and they reckon you was that man." He grinned. "You needn't tell me nothing; I ain't gone on sheepmen, nohow. Hustle right in."

The Kid nodded and entered the shack, and he sat down there to breakfast, the best the lonely ranchman could offer him. He was out of the enemy's country now, that was plain; from now on, all the inhabitants that he met would be on his side, all the more if they believed that he had shot a sheepman; though they might not venture to assist him openly in the face of the sheriff of Pawnee Ford and his posse. The authority of the sheriff extended over Squaw Mountain, in theory at least; and resistance to him was resistance to the law, which the ranchmen would hardly care to undertake; but all the help they could give him, the Kid knew they would give. And when he had breakfasted, his first request was for cartridges; but his new friend shook his head.

"I guess I uses a shotgun, and I ain't a Colt cartridge nohow," he said. "You'll get 'em further up the mountain. Where you heading for?"

"Ever heard of Jud Starbuck?" asked the Kid.

The man started.

"Starbuck, of Hidden Hollow. You bet! He's the biggest rancher of Squaw Mountain, and the quickest man with a gun, too. You don't want no trouble with Jud Starbuck, stranger."

The Kid laughed.

"I ain't hunting trouble with him," he said. "I lent him my horse yesterday to get clear of the sheepmen, and I'm after that cayuse, feller."

"You'll find him at his ranch, I guess, in Hidden Hollow. Any galoot farther on will tell you where that is. Great snakes!" ejaculated the ranchman suddenly, staring from the window.

The Kid leaped up from his bench.

A horseman had stopped at the gate and hitched his horse there, and was already entering, evidently to come up to the shack. It was the burly sheriff of Pawnee Ford. The Kid whistled softly. The sheriff was alone, having apparently left his men still on the hunt to return to Pawnee Ford. The Kid, keeping out of sight, eyed him from the window. The sheriff's face was unsuspicious, and it was clear that he did not know that the man he sought was in the shack. But in two minutes he would know it. And the Kid was unarmed. There was a deep growl from the ranchman. The Kid looked round as the man unhitched the shotgun from the wall.

"Forget it, feller," said the Kid hastily.

"That dog-goned sheriff ain't taking

a puncher out of my shack to be strung up by sheepmen!" growled the ranchman.

But the Kid shook his head.

"I guess I won't let you rope in all that trouble, feller," he said. "Put that gun away. I guess the bang of it would bring a dozen of the galoots on to you, and you'd be shot up before you could say 'no sugar in mine!' Leave him to me. And if they ask you afterwards about me, you allow that you couldn't say 'No!' to a puncher with two guns in his hands." The Kid grinned. "Leave that galoot to me, feller!"

"But you sure told me you ain't got no cartridges in them guns!" said the cowman.

"But I ain't told the sheriff that!" grinned the Kid.

The man stared, and then grinned.

"Oh, shucks!" he said. "You go it, stranger. It's your game."

The Kid nodded, and stood beside the door, so that it would conceal him as it opened. A minute later the sheriff of Pawnee Ford struck the door with his riding-whip.

"Hallo, you'uns!" he shouted.

The cowman threw the door open.

The sheriff stepped into the doorway. Of the Rio Kid he saw nothing; the open door hid him. He stared at the ranchman.

"You seen anything of that firebug?" he demanded. "Mind how you talk, my man! I guess I've seen the trail of a cowman's boots jest ourside your gate, in the mud, and they wasn't there when I passed with my men this morning. You get me? We know that scallywag is on foot now. You seen him?" The sheriff's glance rested on the rough table. "Who's been feeding here?" he demanded, with a sudden flash of suspicion, his hand dropping to a gun.

"I guess a galoot with two guns can ask for breakfast, sheriff, without getting 'No!' for an answer," said the cowman. The man whose little herd of cows pastured within three miles of Pawnee Ford did not want to quarrel with the sheriff, in spite of the impulse that had made him take hold of the shotgun at sight of the disliked official.

"He's been here!" snapped the sheriff, his eyes gleaming. "That durn firebug broke out of gaol last night, and shot up my man Peterson, and knocked me senseless, too. How long since he went? Where is he? Lively!"

"Here, sheriff!" drawled an easy voice, in the soft drawl of the south, as the Rio Kid stepped from behind the door, and the muzzle of a revolver touched the sheriff's neck. "Let go that gun—pronto!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Hands Up!

"PUT 'em up!" smiled the Rio Kid.

The sheriff of Pawnee Ford gripped the butt of his Colt convulsively. But he did not draw it. The cold rim of steel touched his brawny neck, and the Kid's eyes gleamed menace at him. Slowly, reluctantly, the sheriff released his hold of the gun in his belt, and put his hands above his head, his bearded face convulsed with rage.

The Squaw Mountain cowman stared on at the scene, silent, holding the mirth that was within him. The Kid's gun was empty, and he knew it; but the sheriff did not know it.

The Rio Kid's manner did not indicate that it was an empty gun that he held to the sheriff's neck. His face was set and dark with threats; his eyes gleamed at the man he covered with an empty gun. The official from Pawnee Ford trembled with rage as he put up his hands, but he did not think of resistance with a muzzle pressing on his skin. And the Kid, who would have been shot down like a prairie rabbit had the sheriff taken the chance of pulling, smiled serenely.

"That's better, hombre," he said. "You're sure a good little man, and have learned to do as you're told. Keep 'em up, feller."

The sheriff ground his teeth, and cast a desperate glance out of the open doorway. At any moment men might come riding up from the plain; parties of searchers might emerge into sight from any draw or canyon that split the mighty mass of the mountain. But for the moment he was alone with the Rio Kid, and his rage was impotent.

"You'll hang for this!" he articulated, in choking tones.

"I guess that's a cinch, anyhow, if

your crowd get me," grinned the Kid. "Keep them paws over your head, feller!"

With his left hand the Kid drew the gun from the sheriff's belt. A glance showed him that it was loaded in every chamber, and he thrilled with the satisfaction of being armed again. He tossed his own gun into a corner of the shack, and gripped the sheriff's in his right.

"This hyer gun of yours is plumb full," he grinned. "A Colt forty-five. Jest the gun I love, sheriff! You lending me this gun?"

The sheriff's eyes blazed.

"You want to answer, pronto," said the Kid.

"Yes," panted the sheriff.

"That's O.K., then," said the Kid. "I sure hate to take a man's gun agin his will; but if you're going to lend me this gun, all right. You can have my gun in change, sheriff. I reckon you'll find some cartridges for it when you get to home. There ain't any in it jest now."

"What?" yelled the sheriff.

At the discovery that he had been held up and disarmed with an empty gun, the sheriff of Pawnee Ford almost raved. He made a furious stride towards the Kid, and his own gun almost touched his face.

"Forget it, feller!" said the Kid. "There'll sure be a vacancy for a sheriff in this country, if you don't keep good. This here gun of yours ain't empty, feller."

The sheriff controlled his rage.

"You durn coyote!" he gasped.

"Swallow it, hombre!" said the Kid. "I'll borrow that belt and holster of yourn to go along with the gun. I guess I want all the cartridges you've got. Your Pawnee Ford galoots are getting so fresh that I figure on having to do some shooting to-day. Don't make any objections. I'd sure hate to spill your vinegar all over this shack."

He laughed lightly.

"You woke up the wrong cayuse when you started in to hunt me, sheriff. I tell you again that I never shot up Billy Ward, and never heard of the man till you told me you wanted me for drilling him. But I'll tell you this, too. You warn your sheepmen that they want to pack their guns and look lively if they come after me. I sure ain't going back to Pawnee Ford for a necktie party. I guess there will be some shooting before they rope me in. I'm letting you off cheap, sheriff, because I hate to buck in agin the law." The Kid grinned. "But you go home and stay there, like a good little man. I reckon you'll lend me your horse?"

The sheriff quivered with rage.

"You dog-goned hoss-thief——"

"I guess I'm borrowing that cayuse, sheriff, and I'll send him back home," assured the Kid. "I reckon when a galoot is fixed like I am, he can't be too particular. You're getting off cheap, and you know it. You'd have shot me at sight if you'd knowed my gun was empty. Now, you walk out to that hoss in front of me."

"Leave me here! I——"

"Walk!" rapped the Kid; and the sheriff took his longing glance from the shotgun hanging on the wall, and strode furiously out of the shack.

He stared round savagely in the hope of seeing some of the horsemen who were scouring Squaw Mountain for the fugitive. But there was none of the Pawnee Ford riders in sight for the moment.

The sheriff tramped down to the gate, foaming with rage, and under the threatening gun, unhitched the horse and handed the bridle to the Kid.

"I guess I'll get you yet!" he said, in a choking voice. "I'll get you yet, durn your hide, and——"

"You want to beat it," said the Kid placidly. "Nope, you ain't going back into the shack. I never did care for pot-shooting in the back from a shotgun. I should sure hate to be peppered all over by buck-shot, sheriff. You want to walk down the trail, and if you're in sight after I've counted four, sheriff, I begin shooting. Hit the trail, feller!"

"I—I—I——" the sheriff foamed.

"One!" said the Kid.

The sheriff gave a desperate glare, and turned to stride down the trail towards Pawnee Ford. He would not run.

"Two!" came the Kid's clear, drawling voice. "Three!"

The sheriff quivered, but he strode on resolutely, still disdaining to run.

"Four!"

Involuntarily, the sheriff quickened his pace. He was in the open trail, far from cover, and under fire if the Kid chose to pull trigger. And the time of grace had expired.

Bang!

A bullet spattered the dust from the trail within an inch of the sheriff's boot.

Bang!

He leaped clear of the the ground in startled alarm.

Another bullet grazed his leg.

It was too much for the sheriff of Pawnee Ford. Dignity was thrown to the winds, and he broke into a desperate run, and ran for his life. The Kid, grinning, fired again, and shot the hat from his head, and the running man did not stay for the Stetson that spun along the trail. Running like a deer, he disappeared at last round a bend in the trail, leaving the Rio Kid chuckling, and the cowman, in the doorway of the shack, roaring with laughter.

The Kid waved his hand in farewell to the cowman, leaped upon the sheriff's horse, and rode up the trail, gun in hand, eyes on the alert for a foe at every step of the horse, further and further, higher and higher, into the rocky recesses of Squaw Mountain.

THE END.

(Next week's roaring Western yarn contains hundreds of thrills. You must not miss it!)

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 grey 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.

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 locoed 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 sheepmen 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 sheepmen, 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 tomorrow 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.)

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THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Too Late!

HIGH over the summit of Squaw Mountain a silver crescent of moon sailed amid fleecy clouds. soft light glimmered down on deep valley and rocky arroyo, on nodding pines and trembling aspens. In the verdant valley where the Starbuck Ranch lay, the herds were sleeping; ranch-house and bunkhouse were dark and silent. In the deep, rocky canyon that opened on the valley from the west, splitting the mass of the mighty mountain, there was a jingling of spurs and bridles, and a pounding of hoofs. The sheriff of Pawnee Ford, with twenty armed men at his back, rode there, bunched before a tangled thicket that hid the cave in the canyon wall. Every man in the posse had a gun in his hand, every eye was on the alert. They were hunting the Rio Kid, and, though the Kid was a stranger in Wyoming, the men of Pawnee Ford had seen enough of him to be wise to it that they needed to be alert and watchful when they were close on his trail.

Jud Starbuck, the rancher of Squaw Mountain, pulled in his horse by the sheriff's side. He pointed with his quirt at the apparently impenetrable thicket that hid the rocky wall of the canyon.

"I guess that's the place, sheriff," he said, in a low voice.

The sheriff of Pawnee Ford stared at the dark thicket, high over which rose the wall of rock.

"There's a big cave in the rock behind the aspens." Starbuck spoke in a low voice, for the sheriff's ear only. He did not want the party from Pawnee Ford to hear. "I guess he's there, sheriff!"

"If he's there we've got him dead to rights, but——"

"He's sure there."

"How do you know?" The sheriff gave Starbuck a suspicious look. "There ain't a sign of trail on these rocks. I reckon no galoot would figure that there was a cave behind them aspens unless he knows this country like a book. That Texas puncher never found it for himself. Look here, Starbuck, if he's there he was hidden there by some of your cowmen."

Starbuck scowled.

"The bunch will always stand by a puncher when the sheepmen are after him," he answered, still in low tones. "I reckon my own bunch would pull guns on me if they knew I was giving the galoot away to you, sheriff. But that cuts no ice. I don't want that firebug on my range, and I'm telling you where to rope him in. I aim to keep in with the law, and to keep my outfit out of trouble. The puncher's there, if you want him. I'm not horning in; I guess all Squaw Mountain would want to lynch me if they knew I'd handed over a cowman. I've put you wise, and I'll git!"

Starbuck wheeled his horse and rode away down the canyon.

In a few minutes the clatter of his horse's hoofs died away, and he had disappeared in the valley.

The sheriff of Pawnee Ford dismounted. He signed to his men to follow his example.

"Keep your eyes peeled," he muttered. "If that puncher's there I reckon he's wide awake, and got a gat ready in his hand. He's sure handy with a gun, durn his hide. He knows what's coming to him for shooting up Billy Ward. You-uns watch out!"

"I guess he won't handle a gun agin if I get a bead on him," said Jim Ward.

"We've got to take him alive, if we can," said the sheriff. "But if he pulls a gun let him have it."

He drew a deep breath.

"Follow on!"

Gun in hand, the sheriff of Pawnee Ford began to push a way through the thicket towards the towering cliff beyond.

Jim Ward followed him, and the rest of the numerous party.

If the Rio Kid was still in the cave, where he had been concealed by the Starbuck punchers, there was no escape for him. Betrayed into the hands of his enemies by the Starbuck boss, he was at their mercy. But every heart was beating fast as the Pawnee Ford men pushed through the thickets. At every moment they expected to hear the roar of a six-gun. The puncher, who had narrowly escaped lynching at Pawnee Ford, was not likely to surrender, though the odds against him made resistance hopeless.

"Watch out!" breathed the sheriff as he came, at last, through the thickets, and the dark opening of the cave yawned before him.

All was darkness.

From the cave came no sound, no movement. The whole party gathered at the opening, watchful as cats, ready to fire at a sound, at a moving shadow. But there was no sound, no movement. The sheriff kicked over dead embers of a camp-fire at the mouth of the cave. He stooped, and rose again, breathing hard and quick.

"Still warm!" he whispered. "If he ain't here he's been here recent. I guess he must be asleep."

"He'd sure hear the hosses, sheriff."

The sheriff gritted his teeth.

It was no light matter to enter the blackness of the cavern, where it seemed certain that a desperate man lurked, revolver in hand. It was Jim Ward who led the way in at last. The burly sheepman tramped into the cave, fully expecting a shot, but no shot came.

"I guess he ain't here!" said Ward, in a savage growl. "I reckon he heard us coming, and cleared."

"We'd have seen him in this moonlight."

"He sure ain't here!"

Ward struck a match.

The flickering light danced on the walls of the cave, and the men of Pawnee Ford stared round them uneasily, suspiciously. In the light, dim and flickering as it was, they were exposed to the fire of the hidden puncher—if he was there. But it was becoming clear now that the Rio Kid was not there.

"Git a lantern!" grunted the sheriff.

One of the men went back to the horses and returned with a lantern. He lighted it, and the sheriff searched through the cave.

It was empty! There were many signs that someone had recently camped there; but, whoever it was, he was gone—had been gone some time, it was clear, before Jud Starbuck led the posse to the canyon. The sheriff rapped out an angry oath.

This Week:
"HUNTED!"

"Durn his hide! He's beat it!" He scowled savagely. "I guess the Starbuck punchers hid him safe, but he was wise to it that Jud didn't figure on letting him lie doggo in his range, and he vamoosed. Durn his hide!"

"He can't be fur off!" muttered Ward.

The Pawnee Ford party, savagely disappointed, tramped out of the cave again. They traversed the aspen thicket and the open canyon, staring round them. Moonlight fell clearly on the rocks, on the pines that grew up the precipitous sides. Somewhere at hand, they were sure, was the man they sought. But the hard rock left no trail of foot or hoof; the Kid might have been within a dozen yards of them, among the boulders, and they none the wiser.

"I guess we're beat this time!" growled the sheriff. "But we ain't quitting. We'll camp on the Starbuck range and comb Squaw Mountain for him. I guess a lot of the cowmen could put us wise if they liked. We'll search this canyon from end to end at sun-up. We will——"

The sheriff broke off as a clear, cool voice rang across the canyon from a high point on the cliff on the other side.

"Hallo, you-uns!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Kid Speaks!

THE Rio Kid was grinning serenely.

High up the northern wall of the canyon he lay in cover among the rocks, the black-muzzled mustang packed close in cover behind him.

Before him the rocky slope rose steeply from the canyon bottom, open to his fire. The Kid could not have picked a better place for defence. That rocky point could have been held by one man against a hundred, so long as his cartridges lasted.

Looking down from the rugged rocks, the Kid grinned at the bunch of horsemen forty feet below.

"Hallo, you 'uns!"

His voice rang out cheerily.

"That's him!" swore the sheriff.

Bang!

Jim Ward fired at the sound of the voice, and his bullet spattered on rock a yard from the Rio Kid.

The Kid laughed loud and long.

"I guess that won't buy you anything, you galoots!" he called back. "You're sure wasting your lead!"

"You durned galoot!" roared the sheriff. "You come out of that!"

"Not this evening, sheriff!" said the Kid cheerily. "I guess I'm bedded down comfortable. You want to remember that if you come up here it will be the last thing you'll do this side of Jordan!"

The sheriff glared up at the canyon wall. He could not see the Kid, though he was aware that the Kid could see him through some crevice in the rocks that screened him. He knew that a touch of the Kid's finger on the trigger would end all things for him, and his face was grim and a little pale. His men sat their horses silent round him. The whole party were exposed to fire from where the Kid lay in cover; and he could have picked them off like so many prairie rabbits.

"I guess we want to ride, sheriff," murmured one of the sheepmen uneasily.

But he hesitated to ride. The swiftest gallop down the canyon could not have saved the riders from the gun above. Five or six of them, at least, the Kid could have shot down before the party got clear. Jud Starbuck had aimed to lead them to the capture of the hidden puncher; but he had led them into a deadly trap.

But why the Kid had revealed his presence was rather a mystery to the sheriff's men. He could have lain undiscovered in his rocky eyrie, had he chosen, until they had ridden away.

"I guess I've got you where I want you, sheriff," went on the Kid's voice in the same, cheery tones. "You sheepherders sure ain't the galoots to trail a puncher. But I ain't looking for trouble, sheriff. I jest want to put you wise. You'll listen to me."

"You durn galoot——"

"Forget it, sheriff! It's my say-so now, and if you'd rather hear my gun talk, I guess I'm ready to oblige!"

"What do you want to say?" hissed the sheriff.

"What I've said before, feller! You roped me in for shooting up Billy Ward, and I guess I never heard of the hombre before you told me I had shot him up. You packed me in the calaboose, and I sure had a close call getting away from Judge Lynch. But I don't bear any malice, sheriff—any galoot might make a mistake. Now I tell you agin that I didn't shoot up Billy Ward, but I know the man who did."

"You're a durn liar!" roared Jim Ward. "You shot up my brother, and I'm sure going to get you for it!"

"If the galoot was your brother, hombre, I guess I won't plug you for calling me fancy names," said the Kid. "It would naturally get your goat. But I'm going to put you wise. The man who shot up Billy Ward was getting away when I met up with him, and I lent him my horse to vamoose on. I was sure plumb loco to do it, but there it is. And the name of that galoot is Jud Starbuck."

"Starbuck!" yelled the sheriff.

"Sure!"

"You durn——"

"Don't say it, sheriff. I reckon my gun might go off if you do," suggested the Kid.

The sheriff ground his teeth.

"I'm jest putting you wise," went on the Kid. "I'd sure be sorry to have to wipe out a whole family of sheepherders! I reckon sheepmen ain't worth powder and shot, if you come to that!"

There was a growl of rage from the Pawnee Ford party. All of them were sheepmen, and all of them embittered by the range war that was going on in the Squaw River country.

"I'll get you yet!" muttered Jim Ward savagely.

"I ain't the man you want to get," replied the Kid placidly. "I'm giving you the straight goods, fellers. I came up this mountain to get my hoss back from Starbuck, figuring that he would be glad to help a galoot that had saved his pesky life. But he's a yellow coyote from the toes up. He figures on fixing that shooting on me, and saving his own life by putting mine in the rope. Didn't I see him leading you galoots up here to the cave—where you'd have found me if you'd come a few hours earlier? I guess Starbuck reckoned I was there—and by this time he figures that you 'uns have shot me to little pieces. That's why I'm putting you wise. It's Jud Starbuck you want for shooting up Billy Ward."

"Is that the lot?" snarled the sheriff.

"That's the lot, feller! You can believe it or not as you durn well like!" snapped the Kid. "Now, if you want trouble, you can come a-hunting it!"

The horsemen stared uneasily up the steep, rocky cliff. The Kid had led his mustang up the steep ascent, by the bridle, picking his steps. Riding up was impossible. Clambering up on foot, exposed to the Kid's fire, was throwing life away. That was clear to the sheriff of Pawnee Ford and all his men.

"Git, while the goin's good, sheriff!" muttered one of the sheepmen. "If that scallywag burns powder, we're done!"

"I'm going for him!" said Ward, between his teeth.

"Forget it!" said the sheriff. "We ain't a chance here. In the daylight we'll comb the mountain for him and rope him in!"

Ward, unheeding, threw himself from his horse, and, with a set, furious face, began to clamber up the rocky steep.

Bang!

A gun rang forty feet above, and Ward, with a yell, staggered back and fell to the earth.

"He's got his!" muttered the sheriff.

"Any more coming?" called out the Kid. "I guess I'll show you'uns how we shoot down in Texas!"

But the fall of Ward had shown the posse, if they had not known it before, that they had no chance. Some of the horsemen already had started riding down the canyon towards the valley.

"Pick up that galoot and tote him along!" chuckled the Kid. "He ain't hurt much—I guess I've only creased him, like we do an ornery steer down on the Rio Frio."

Jim Ward sat up dazedly, passing his hand over his head. The bullet had grazed his head, stunning him for the moment.

"You're all O.K., feller!" called out the Kid. "Only don't try it on again; you might get hurt."

Ward staggered to his feet.

"Git outer this!" muttered the sheriff. His life was at the mercy of the puncher he was hunting, and he was anxious to go.

He helped the dazed man to his saddle, and the Pawnee Ford party rode down the canyon. A light laugh from the Rio Kid followed them, as they disappeared into the valley.

The Kid sat on a boulder and smiled.

"Old hoss," he said, addressing the black-muzzled mustang—"old hoss, I guess you and me want to beat it, pronto. I guess them galoots will be after us at sun-up; and they'll strike the high spots and pick us off with rifles from up yonder. We want to beat it, old hoss!"

And, taking his mustang by the bridle, the Rio Kid led him away—by dizzy paths up the rugged hillside, by ravines and ledges where it seemed that only a mountain goat could have found footing. By the time the sun rose over the mountains of Wyoming, and shone down on the Squaw River and the gulches of Squaw Mountain, the Kid was far away; and when the sheriff and his men "combed" the canyon for him they found no trace of him.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Roped!

JUD STARBUCK scowled as he rode down the cattle-trail from his ranch to the lower slopes of Squaw Mountain. The rancher was in a black and bitter mood. Pro-

bably, at first, Starbuck had felt some twinge of remorse at his treachery in betraying the Texas puncher, who had saved his life, into the hands of his enemies. But if he felt remorse he had not hesitated. To the man with a yellow streak in him, in fear of being brought to justice for the shooting of the sheepman, the Kid had come in as a useful scapegoat.

He had shot down a man in hot blood; but in cold blood he was in fear of what would follow. The whole sheep country was up, to find the man who had shot up Billy Ward. The reckless rascal had raised a storm that he had not the nerve to face.

He could have endured a twinge or two of remorse had the Rio Kid been lynched, and the whole matter settled in the belief that justice had been done. But his betrayal of the puncher, whom his outfit had sheltered on the range, had gone for nothing; the Kid had evidently been suspicious, and had gone from the cave in time, and now he was lost on the wild wastes of Squaw Mountain.

That he had fled from the mountain was improbable; all the ways were watched, every road and trail guarded, while the hunt for him went on in the rugged canyons and gulches and arroyos. Somewhere in those rocky wastes the Kid still lurked, hunted, but so far free; and all the time he remained free on Squaw Mountain was a time of danger for the rancher.

chief of the raids on the sheeplands, of driving sheep over cliffs and poisoning the water-holes, and other lawless deeds that were the tactics of the range war.

His outfit were on jeering terms with the sheriff's men camped on the range, and any day shooting might break out. And until the elusive Kid was roped in the Pawnee Ford men would not ride down the mountain. Every day that the Kid remained free was a day of danger to Starbuck; and if he had felt anything like remorse

CORNERED! "I'm going for that scallywag!" growled Ward. He threw himself off his horse, and with a furious face, began to clamber up the rocks. Bang! The Rio Kid's gun rang out, and Ward staggered back. "He's got his," muttered the sheriff. (*See Chapter* 2.)

Even his own men would have turned on him had they known of his betrayal of a refugee puncher to the sheepmen; all his friends and neighbours would have turned from him in disgust. It might come out; and, in the meantime, the sheriff and his men were camped on the Starbuck range, hunting for the Kid, and there was peril every day of a "rookus" breaking out.

Starbuck was the leader of the range war against the sheepmen; but he worked in secret, and an open defiance of the law was too dangerous for him. If trouble broke out on his range it would come home to him. Already he was more than half-suspected of being

at first, it was swallowed up now in a bitter hatred for the boy puncher who was causing him so much trouble.

It had occurred to him, too, that the Kid, knowing now his treachery, might shoot him up from behind a rock or a clump of mesquite; and for that reason Starbuck avoided the lonely places on his range during the four or five days that followed the sheriff's failure at the cave.

That he was in danger now as he rode down the open cattle-trail towards Pawnee Ford, he did not reckon. He was some miles from his ranch now, and he guessed that the fugitive puncher was keeping to the uplands. But it was now, when he supposed the Kid to be far away, that danger was hanging over the traitor's head.

It came suddenly, and not in the form of a treacherous shot from cover, which Starbuck would never have feared had he known the Kid better. It was the whiz of a riata that suddenly broke the silence, and before the rancher knew what was happening, the loop of the lasso had settled over his shoulders. He made a fierce clutch at the rope—too late. It tautened; there was a sharp jerk, and Jud Starbuck was plucked from the saddle, to land on the hard trail with a crash.

For some moments he rolled there, his senses shaken and dizzy. A lithe figure bent over him, and his gun was jerked away and tossed into the bushes. The loop was drawn tighter and knotted, pinning his arms to his sides. His horse, startled and frightened, was already galloping down the trail. He stared up with dizzy eyes into the smiling face of the Rio Kid.

"I guess we've met up again, feller!" drawled the Kid. "I've sure been hunting you!"

Jud's face was white as chalk. He lay with arms bound at the mercy of the puncher he had betrayed to death. But the Kid did not touch a gun. He grasped the rancher and jerked him to his feet.

"You kinder seem sort of surprised," drawled the Kid. "Did you figure out that you could sell me out, you yellow coyote, and get away with it? Not on your life!"

"What do you want?" breathed Jud.

"You!" said the Kid laconically.

"I—I guess——"

"Quit guessing, feller! I reckon you're going to take a little pasear with me. Any objections?" grinned the Kid.

Starbuck cast a fierce glance about him. The trail was deserted and lonely; evidently the puncher had waited for his chance. Jud opened his mouth to shout, in the hope that someone might be within hearing, and gasped as the muzzle of a six-gun was thrust into his jaws.

"Forget it!" grinned the Kid.

Starbuck panted. The Kid jerked away his neck-scarf, and gagged him

with it. Then, with an iron grip on Starbuck's arm, he led him off the trail, into the grove from which he had flung the lariat. There the black-muzzled mustang waited, deep in the trees. With the rope, the Kid bound the rancher to a tree.

"I guess the sheriff is hunting me up the mountain, feller," drawled the Kid. "I reckon we got to wait for dark before we make a move. I want you, feller, and I ain't taking any risks of losing you—not none! You can chew on that scarf till dark, hombre!"

Till the sun set Starbuck remained bound to the tree in the deep heart of the grove, and the Kid, in cover, watched the cattle-trail. More than once Starbuck heard horsemen ride down the trail; once he heard a bunch of cattle driven past—his own cattle, driven down the mountain to be herded to the railroad depot. He heard the crack of quirts, and once the voice of his own foreman, Buck, and he bit and chewed desperately on the gag.

But he could make no sound, and darkness fell and found him still a prisoner, bound fast to the tree.

Savagely, apprehensively, he wondered what the Kid wanted with him. He could have understood the puncher shooting him out of hand for his treachery; but this he could not understand.

Under the stars Starbuck was loosed from the tree and tied on the back of the black-muzzled mustang, still gagged. The Kid took the bridle and led the horse away.

What was the puncher's object, where he was taking him, the rancher could not guess. By devious ways, by arroyo and draw and deep canyon, they wound about the rugged sides of Squaw Mountain, ever higher and higher.

Once Jud had a glimpse, in the starlight, of the valley where his ranch lay and heard the murmur of many cattle.

But the Kid led him on and on, into wild, rocky wastes, where he had picked up the paths, into barren recesses, where no trail could be followed.

It was in a deep, shadowy arroyo, high up Squaw Mountain, far from ranch or pasture, that the Kid stopped at last, and in the starlight Jud saw a little hut built of branches and rocks, and guessed this was the remote hiding-place where the Kid had sheltered since he had escaped from the sheriff of Pawnee Ford.

There he was taken from the horse's back, and the Kid tossed him, still bound, into the hut. In the darkness and terror the rancher of Squaw Mountain lay, listening to the departing footsteps of the puncher, till they died away in silence, and all was still.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The Kid's Trump Card!

THE sheriff of Pawnee Ford swore wearily, and fanned his heated face with his Stetson. The morning sun, blazing down on Squaw Mountain, filled the gulch with shimmering heat. Four men of the posse were halted in the gulch, where for long hours they had been seeking to read sign, till they had stopped to rest in what shade they could in the heat of the day.

In other directions, the rest of the party were still on the trail; and lower down the mighty mountain five or six other posses were hunting for the elusive puncher. That he was still somewhere on Squaw Mountain the sheriff was certain; but there were square miles of rugged rock and tangled thickets and pinewoods to be searched, and all the sheepmen were growing weary of the hunt. But they kept on grimly to the task, sure that, sooner or later, the fugitive would fall into their hands.

The sheriff sat with his back to a boulder, fanning his perspiring face. The three men with him sought what they could of shade. Two of them lay asleep, their Stetsons over their heads to keep off the sun. Jim Ward sat on a rock, his rifle across his knees, his bearded face dark and grim.

"It's some hot!" grunted the sheriff. "And durn my boots if I think we're on the trail of that young fire-bug, after all!"

Ward shook his head.

"I picked up sign down the gulch," he said. "Some galoot has sure been up this gulch, and I guess the cowmen never come up here—it's all rock, and not a yard of feed. The cows never wander this-a-way. I guess it was the galoot we're after."

"Right!" said a quiet voice.

From behind a rock, not six yards from the camped posse, a figure in wide Stetson hat and cowboy chaps rose, with a smiling face.

The sheriff started convulsively. Ward grasped his rifle; but the Rio Kid's voice rang out in warning:

"Drop it!"

A gun gleamed in either hand of the Rio Kid. The sheriff made no move to touch a weapon. And Ward, who had sampled the Kid's shooting before, slowly released his rifle, his eyes burning at the Kid. The two sleeping men started into wakefulness, staring blankly at the puncher. The Kid's keen eye ran over the four.

"Any galoot that touches a gun won't know what hit him," he said. "I've got you covered, fellers, and you don't want to forget it."

"Shoot, durn you!" snarled Ward.

"I guess I ain't come a-shooting, if you'll behave," grinned the Kid. "But I'll sure drop any man that gets fresh. I want you, sheriff, and I want you, Mister Ward. Them other two galoots can beat it, takin' the hosses. I ain't waiting, either. You've been hunting me four days—and I've been hunting you the same time—and I guess it's you that's come out at the little end of the horn. You're a durned bunch of mutton-eating sheep-herders, and you ain't worth shucks. But I've a hunch to prove up to you that you're after the wrong man, and that's my game now. You're going to get it clear whether you like it or not. Savvy?"

"What——" began the sheriff.

"Swallow it, feller, it's my say-so now," interrupted the Kid. "I'm waiting for them two galoots to hit the trail. My guns will begin to talk in one minute if they ain't gone!"

The Kid's face was grim over the levelled Colts. The sheriff, almost white with rage, gave a nod in answer to the inquiring looks of his followers. The Kid had them covered, and though he was only one against four, all the advantage was on his side. They knew what his shooting was like, and they did not want another sample. The two men, taking the four horses, moved away down the gulch, the Kid shifting his position a little to keep the tail of his eye on them as they went. Not till they were out of effective range did the Kid speak again, though all the time his guns unwaveringly covered the sheriff and Jim Ward. More than once Ward was tempted to seize his rifle and try a pot-shot. But the attempt was death, and he knew it. He stifled his rage, and waited.

"Now, fellers," drawled the Kid at last, "I'm going to take your guns, and I hope you won't object, because I should sure hate to blow the cabeza off a locoed sheepman. Keep your paws up!"

He belted one gun, and advanced over the rocks, keeping the other levelled. With their hands up, the sheriff and Ward awaited him, and not for an instant did the Kid's wary watchfulness relax. Coolly and quietly he disarmed them, throwing their weapons into a deep crevice. They watched him like panthers, but they had no chance to take the Kid by surprise.

And, mingled with the rage in their faces was perplexity. They could not understand the Kid's game. That he did not seek their lives was clear; but a fugitive, fleeing and hiding for his life, could not be seeking to burden himself with prisoners. But whatever were the Kid's intentions, he was going to carry them out, and the six-gun in his hand enforced obedience.

"Face round, and put your paws behind you!" said the Kid tersely. "No tricks, fellers, or you'll get it in the back of your cabezas, pronto."

With lengths of trail-rope he bound the arms of the two Pawnee Ford men behind them. They were helpless now, even if resistance had been possible before. They stared at the Kid with burning eyes. He smiled cheerily in return.

"I guess you was hunting bigger game than you figured, fellers, when you came a-hunting a galoot about my size," he bantered. "When I go over the range, I sure opine that it won't be a sheepman that gives me my ticket for soup. No, sir. But don't you get mad, fellers. I ain't going to hurt you none. You're going to take a little pasear with me, before your friends come a-looking for you and I have to shoot them up. I got to keep you quiet, but you ain't going to be hurt."

He gagged the sheriff and Ward with their own neck-scarves. Then he pointed up the gulch with his gun.

"You walk that a-way," he said. "I ain't taking you far—only up to a little place where I've been camped. I guess you're going to get some news there. Beat it."

With their faces crimson with rage and helpless fury, the prisoners moved, the Rio Kid following them as they went. Up the rugged gulch, through the torrid heat, they tramped clumsily, and over a rocky hillside, and through a pine wood, and then by a narrow arroyo, where the rocks left no trail. Weary, sweating aching with rage, they tramped on, till the Kid called a halt at last, and they flung themselves down at the foot of a great rock.

Then with a rope the Kid bound their feet, and tied the rope to a tethering-peg jammed in a crevice of the stony ground, and left them. His footsteps died away, and the sheriff and his man, looking at one another's enraged faces, exchanged dumb glares of rage and wonder. The puncher could not have brought them there to leave them thus. They could not believe that; and yet, what was his game? Helpless, enraged, perplexed, they lay in furious silence, and at last, from the silence, came the sound of voices.

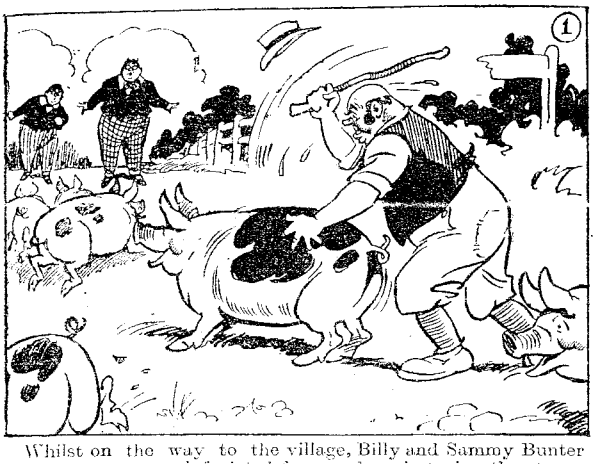
Voices—and they started and listened. No one was in sight. The voices came from round the great rock against which they lay. The speakers were not three yards distant, but no sign of them could be seen. Clearly, distinctly, the voices came, and the rage died out of the faces of the two sheepmen, as they listened in wonder.

(*Continued on page* 23.)

The BUNTER BROTHERS

— Merry Mirthmakers. —

THE TALE OF THE PIG-HEADED PIGS!



Whilst on the way to the village, Billy and Sammy Bunter came across a very infuriated farmer-chappie trying the strong persuasion stunt with his herd of pigs. But being pig-headed, those grunters refused to go the way they should.

When the farmer sighted the Bunter Brothers he gasped with relief. "Here!" he yelled to them. "Help me with these pigs!" he begged. Of course, what else could those cheery, fat youths do other than give the necessary aid.

They had never learnt the gentle art of pig-driving, but Billy and Sammy did their best. "On the ball!" yelled Billy, as he waded into those porkers. "Here, keep to the left!" shouted Sammy. "Mind where you're driving him!" cried Billy. "Look out, it's only one-way traffic this way!"

Oh, what a scene there followed! Oh, what a merry mix-up! The driving was not a success. And before long, pigs, Bunters, and farmer were involved in a struggling heap in the middle of the road. One large porker took Sammy between the legs, and gave him an upside-down view of things.

Then another pig barged underneath Billy's legs, and sent him over his back. The two fat youths clung with loving arms round two fat porkers, and the next moment there was a regular Derby down the lane. "Hi, come back!" howled the farmer. But those pigs did not come back.

They grunted on and on, bearing their unwilling riders, and right up to Greyfriars they scudded. When Gosling, the porter came out of his lodge, he saw two large chunks of bacon racing through the gates, carrying two "eggs"-cited juniors. The race was a dead-heat, and the Bunter Brothers were dead-beat!

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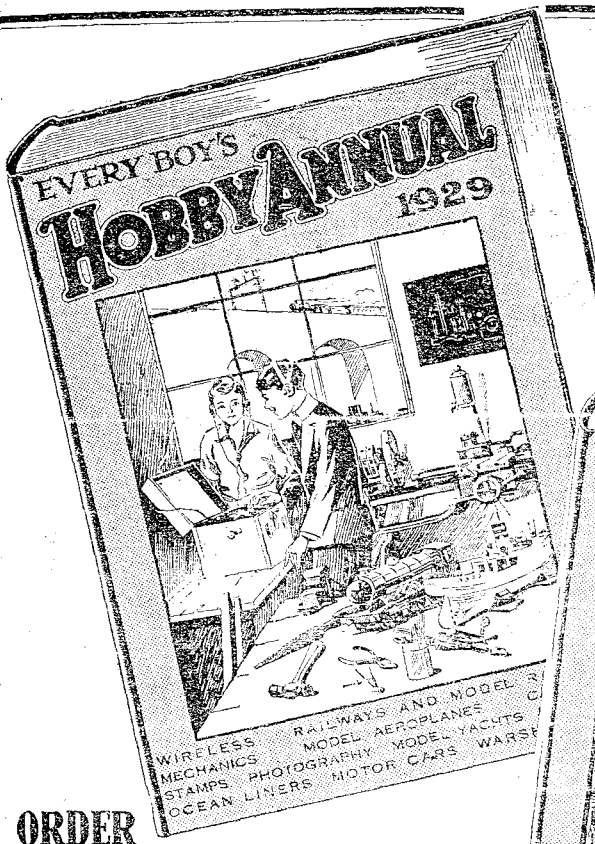

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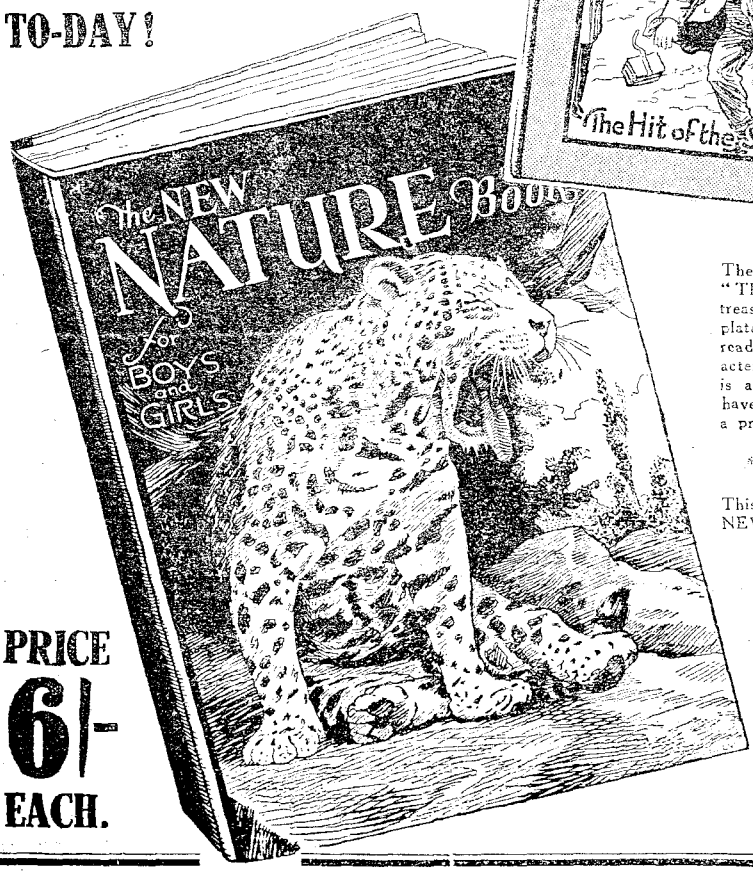

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HERE IS THE BOOK FOR WHICH YOU HAVE BEEN WAITING!

"THE RIO KID!"

(Continued from page 6.)

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
Put Wise!

JUD STARBUCK rolled over on the floor of the jacal, and stared up at the Rio Kid as he entered. For hours—it seemed like days—the rancher of Squaw Mountain had lain there, gagged and bound, waiting; waiting to learn what his fate might be at the hands of the man he had betrayed.

He feared the Rio Kid's return; yet, feared, too, that the Kid would not return, that he was abandoned there to perish of hunger in that untrodden mountain fastness. With mingled relief and fear the rancher saw the Kid at last.

The Kid cut through the ropes that secured his feet, and jerked him up. Starbuck, his hands still bound, eyed him desperately. He could not speak. But the Kid removed the gag from his mouth, and he panted out a question.

"What are you going to do with me?"

"I guess I'll put you wise, pronto!" said the Kid. "You got to wait till then. This a-way."

He gripped the rancher's arm and led him from the jacal. Outside, the afternoon sun was blazing down on the rocks. Starbuck's cramped limbs stumbled as the Kid led him away. The Texas puncher halted at a great rock, and placed the bound man with his back to it. Starbuck leaned there, panting, as the Kid took a six-gun from his belt.

"You—you rustler, you're going to shoot me?" he panted.

"What did you figure on?" asked the Kid carelessly. "You're a poison rattler, Starbuck, and shootin' is too good for you. I guess what you want is a rope and the branch of a cottonwood. A heap of galoots in Pawnee Ford would be glad to give you what you've asked for, if they knew the yellow coyote you are. You sold me out to the sheriff, you durned reptile! I lent you my cayuse to get away from the sheepmen, and that's how you came back on me. Ain't that correct?"

Starbuck gritted his teeth.

"You'll get the rope for this!" he said hoarsely. "Let up, puncher—let up! Shooting me won't buy you anything. I guess I'll help you to get clear of Squaw Mountain, and back to your own country. I'll stake you the roll they took off you at Pawnee Ford. I'll ride you safe off Squaw Mountain with all my outfit to guard you. Let up!"

"I guess when I beat it off Squaw Mountain I ain't looking for any guard!" said the Kid. "That ain't worrying me any. But it sure gets my goat for the sheepmen to allow that I shot up Billy Ward, a man I never heard of. You put that on me, feller."

"I never put it on you!" panted Starbuck. "That fool the sheriff roped you for it—I never reckoned anything of the kind would happen."

"You let him think so."

"Was I to put the rope round my own neck?" snarled Starbuck. "You're talking plumb foolishness. What will it hurt you if them pesky sheepmen think you shot up Billy Ward, when you beat it for your own country? You don't want to care what a bunch of sheepmen think in Wyoming, when you're back in Texas."

"That cuts no ice, feller! Billy Ward was shot down unarmed, and I should sure hate any galoot to think that I shot up a man without giving him a chance. That's what gets my goat."

"I tell you, there's no help for it!" growled Starbuck. "Billy Ward asked for what came to him; and I never knew he hadn't a gun when I pulled on him."

"I guess that's a plumb lie!" said the Kid. "Still, it don't matter. Take a little pasear with me!"

The Kid grasped him by the shoulder and swung him round the corner of the great rock.

Jud Starbuck's eyes almost started from his head as he stared at the two bound men lying there.

Ward was struggling madly with his gag. The Rio Kid stooped, and removed the gags from the mouths of the prisoners.

"You wise to it, too, sheriff?" grinned the Kid.

"Sure!" grunted the sheriff. "You let us loose, puncher, and we'll rope in that murderer, and you can beat it as soon as you like."

Starbuck panted.

The Rio Kid cast loose his bonds.

"Beat it!" he said laconically. "These hombres know now who shot up Billy Ward; and I guess all the section will know it soon. I give you ten minutes to hunt cover before I let them loose on you."

For a moment the Squaw Mountain rancher stood there, panting, desperate. Had he been armed he would have taken his chance with the Rio Kid, in the hope of silencing for ever those who knew of his guilt. But he had no weapon; and all that remained to him was flight—first to his ranch to get a mount, and then by the quickest trail away from Squaw Mountain—a ride for his life with vengeance on the trail. He turned and plunged away down the rocks, with a bitter curse, and vanished.

"Let me loose, puncher!" yelled Ward.

"Give the galoot a chance," said the Kid. "He's sure the yellowest coyote I ever struck; but he's going to have his chance."

And not till ten minutes had elapsed did the Kid loose his prisoners, and then Ward plunged away down the rocks on the track of the fleeing rancher, the sheriff following more slowly.

The hunt for the Rio Kid was ending—it was Jud Starbuck who was the fugitive now. The Kid walked back to the spot where he had left the black-muzzled mustang.

It was by devious ways, by lonely trails and under cover of darkness that night, that the Rio Kid left Squaw Mountains for ever.

Whether Starbuck escaped, or whether the avenger of blood trailed him down, the Kid never knew, and never cared to know. His heart was lighter when he was clear of the Squaw River section at last, and the mighty mass of Squaw Mountain sank below the skyline as he rode southward.

THE END.

(Next week's roaring long complete Western tale contains hundreds of thrills. Don't miss it!)

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