THE CATTLE THAT VANISHED!

Right to the very edge of the prairie the trail of the stolen cattle leads the Rio Kid—then that trail suddenly ends. The rustled cows cannot vanish into thin air—but, where have they been driven? That's a big problem for the Kid!

The SECRET OF THE LOST TRAIL!

By RALPH REDWAY

THRILLING AND DRAMATIC LONG COMPLETE YARN OF THE WILD WEST, STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
From Foes to Friends!

"GREAT snakes!"

Buck Wilson, foreman of the Carson Ranch, stood before the open door of the bunkhouse, shaded his eyes with his hand, and stared.

It was early morning, but the sun was already shining brightly on the wide grasslands. Men were yawning and turning out in the bunkhouse. From the cookhouse came the red glow of the ranch cook's stove, and an appetising smell. Buck Wilson, as he stepped out in the rosy dawn, had been thinking chiefly of breakfast. But he forgot all about bacon and flapjacks and steaming coffee as he sighted the two riders advancing towards the ranch on the trail from the west.

"Great snakes!" he repeated blankly. "It's that young cuss Carfax trailing back; but who's he got with him?"

Five or six punchers joined the foreman, and stood staring at the approaching riders. The Rio Kid was easily recognisable at the distance, but his companion sat his horse like a sack, his head drooping, his face unseen. Evidently it was a sorely-wounded man that the Kid was guiding to the bunkhouse of the Carson Ranch.

"Gee!" exclaimed one of the punchers. "That's Posy Pete! If that young firebug from Texas has shot him up——"

"I guess he wouldn't be bringing him back here if he'd shot him up," said Buck Wilson dryly.

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

"You hustle along to the rancho and call Colonel Carson," said the foreman. "You needn't call young Steve—he's death on that Texas puncher, and we sure don't want any gun-play till we know how we stand. If he's picked up Pete hurt, and toted him home, we sure ain't going to worry him any. You call the colonel, Jake Sanders."

"Sure."

The puncher hurried off to the adobe ranch-house. By that time all the Carson outfit who had been in the bunkhouse had gathered round the foreman to watch the Kid as he came. Even cooky came to the doorway of the cookhouse in his shirt-sleeves, with a saucepan in his hand, to stare at him. The Kid was the centre of all eyes as he rode up at a walking pace, supporting the wounded cowpuncher who sat feebly on the back of his led horse. Laramie Bill darted forward to open a gate for the Kid, and the boy puncher gave him a cheery nod as he rode through.

"Mornin', feller!" greeted the Kid.

"Mornin'!" grinned Bill. "You come back hyer lookin' for a rope and a branch, Carfax?"

"Forget it!" said the Kid; and he rode on to the bunkhouse with Posy Pete.

His progress was slow, and before he reached the group of punchers Colonel Carson came striding down from the rancho. The rancher was on the spot to meet the Kid as the latter drew rein. Buck Wilson on one side, Jake Sanders on the other, caught hold of Posy Pete, who sank into their arms and was lowered gently to the ground and carried into the bunkhouse. The Kid sat in his saddle, eyeing the crowd of punchers, evidently at his ease, and cool as ice, though he knew that guns might leap from their holsters at any moment.

"What does this mean, puncher?" demanded Colonel Carson harshly. "Keep your hands from your guns, I warn you."

"I guess I ain't come a-shooting, feller," answered the kid cheerily. "I've humped in to tote home that puncher, and I reckon if you've got a doc on this ranch, the sooner he gives Posy Pete a look-in, the better. The galoot's got two bullet-holes in him, and he's sure lost a lot of juice."

"He's been shot up?" said Laramie Bill.

"Guessed it in once," said the Kid amiably. "You're sure bright lads in this hyer outfit."

"What we want to know is, who shot him up?" rapped out the rancher.

"I guess he'll tell you when he feels like it," answered the Kid coolly. "You don't want to fire off orders at me, rancher. I guess I ain't a man in your outfit, and I never did stand for being bulldozed. I've toted your galoot home, and I guess it's me for the trail."

"Halt!" snapped the colonel.

"Forget it!" jeered the Kid.

And he wheeled his horse.

"Hold on," said the colonel more gently. "If you came here to bring Pete home, Carfax, you'll go as safe as you came, rustler as you are. But don't ask for trouble, with a dozen guns ready to riddle you with lead."

The Kid laughed, but he turned his horse back.

"I guess my guns would be talking some about the same time," he said cheerily. "But I ain't here hunting for trouble. I keep on telling you that I ain't no rustler, and I guess Posy Pete will tell you the same if you ask him to put you wise."

"That's Buck Wilson's broncho you're riding, and Buck Wilson's guns you've got."

"Sure! I guess I'm ready to trade back if Buck will hand over my cayuse and my shooting-irons. You ain't forgot that you roped them in when you had me a prisoner here, feller?"

Buck Wilson came out of the bunkhouse. His rugged face was very grave.

"Pete allows that that Texas galoot is a white man, boss," he said. "He helped him agin the rustlers at the fork of the Bajo last night, and brought him off when he was shot up by Scar-Face Judson. Pete reckons he would have been rubbed out but for that fresh young cuss."

"The rustlers again!" exclaimed the colonel, knitting his brows.

"Pete allows they've got away with his herd from the Rio Bajo pasture," said the foreman. "That cuss Carfax stood by him like a little man, Pete says."

Colonel Carson's grim face relaxed. He raised his Stetson hat in salute to the Kid.

"If I've been deceived, I ask your pardon, Carfax!" he said courteously. "The look of things was against you when you were brought here, and you can't blame us for being wary of strangers. Give him his horse and his guns, Buck."

"Sure!" said Buck. "I allowed that I'd fill him full of holes at sight for holding me up on the prairie and roping in my cayuse; but arter what he's done for Pete I guess I'm his friend."

"That's hoss-sense," said the Kid, slipping from the saddle of the broncho. "I'll sure be glad to have my own cayuse again."

Buck Wilson brought the mustang from the corral, and from the bunkhouse he fetched the Kid's guns—the walnut-butted guns that the Kid was glad to handle again. He gave them to him with a friendly grin. Colonel Carson had gone into the bunkhouse to speak to the wounded puncher. He came out in

a few minutes, and his look showed that his doubts of the Kid were quite gone. The Kid stood stroking the glossy neck of his mustang when the rancher came up to him.

"You've proved up that you're a white man, Carfax," said the colonel. "The other day you asked me if I had room in my outfit for a good man. There's room for you if you haven't changed your mind."

The Kid eyed him with a rather curious expression.

"Thanks, boss, but I reckon not," he answered. "It's me for Texas when I'm through with the Rio Bajo rustlers. I guess I'm not quitting that trail till I've cinched Scar-Face Judson and his gang. I reckon there ain't room for me in your outfit when it's shooting at sight between me and your nephew Steve Carson."

The colonel frowned.

"Steve believes you to be a rustler," he said. "He will give you the glad hand when he knows that you are to be trusted."

The Rio Kid did not answer that. His feelings towards Steve Carson, who had thrice attempted to shoot him up, were not friendly. And he did not much like the high-handed autocrat of the Carson Ranch, who had ordered him to be kept a prisoner on suspicion. But he respected the grim old rancher, and he could not find it in his heart to tell him what he knew—that Steve was in league with the rustling gang, that the colonel's own nephew was the spy at the ranch who put the rustlers wise to any move that was made against them, and conveyed information to them to facilitate their raids on the herds. When the gang was rounded up—as the Kid was determined they should be—the proud old rancher must learn that one of his own blood was a spy and a traitor; but it was not for the Kid to tell him. Not, indeed, that the colonel would have believed him had he told. The strongest proof would have been required to make Colonel Carson believe that his nephew was a partner of cow-thieves, that he had helped to rob the ranch where he lived, to raise the money to pay gambling debts at Bunch Grass.

"I will speak to my nephew, and explain to him!" said the rancher. "He will give you the glad hand."

The Kid shook his head.

"I reckon I've changed my mind, boss," he answered. "It's me for Texas when I'm through with the rustlers."

"As you like!" said the rancher stiffly. The lord of thousands of rich acres in New Mexico, master of countless herds, was not accustomed to having a request or an offer refused.

"All same, I reckon I've a hunch to ride with your outfit, if you're sending your men after the rustlers," said the Kid. "I've sure always been reckoned a good hand at a trail, if you'uns want a good man. I reckon I'm taking the trail, anyhow."

"The outfit will be glad of your help, Mr. Carfax!" said the colonel. "We're going to make a clean sweep of the rustlers, if I have to stop all work on the ranch till they're rounded up."

"It's a cinch!" said the Kid cheerily.

Colonel Carson walked back to the ranch; and the Rio Kid joined the outfit at breakfast. On all sides he was given a cheery greeting. Once distrust was banished, the punchers were friendly enough to the young cow-man from Texas. The Kid's sunburnt, handsome face was beaming as he ate with the punchers. They were a rough-and-ready, hard-bitten crowd, long-limbed, tanned, reckless, good-humoured; such a bunch as the Kid had ridden with in the old days at the Double-Bar before trouble fell on him and clouded his young life. It was like wine to the Rio Kid, to be one of such a cheery bunch again.

And while he ate and talked with the punchers, the Kid wondered whether he had better not, after all, change his mind again, and accept the rancher's offer, and stay on the Carson ranch for keeps. In his own country of Texas, where he longed to be, the hands of the sheriffs were stretched out for him; he could not ride the old familiar banks of the Rio Frio without a gun ready to his hand; all along the Rio Grande he was a hunted man. Here, in the wild ranch-lands of New Mexico, they had never heard of the Rio Kid; here he would be trusted; here were many friends for the making. The dark days of outlawry, cast behind for ever, would be forgotten at last.

But he shook his head.

The bitter face of Steve Carson rose before his mind's eye. He could not hang up his hat at a ranch where the boss' nephew was his bitter foe, and seeking his life. And if Steve's connection with the rustler gang was proved up, and he went to his just punishment, what were the colonel's feelings likely to be towards the Texan who had been the means of it? The Kid shook his head. Either way the Carson ranch was no place for him—the wide plains and the open trail were the home of the Rio Kid.

But for the moment, at least, the Kid dismissed such thoughts; and he smiled cheerily over a can of steaming coffee. And when the punchers prepared to ride, the Kid saddled up the black-muzzled mustang to ride with them, and he whistled a cheery tune. Many a trouble lay behind him—many a trouble lay before him—but trouble and the Rio Kid were old acquaintances, and his heart was light as he saddled up to ride with the Carson bunch.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The Blind Trail!

"HYER'S the trail!"

Buck Wilson drew rein, and a dozen riders behind him halted. Ten miles from the rancho, the outfit struck the trail of the cattle that had stampeded the night before, driven off by the Judson gang. Wide and trampled lay the trail, and here and there single tracks led off from it, showing where a cow had wandered from the herd; here and there two or three tracks, where frightened cows had scattered. But the main herd had evidently kept together under the driving of the rustlers. In the shining sunlight of the morning it was easy to see that at least a hundred cows had been driven off in a bunch; and the trail was one that any cow-puncher could have followed blindfold.

"I sure reckon we shan't have to ask our way!" the Rio Kid remarked.

But Buck did not look hopeful.

"It's a sure cinch, if it lasts like this," he said. "But them rustlers have a trick of blanketing the trail, like I've told you; and afore we get near the hills, I reckon this hyer trail will peter out."

"'Cording to Carfax, the herd was stampeded," said Laramie Bill. "The rustlers mayn't hev been able to slow them down."

"I guess we'll soon see!" answered the ranch foreman. "Ride on."

The bunch rode in the thick, wide trail left by the herd. So far, it was easy work, and they rode at a gallop. Here and there, they passed the bones of some hapless animal that had fallen in the crowding, and had been trampled on—already picked clean by coyotes and buzzards. The trail ran north-west; and in the west rose the low slopes of the Sierra Baja—rocky, precipitous, seldom trodden, almost trackless. It was easy to guess that the rustlers had driven the cattle into some rocky recess of the hills; but unless a trail was left, a search in those barren wastes would be useless. And Buck Wilson did not believe that a trail would be left.

Somehow—no man knew how—the tracks of the cattle lifted from the Carson ranch were blanketed. It had happened a score of times—once it had happened within the Kid's knowledge, and the mystery of the trail that ended in the midst of the open plain had fairly got his goat. As he rode on with the Carson bunch, the Kid wondered whether this trail was to peter out, without leaving a further sign, as so many had done before.

To a plainsman's eye, it was easy to read where the herd had slowed down, controlled at last by the whips and voices of the rustlers, as they grew fatigued with their wild rush. The hills were still a couple of miles distant when Buck Wilson and his men could read that the cows had been ambling on at a loping walk, under control. No longer could they read sign of hurried, thudding hoofs—it was now the trail of an ordinary cattle-drive. At long last, the rustlers had mastered the stampede, as the herd grew weary, and it had been herded on its way at a moderate pace.

And then—suddenly—the trail ended.

All the bunch had been expecting it, the Rio Kid had been expecting it, from what he had seen before of the work of the Judson gang; and yet it came as a surprise, so strange was it.

Up to a certain point, the trampled trail, though not so deep as at first, was clearly marked: plain traces where hundreds of hoofs had trod. Beyond that point—nothing! Nothing but waving grass to north, to east—and on the west, thinner grass on harder soil that rose in waves and ridges to the low hills. The tracks did not turn back to the south. They did not lead on to the north or west or east. They ceased.

"Shucks!" said the Kid.

Buck Wilson swore savagely.

"I reckoned it would be the same game agin!" he said. "How them coyotes blanket the trail of a herd of steers beats me to a frazzle. But they've done us agin."

The Kid slid from the back of his mustang.

He examined the trail, as he had examined a similar mysterious trail a few days before, when he had picked up, among the cow tracks, the track of a man who limped—the track of Steve Carson.

Now there were no foot-tracks to be seen: only the trail of the cows and the rustlers' horses. And the trail ended.

The whole bunch dismounted to pick up sign. They picked up none, and they gathered in a group, expressing their disappointment in picturesque language. But the Kid was still busy. From what he had already learned of the rustlers, he knew that their camp was in the hills, the Sierra Baja that barred the horizon on the west. It was to the hills that the stolen herd had been driven. But what line had they taken—at what point had they struck the hills?

It was futile to ride on into the hills in the hope of picking up sign. Such a search might have lasted for weeks on end with no result.

The Kid scanned the trail, sorely

puzzled and irritated. The Kid knew the trailer's art to a finish; he hated to be beaten, and never yet had he been beaten at picking up sign on the open llana. But it seemed that the rustlers of the Rio Bajo were to beat him.

He came back at last to the group of waiting punchers. Two or three of them had mounted and ridden off, to round up cows that had wandered from the stolen herd, and that could be found and driven in by searching the grass-lands. The others were watching the Kid rather sarcastically. They liked the Kid, and his frank and cheery ways, and they were all his friends; but they did not opine that a kid puncher from Texas could pick up any sign to which they were blind. The rustlers had beaten them, as they had beaten them a score of times before, and that was all there was to it.

"They're sure smart Alecs, that crowd!" the Kid remarked, as he joined the punchers. "They've got us beat."

"You, too!" grinned Laramie Bill. "I reckoned you was coming back to tell us which way to ride, kid."

"They don't know everything in Texas, arter all!" remarked Jake Sanders; and there was a chuckle from the bunch.

The Kid laughed good-humouredly.

"I guess we don't come over from Texas to learn things about trailing in New Mexico," he said. "But I don't claim to know more than any galoot present."

"You ain't picked up any more tracks of a galoot with a limp?" asked Buck Wilson sarcastically.

The Kid looked at him.

"Nope!" he answered. "I wasn't looking for them, neither; I guess that galoot with a limp wasn't in the show last night. But I've figured it out that the cattle went to the hills——"

"I guess we know that," said Buck. "They'd hide in the hills nat'ral. But where? The Sierra Baja is fifty miles long, and anything from five to ten across. Like to go over it on your hands and knees lookin' for sign?"

"And they went in single file," said the Kid.

There was a general exclamation.

"Oh, carry me home to die!" roared Laramie Bill. "You allow them cows went in single file, like a war-party of Injuns in the old days."

"Sure!"

"Who ever heard of driving cows in single file?" yelled Jake Sanders.

"I guess if you'd heard of it you'd have got wise to this afore," said the Kid coolly. "Them cows went in single file, I keep on telling you. When the rustlers got them in hand they sorted them out and lined them up, and drove them away in a single file one after another."

"And how do you figure that out?" asked Buck Wilson, eyeing the boy puncher curiously, while the rest of the bunch roared.

"I reckon it's hoss-sense," said the Kid. "They've blanketed the trail; and no man on earth could blanket the trail of a herd of cows running promiscous. But I reckon if the cows went one after another in single file, they could blanket the trail. I tell you, every dog-goned cow in that bunch was walked off single—roped, I guess, and made to walk steady, and that's how they was able to blind the trail behind them."

Buck gave a low whistle.

"Stirrin' up the grass where they'd trod, and so on?" he asked. "Injun tricks?"

"That, or some other stunt I ain't

cottoned on to yet," said the Kid. "Some other stunt, I reckon. I've followed a trail in Texas that an Apache had stirred up behind him, and I reckon I could do the same here. It's some other game, and a durned deep game, I'm telling you. That's how they've been able to work this ranch for three years on end and never get pushed to a show-down. I've got a sorter idee at the back of my head, too, but it don't seem to figger out. But I'll get on to it, I tell you sure."

"If we wait till you do, I reckon the boss will want to know what has become of this bunch," grinned Laramie Bill.

"I ain't asking you to hang on, am I?" said the Kid. "Mount and ride, and leave me to it. I guess I'm getting my teeth into this, and I ain't letting go till I've bit to the bone."

The punchers looked at Buck Wilson. The foreman of the Carson Ranch wrinkled his brows in thought.

"Hang on a piece!" he said.

Careless whether they stayed or went, the Rio Kid returned to the trail and resumed his examination of it and of the trackless prairie on either side of the trampled trail.

The bunch stayed. Some of them moved about looking for sign, though with little hope. The rest waited for Buck Wilson to give the order to ride. But the foreman did not give the order. He leaned on his saddle and watched the Kid in silence. Twenty times at least during the past two or three years bunches of cattle had been driven off the Carson ranges, and every time a blind trail had been left and pursuit had been beaten. How it was done no man on the ranch knew—unless it was Steve Carson, who was not likely to tell. But the Kid had, as he said, his teeth in it now, and he was going to worry it through. From the point

The range rustlers thought they were safe from detection—but that's where they made the biggest mistake of their lives. For the Rio Kid is on the trail after them, and when the Kid starts a trail he never lets up till he's made a capture!

where the blind trail ended the Kid moved towards the hills, never at rest, stooping, rising, running, stooping again, staring across the grass under the shade of his hand, unconscious now of the watching punchers, only concentrated on the work of penetrating the mystery of the blind trail.

And suddenly the Kid straightened up, and waved his hand and whooped.

"Gee-whiz!"

With a rush the punchers swept down on him. Buck Wilson was the first to reach the Kid.

"What you got?" he panted.

"The goods!" answered the Rio Kid.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Tracked Down!

THE Kid's eyes were dancing.

Seldom had the boy puncher felt so elated as he felt now. Sheer patience and hard thought had beaten the problem he had been up against, and he had the clue in his hands. He was sure now that he had penetrated the mystery that had baffled the Carson outfit for years on end.

But the punchers gazed at him blankly after a swift glance round. The grassy ground told them nothing at this spot, a hundred yards from the trampled trail of the stampede.

"You got the goods?" repeated Buck.

"Sure!"

"Spill it!" grunted Laramie Bill.

The Kid smiled.

"Look!" he said.

In the soft grassy earth, close by where the Kid stood, was an indentation. It was not a deep track, but it was a track; and once the attention of the punchers was directed to it they knew what it was well enough. The forefoot of a cow had trodden there; every man in the bunch knew that, and they stared curiously at it. For there was no other track of a cow anywhere near, and that single track of a single hoof was strange and uncanny.

"Shucks!" muttered Laramie Bill. "I guess this gets me beat! I want to know how a cow trod there on one foot?"

"I guess I'll put you wise, then," grinned the Kid. "The cow trod there with one foot, old-timer, because the other three were on something that kept that pesky cow from leaving tracks."

"How the thunder——"

"Look at it," said the Kid. "Here we are the length of half a dozen ropes from the trail, to the west of it—making for the hills. That cow wasn't carried so far on a man's shoulders, was it? That cow walked without leaving a track. That was because it walked on something spread over the grass to stop the tracks. But leetle accidents will happen when a gang are driving a herd in single file with a hundred head to handle. I guess they was mighty careful and spry not to leave more sign than this. Jest here that cow put one foot off'n the thing, whatever it was, jest for one step. But that was enough to leave this sign."

"Gee!" said Buck Wilson.

He drew a deep breath.

"But what you reckon they put down for a long file of a hundred cows to walk over, Kid?" he asked.

"Search me!" said the Kid. "I guess it wasn't their blankets. I've known a couple of Injuns to blind a trail by puttin' down their blankets an' walkin' on them, one after another, and pickin' them up, and so on; but they couldn't work a riffle like that with a hundred head of cows. It would take them too long. But it was somethin' of the sort; p'raps a roll of blanket stuff—p'raps a hundred blankets joined end on end."

"Oh, sho!"

"I figured it out that that was sure the way they worked the riffle," said the Kid. "And I sure reckoned that if a file of cows was walking one after another along a thing like that, one of

them would step aside sooner or later, spry as the drivers might be, and leave sign. And I guess that that's what's happened hyer."

Buck Wilson rubbed his bearded chin thoughtfully. It was a new idea to him, and his mind was slow to take it in. Yet it was the only way of explaining that single track of a hoof.

"If you've got it, Kid," he said, at last, "we'll sure pick up some more sign like this if we look."

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

"Spread out and look for sign, you-

had hope now, and the certainty that the secret of the trail was known. It was a matter of time and patience; and through the long, hot afternoon the bunch worked patiently.

The sun was sinking over the Sierra Baja, a long day of hard trailing was drawing to its close, when the Rio Kid picked up a half-smoked cigarette from the grass. The grass was thin at this point, growing sparser on the stony soil that rose in ridges towards the foothills. The Kid held up his find, and grinned.

see for what they walked across on," answered the Kid cheerfully.

"Oh, shucks!" grunted Jake.

The Kid laughed, and proceeded to search the rocky, sloping sides of the draw. The bunch watched him impatiently; most of them grimly disappointed, under the impression that they had followed, after all, a false trail.

But the Rio Kid knew that he had not followed a false trail, and he was patient. The cows had crossed the narrow barranca, and they had not jumped it. There had been, the Kid

SIGN AT LAST! The waiting punchers saw the Kid straighten up suddenly, wave his hand, and whoop. "Gee-whiz!" With a rush they came sweeping down on him. "What have you found?" asked Buck Wilson. "The lost trail!" answered the Kid. *(See Chapter 2.)*

'uns," said Buck. "The boss will be joining us some time, and I reckon I'd be glad to have some news for him that we're on the trail of the cows."

The punchers spread out in a wide circle, every man keen and eager. Now that the Kid had given the clue they knew what to look for. No man would have been likely to heed or observe a single track in the grassy ground, far from the trail. But now that the Kid had put his finger on the secret, they knew what to search for.

Under the blazing sun, heedless of fatigue, the search went on; and it was an hour later that Laramie Bill, at a point much nearer the hills, lifted his hand, and shouted. There was a rush to the spot, and Laramie pointed to a track—once more the hoof of a cow.

"I guess that cinches it!" said Buck Wilson. "We ain't goin' to believe that a one-legged cow was cavortin' around hyer. The critter had the other feet on a blanket, or suthin'."

"Jest that!" said the Kid.

"It's a cinch!" said Jake Sanders. "That Texas kid has put us wise, and I reckon we're on the trail at last."

"We sure are!" said Buck.

The punchers were nearer to the openings of the hills now. With eager eyes they searched, and once more a sign was picked up. The direction now was back towards the south, proving that the rustlers had not made a bee-line for the hills when they started to blanket the trail of the stolen cows.

At what point they had struck the hills still remained to be discovered, and the bunch knew that they had a long and weary task before them. But they

Ten minutes later the bunch entered a stony draw that led into the hills. Here the ground was hard and rocky.

The Kid scanned it.

"I reckon they let up on blanketing the trail hyer," he remarked. "These durned rocks wouldn't leave any sign. But I reckon for sure that we've struck the place where they drove the cows into the hills, you-uns."

"We sure have!" said Laramie Bill.

The bunch followed the draw. The hard rock bore no sign, but it was clear that if the stolen herd had been driven into the draw they had been driven through it and beyond.

But at the upper end of the draw they were stopped by a barranca—a deep fissure three feet wide in the narrowest place, that ran from side to side across the way.

"Oh, shucks!" exclaimed Laramie Bill. "That lets us out!"

"They never got cows to jump that!" said another of the punchers, shaking his head. "That's a cinch!"

"They wouldn't have come this way, with that durned barranca to stop the cows!" said Jake Sanders.

The Kid grinned.

"I guess they came this way, jest because that durned barranca was there," he answered. "I guess they figure that any moss-head who got on the trail would let up when he got to that hole in the ground, reckoning that cows never jumped it, for sure."

"Then how did they get the cows across, durn your hide?" demanded Jake warmly. "Mean to say that a cow could be got to jump it?"

"Nope! I reckon I'm going to look-

opined, some sort of a bridge, and he was searching for a sign of it.

He leaped across the barranca, and a few minutes later disappeared behind a thick screen of stunted pines and trailing juniper that grew against a wall of rock.

Then his shout was heard.

"This-a-way, you-uns!"

"What's he got now?" grunted Jake.

Buck Wilson hurried after the Kid, and the bunch followed. They joined him behind the screen of pines and creepers. He was standing in an opening of the rocky wall—a narrow cave that ran back for a dozen feet, widening farther on in the cliff.

"I guess we've got the goods!" grinned the Kid.

"Gee-whiz!"

On the stony earth lay a wooden gangway, with side-rails, built of pinewood, and roped together. Evidently it was the bridge that had been used across the barranca. But that was not all.

Farther on in the cave were four great rolls of blankets. The Kid had jerked loose the end of one, revealing a number of wide, thick blankets sewn end to end, like a roll of carpet.

"Gee!" said Buck Wilson, with a deep breath. "Gee! This sure cinches it, fellers!"

"It sure does!" said Jake. "I guess I take off my hat to you, Texas!"

The Kid laughed.

"I reckon they left their fixings here, ready for next time," he remarked. "It was sure a pesky deep game. They unrolled them blankets and walked the

(Continued on page 27.)

THE SECRET OF THE LOST TRAIL!

(Continued from page 15.)

cows along them from where we lost the trail right into that draw. It was sure a spry galoot that worked out a stunt like that; and I guess he got away with it all right, as you 'uns tell me that they've been working the Carson ranges for three years on end, and no galoot ever got on their track all that time."

"I guess the boss will be jumpin' for joy when he lights on this," said Buck Wilson. "We've got them rustlers now. It was a lucky day for this bunch when you moseyed on to the Carson range, Kid Carfax. Git on with it; I reckon we ain't fur behind them scallywags now."

Leaving the cave and the barranca behind, the bunch pursued their way into the hills. In the sinking sunlight shadows were lengthening, and every man in the bunch was fatigued. But they did not think of fatigue now. The secret of the lost trail was discovered at last, and they were on the track of Scar-Face Judson and his gang. And it was soon evident that once in the pathless hills, the rustlers had been less careful in the matter of leaving sign. There were no tracks on the rocky soil; but the Kid picked up a burnt match and a cigarette-end, and Laramie Bill found a half-smoked cigar; and at a creek in a deep canyon there were ample signs where the cows had stopped to drink.

At that point the rustlers had not doubted that they were far beyond the possibility of trailing. From the creek the bunch pressed on up the canyon, every man keeping his gun at hand now, for it was more than likely that they were drawing near to the spot where the stolen cows had been halted at the headquarters of the rustlers.

And suddenly, as they rode round a bend of the winding canyon, a Stetson hat bobbed into view, and a man who was leaning idly against a rock reached for the rifle that stood beside him and gripped it.

"Hands up!" roared the Kid.

His six-gun bore full on the startled rustler, his eyes blazed over the levelled barrel.

For a second the man gripped the rifle; then he let it drop at his feet, and lifted his hands above his head.

"Keep 'em up!" said the Kid grimly, as he rode closer. "And if you let out a howl, hombre, it will be the last yaup you give on this side of Jordan!"

"I guess it's your say-so!" said the rustler, shrugging his shoulders. "I ain't asking for mine."

"You've got a riata, Jake Sanders; rope up this galoot and fix him so that he can't yelp!" said the Kid.

"You bet!" grinned Jake. "I guess I know that galoot; I've sure seen him down at Bunch Grass, spreading dollars he never earned. You're in Scar-Face Judson's gang, Tennessee."

"You've got me!" answered the rustler. "I sure want to know how you hit the trail hyer. Jud allowed that no galoot ever would hit the trail to this canyon. I reckon some scallywag has squealed."

"Nobody has squealed," grinned Jake. "This kid from Texas has sure picked up the trail, Tennessee, that beat us all to a frazzle. Put your paws hyer, you pizen cow-thief!" With his riata the cowpuncher bound the rustler's hands behind his back, and then roped up his legs. "I guess we'll leave you safe when we ride on to wipe out the gang. How far on are they now?"

"Search me!" answered Tennessee.

Buck Wilson jammed the muzzle of a six-gun under Tennessee's ear. His eyes gleamed over it.

"How fur on are the gang?" he asked grimly. "You've got jest one minute to squeal, you durned cow-thief."

"I guess you don't want to burn powder on me, foller," answered Tennessee coolly. "The camp's a quarter of a mile on if you foller the canyon—and I guess you'll catch them napping."

"You're the only man on watch?"

"Sure!"

"How many at the camp?"

"More'n a dozen."

"Stick a gag in his mouth," said Buck. "We'll ride on; and if we find another man on the watch, you put a bullet through this galoot's head before you come on and jine up, Jake."

"Sure!"

"Hyer, hang on!" gasped Tennessee. "There's sure another galoot on guard, now I remember; you'll find him at a bunch of pines half-way to the camp. I sure disremembered for a minute."

"I guess you've remembered in time to save your life, you skunk!" said the ranch foreman. "Stick a chunk of rope in his jaws! I guess we'll get the other man quiet if we can——"

"Leave him to me," said the Kid. "You 'uns wait here a piece." He slipped from his horse and disappeared up the winding canyon.

It was a quarter of an hour later that the Rio Kid came back, in the thickening shadows of the falling night. There was a grin on his face as he rejoined the bunch.

"You got him, Kid?" asked Buck.

"I reckon he never knew what hit him," answered the Kid coolly. "The way's clear now. Ride!"

And the bunch pressed on up the rocky canyon, every man with a gun in his hand, for the camp of the rustlers.

(How will this gallant band of punchers fare against the desperate range rustlers? See next week's topping long complete Western yarn, entitled: "ROUNDING UP THE RUSTLERS!" by Ralph Redway. It's packed full of breathless adventure!)

ADD INCHES TO YOUR HEIGHT BY MY SIMPLE METHOD. Amongst my numerous clients are many who are now in the Police, having been enabled to pass through by gaining the necessary inches and physique which my system has imparted. Send for my beautifully illustrated booklet and full particulars. Enclose 2d. stamp.—**PERCIVAL CARNE, 39, Lincoln Street, Cardiff, S. Wales.**

25 UNUSED COLONIALS AND 100 DIFFERENT STAMPS FREE!! An extraordinary offer. Send 2d. postage requesting approvals. **LISBURN & TOWNSEND, London Road, Liverpool.**

BLUSHING.—FREE to all sufferers, particulars of a proved home treatment that quickly removes all embarrassment, and permanently cures blushing and flushing of the face and neck. Enclose stamp to pay postage to—**Mr. A. TEMPLE (Specialist), Palace House, 128, Shaftesbury Avenue (2nd Floor), London, W.1.** *(Established over 20 years.)*

STOP STAMMERING! Cure yourself as I did. Particulars Free.—**FRANK B. HUGHES, 7, SOUTHAMPTON ROW, LONDON, W.C.1.**

ACTIVE AGENTS WANTED to sell Private Christmas Cards. Experience not essential. Highest Commission. Valuable Prizes. Free Sample Book. Apply: **DENTON & CO., Dept. D.13, ACCRINGTON.**

THE WORLD'S BEST PEA PISTOL

Not until you own a 50 Shot AUTOMATIC can you enjoy the fun of pea shooting to the full. Built on the lines of a real automatic, it is the super pea pistol. Its magazine holds 50 shots, which are fired with force and precision. Post free, 2/6. The well-known 25 Shot Automatic, post free, 2/-. The popular 17 Shot Triumph, post free, 1/2.—**R. DILNOT (Dept. T), 128, Chiswick High Road, London, W.4.**

All applications for Advertisement Space in this publication should be addressed to the Advertisement Manager, UNION JACK SERIES, The Fleetway House, Farringdon St., London, E.C.4.

GET THIS FINE PEA PISTOL!

50 SHOT AUTOMATIC REPEATER PEA PISTOL. Perfect rapid repeating action. Finest shooter yet produced. Great fun-maker. 2/6, post free. **25 SHOT AUTOMATIC MAGAZINE PISTOL.** Very popular. 2/-, post free. Both heavy make. Well-known **17 SHOT "TRIUMPH" REPEATER.** 1/2, post free. Ammunition with each pistol.

Colonial, postage 6d. extra.

NORWOODS (Dept. A), 3, FINSBURY SQUARE, LONDON, E.C.2.

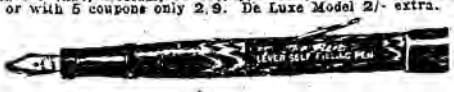
DON'T BE BULLIED

Send Four Penny Stamps for **TWO SPLENDID LESSONS** in **JUJITSU** and Handsome Photo Plate of Jap Champions. The Wonderful Japanese Self-Defence without weapons. Take care of yourself under **ALL** circumstances; fear no man. You can have **MONSTER** Illustrated Portion for P.O. 3/9. **SEND NOW** to **"YAWARA" (Dept. A.P.), 10, Queensway, Hanworth, Feltham, Middlesex.** Practical Tuition, Richmond and London Schools Daily.

CINEMA FILMS! Up to 5-Reelers for Sale, Hire, Exchange. Sample Reel 5/-, or 100 ft. 1/-. Pt. Pd. MACHINES, 12/6 to £12.—"FILMS," 34, Beaufoy Road, Tottenham.

FREE! (Abroad 6d.) Scarce Set of 6 Japan EARTHQUAKE STAMPS and 25 different BRITISH COLONIALS, to all asking to see Approvals.—W. A. WHITE, Engine Lane, LYE, Stourbridge.

CUT THIS OUT VALUE 3d.

"POPULAR" PEN COUPON.

Send 5 of these coupons with only 2/9 (and 2d. stamp) direct to the **FLEET PEN CO., 119, Fleet Street, E.C.4.** By return you will receive a handsome lever self-filling **FLEET FOUNTAIN PEN** with solid gold nib (fine, medium, or broad), usually 10/6. Fleet Price 4/-, or with 5 coupons only 2/9. De Luxe Model 2/- extra.