OUR LONG COMPLETE WESTERN YARN WITH A KICK IN EVERY CHAPTER!

His fierce hatred of the Rio Kid, and his longing for revenge upon him leads Barney Baker, late foreman of the Lazy-O ranch, to commit an action which brings about his own downfall. But even though the consequences prove disastrous for Barney, so do they for the Kid!

BARNEY BAKER'S LAST TRAIL!

By Ralph Redway.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Beat It, Barney!

LONG BILL, the horse-wrangler of the Lazy O Ranch, stepped into the open doorway of the bunk-house.

Behind Long Bill came Shorty, the puncher, and seven or eight other men of the Lazy O bunch.

There was one man in the bunk-house, Barney Baker, one-time foreman of the ranch, and boss of the bunch, monarch of all he surveyed in the wide grasslands that stretched along the valley of the Rio Pecos.

Barney sat on the edge of his bunk, his hard, unshaven face grim and savage in look.

He knew that there was going to be trouble.

The murmuring voices of the punchers had reached him for some time—a deep and threatening murmur. Now they had come, and he knew that they had come for him.

The foreman of the Lazy O had a revolver in his hand, resting on his knee, as he sat on the bunk. What the bunch intended he did not know, but he knew that it was trouble.

Black and bitter was Barney's hard face. Only a short time before he had been undisputed master of the Lazy O, and every man in the outfit had jumped to do his bidding. Now, of all the bunch, only one man stood for him—Coyote Jenson; and the Coyote, just then, was hitting the trail for White Pine as fast as his cayuse could carry him. Barney was alone at the Lazy O, among foes who had once been friends.

It was the coming of the new boss, Mister Fairfax, that had made all the difference, and Barney's hatred of the boy rancher, his longing for revenge upon him, burned fiercely in his heart. Had Mister Fairfax been among the crowd that surged in at the doorway of the bunkhouse, Barney would have been tempted to lift his gun and pull the trigger, reckless of what would follow. But Mister Fairfax was not there; he was riding the plains far away towards Packsaddle.

Barney's eyes glinted at the crowd of cowmen. Their faces were as grim as his own.

"Say, you'uns, what's this rookus about?" growled Barney.

Long Bill came to a halt a few feet from the foreman. His followers halted behind him. One or two of the punchers had drawn their guns. All eyes were fixed threateningly on the haggard, sullen man in the bunk.

"I guess we've come for you, Barney," said Long Bill.

"You moseyed in to tell me that you're standing by me agin that meddling guy Fairfax?" asked Barney, with bitter sarcasm.

"Not any," answered the horse-wrangler. "Cut it out, Barney. That game's played out!"

"It sure is," said Shorty. "This bunch is standing for Mister Fairfax, and don't you forget it, Barney Baker."

"You dog-goned, pesky bunch of greasers!" growled Barney. "What you got agin me? Ain't we stood together for years, and kept the Lazy O in our own hands, and scared off every boss that bought the ranch, till this scallywag Fairfax moseyed in, and got you all scared to a frazzle? What grouch have you got, you durned bunch of coyotes?"

"Aw, can it!" said Long Bill. "You played a low-down game agin Mister Fairfax, and the bunch would never have stood for it, if they'd knowed. You got all shot up in an ambush you laid for the boss on the prairie. This bunch never stood for shooting a guy in the back, Barney. You sure got what you was asking for; and I'm telling you that that guy Fairfax is a man-size galoot, and good enough for this bunch. This bunch knows a white man when we see one, Barney, and Mister Fairfax is the whitest man that ever struck the Lazy O."

"You've said it, Bill!" agreed Shorty.

"Mister Fairfax has let you hang on here till you was mended enough to ride," went on Long Bill, "and all the time you've been trying to double-cross him, and get the ranch off'n him agin. I guess he was some bonehead not to boot you off the ranch as soon as he knowed your game. You're making out to be still a sick man, jest to keep on here and work agin the boss, but you can sit a bronc if you want. And I guess you're hitting the horizon afore you're an hour older, Barney Baker."

"Mister Fairfax's orders?" sneered Barney.

"Nope. Mister Fairfax is out on the plains, and he don't know nothin' about this here rookus," answered the horse-wrangler. "This bunch is giving you orders to quit, Barney."

"The bunch can go to the hot place!" snarled Barney. "What you got agin me, you all-fired scallywags?"

"You've been telling Buck Sidgers, the marshal of Packsaddle, that the boss is that fire-bug from the Rio Grande they call the Rio Kid!"

Barney's eyes glittered.

"It's sure straight goods," he said. "That guy that calls himself Fairfax is the Rio Kid, the outlaw that's wanted by half the sheriffs in Texas."

"Aw, forget it!" snapped Long Bill. "I'll tell a man, Buck was snickering fit to bust a button when he told me what you'd said about the boss. He don't take it in any."

"Buck Sidgers is a locoed bonehead," snarled Barney. "I'll tell the world the boss is the Rio Kid, and I know it!"

There was a growl of angry derision from the punchers. Not a man believed a word of the accusation.

"I'm telling you, Mister Fairfax is that fire-bug the Rio Kid," went on the foreman savagely. "I saw him once at White Pine shooting up the town. There's guys at White Pine that would give a stack of dollars to get a bead on him!"

"I guess that's a plumb lie!" said Long Bill. "You want to make out you saw the Rio Kid once, and you say Mister Fairfax is him, and all this time he's been at the ranch you ain't let on to it. Shucks!"

"I never was able to recognise him," said Barney sullenly. "It wasn't till I saw him riding the Rio Kid's cayuse, Side-Kicker, that I knowed for sure. He was riding that mustang when he shot up White Pine three months ago."

"Can it, you gink," said Long Bill. "The boss got that cayuse from Jim Hall, the Texas Ranger, who roped it in when he was hunting the Kid. You figure that Jim Hall would let up on the Rio Kid and give him back his cayuse?"

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"He squared that dog-goned Ranger somehow."

"I guess you're plumb loco," said Long Bill. "But even if it was as you say, you dog-goned geck, what sort of a yellow coyote do you call yourself, giving the guy away? Ain't there a heap guys in Packsaddle that have had trouble, and come to Packsaddle to keep out of the way of the sheriffs? Why, you yourself, you durned skunk, you don't dare to ride into the San Antone country, and every man in the bunch knows it."

Barney's answer was a curse.

"This here bunch ain't no collection of tin angels," went on Long Bill. "Most of the boys have hit trouble one time or another. Packsaddle's full of such guys. Why they'd lynch you in town if they was wise to it that you was putting the law on to a guy that was taking cover. Heap plenty guys in Packsaddle wouldn't feel safe if they knowed there was a skulking coyote around giving a man away."

Barney was sullenly silent.

So far as the Lazy O bunch were concerned, he had made a bad break in accusing Mister Fairfax to the town marshal. Buck Sidgers might be glad of a chance of cinching an outlaw, if he believed the accusation. But the wild section was a refuge for many who had had trouble with the law, many of the Lazy O bunch among them, and Barney himself for that matter. In Packsaddle it was an unwritten law that a galoot did not horn into another galoot's private history.

"You dog-goned pesky polecat," went on Long Bill, "you got a grouch agin Mister Fairfax, and you'd set the sheriffs on him, if you knew how. If you got a grouch agin me, or Shorty here, or Mexican Dave, or any of the bunch, you'd do the same. I guess no guy in Packsaddle is safe with you around, Barney. You double-crossing scallywag, you're quitting, pronto. There ain't no room on the Lazy O for a squealer!"

"There sure ain't!" said Shorty.

"Mister Fairfax has let you hang on, you making out you wasn't fit to ride," jeered Long Bill. "I guess you've fooled him some. You was able to ride days ago, if you'd wanted. Now you're riding, Barney. You got ten minutes to pack your traps, and if you ain't absquatulated by then, you'll be put! You get me?"

Barney Baker gripped his revolver convulsively.

Three or four guns were lifted at once. There were grim faces behind them.

"Put down that barker!" snapped Long Bill. "I guess if you burn powder, Barney, you'll get yours so sudden you won't know what hit you."

"You sure will, Barney!" said Shorty, looking at the foreman over the levelled barrel of a Colt, his finger on the trigger.

Barney spat out a curse, and the gun went with a clatter to the floor of the bunkhouse.

He rose to his feet.

"I'll git!" he snarled. "But this here ranch ain't seed the last of me, and don't you forget it! I guess I'll be running this ranch, with a new bunch, after Mister Fairfax has been roped in and swung up to the branch of a cottonwood."

"Forget it!" jeered Long Bill.

The punchers crowded out of the bunkhouse. Barney Baker, with a black brow, made his preparations for departure.

The horse-wrangler brought his broncho from the corral.

Barney came out of the bunkhouse, and the punchers stood round, looking on, as he packed his roll behind the saddle.

Slowly, reluctantly, Barney Baker mounted the broncho.

He sat in the saddle, taking his last look round at the wide grasslands of the Lazy O, where he had so long ruled as master.

"Beat it!" grunted Long Bill.

Barney gave him a bitter look.

"I'm hitting the trail!" he said, between his teeth. "But you'll see me again—and the Rio Kid will see me again!"

"Aw, beat it, you geck!"

Barney gave a savage glance round at the circle of unfriendly faces.

It was on his lips to tell the bunch that the Coyote even then was riding

hard for White Pine, seventy miles down the Pecos, with news for Jake Nixon, the sheriff—news where the Rio Kid was to be found.

But Barney checked himself.

That was his own secret, and when the blow fell he calculated on its taking "Mister Fairfax" by surprise.

He realised that even had the Lazy O bunch believed that Mister Fairfax was indeed the celebrated boy outlaw of the Rio Grande they would have stood for him all the same. Mister Fairfax had won the hearts of the rough bunch, and they were devoted to him as they never had been to Barney. Likely enough they would stand for him when the sheriff of White Pine came for the Kid. Barney shut his teeth on his secret.

Long Bill cracked his quirt.

"Beat it, Barney!" he repeated.

Slowly the fallen foreman of the Lazy O set his broncho in motion. The bunch watched him in grim silence.

At the gate Barney turned to take a last look at the ranch, to bestow a last savage scowl on the bunch who had turned him down and turned him out.

He shook a clenched fist at the grim faces.

"You'll see me again!" he shouted. "You durned pack of pesky coyotes, you'll see me agin, and I guess I'll run every galoot of you off'n this ranch when I come back. I guess——"

Bang!

Long Bill's revolver roared, and the bullet cut through the brim of the foreman's Stetson.

"Now git!" growled Long Bill.

Bang, bang! Crack, crack! came the reports of half a dozen guns. Bullets buzzed like mosquitoes round the savage-faced rider. Barney grabbed his reins, drove his spurs into the flanks of the broncho, and dashed away at a gallop. The punchers rushed to the gateway after him, still firing; "fanning" the galloping horseman with bullets till he disappeared in the high grass in the distance.

"I guess that puts paid to Barney Baker!" growled the horse-wrangler, as the foreman's Stetson vanished in the blue distance. "I guess this here ranch will be healthier without that skunk around."

"You've said it," agreed Shorty.

Barney Baker was gone.

To his threats no man in the outfit paid heed; none expected to see Barney Baker again on the trails of the Lazy O. But the savage-faced man who spurred his horse across the rolling prairie swore to himself, with many a bitter oath, that the Lazy O bunch were not yet through with him.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Danger Ahead!

"IT'S sure going to be good, old hoss!"

The Rio Kid spoke to the grey mustang with the black patch, a habit he had fallen into in the old days of outlawry, when Side-Kicker had been his only companion on lonely trails.

The days of outlawry lay behind the Kid.

Few who saw the handsome young rancher riding the mustang would have figured that he had ever been an outlaw.

It was going to be good for the Rio Kid now. A new life lay before Mister Fairfax, boss of the Lazy O.

In the new life, ranching the Packsaddle country, dangers had come; but they had passed. Mule-Kick Hall, the Texas ranger, had found him out; but Mule-Kick Hall had given him his chance to lead a new life on the right side of the law. Buck Sidgers, the marshal of Packsaddle, was wise to his secret, but Buck was standing his friend. In the Packsaddle country no one else knew, save Barney Baker, the unscrupulous foreman who had striven to rob the new ranch boss of his ranch. And Barney, the Kid figured, could only suspect—his suspicion fed on hatred and revenge.

The Kid, as he rode back to the Lazy O in the golden Texas afternoon, was in a cheery mood. Dangers had come and gone, and now his only peril lay in Barney Baker, the wounded foreman of the Lazy O, still bandaged in the bunkhouse. And with Barney the Kid was prepared to deal.

Had the Kid been the fire-bug, the merciless gunman, that his reputation made him out to be, there would have been no danger from Barney Baker. Many a man in Packsaddle would have shot Barney for much less than Barney had done. But wild as was the reputation of the Kid, he was not the man to burn powder if he could help it.

But he was going to secure Barney's silence. Whether Barney knew, or whether he only suspected, he was not going to tell all Packsaddle what he had told Buck Sidgers.

And the Kid's cheery face became graver as he thought over that problem. Barney had to be silenced; and the Kid was not the galoot to silence him with a bullet through the heart, though few hombres in Texas would have put it past the Kid to do that very thing.

The Kid, thinking it out, figured that he would get Barney away from the Lazy O, pronto, and get him somewhere where he could not talk. He knew of a bunch of thief-Apaches in the Staked Plain, who would look after Barney for him. Or, if his enemy preferred, he would give him an even break, man to man, and gun to gun, with the Lazy O Ranch as the prize for the victor. His treacherous enemy could not justly ask better than that. Anyhow, he reckoned he could handle Barney; and with his last enemy's mouth closed Mister Fairfax would never hear of the Rio Kid again. The name of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande would live only in tales told round the camp-fire and over the bars in the cow-towns. And the Kid was only too keen to let his name and fame die out of men's memory. It was sorely against his own will that he had been driven into outlawry; and with a light heart he would throw the shadowed past behind him.

With a clatter of hoofs the Kid rode up to the ranch, lifted Side-Kicker over the gate, and rode on towards the bunkhouse. Five or six of the bunch gathered to salute him as he rode in.

The Kid dismounted, and Long Bill led Side-Kicker away to the corral. Some of the punchers looked rather curiously at Mister Fairfax as he walked into the bunkhouse. They did not believe the tale that Barney had told, but it interested them all the more in the boy rancher who had come to the Lazy O and tamed the wildest bunch in Texas.

"Say, Barney!" said the Kid, as he entered the bunkhouse.

He halted, breathing quickly.

Barney Baker's bunk was empty, and there was no sign of the foreman in the building.

The Kid, with a strange expression on his face, stepped out again. He had given Barney Baker orders to quit as soon as he was able to ride; but well he knew that Barney did not aim to leave the Lazy O if he could help it. He had had no doubt of finding him there.

The Kid glanced round at the punchers.

"Say you'uns, where's Barney?" he asked.

"Quit, boss!" answered Mexican Dave.

"Quit?" repeated the Kid.

Long Bill came back from the corral.

"Barney's hit the trail, boss," he said. "I guess this bunch made him hit it, sir. Say, he's been telling Buck Sidgers that you was that fire-bug from the Rio Grande, the Rio Kid. I guess it fed-up this bunch."

"It sure did!" said Shorty.

The Kid breathed a little hard.

"How long's Barney been gone?" he asked.

"More'n an hour, I reckon."

"And he ain't coming back?"

Long Bill grinned.

"I guess not, boss! He sure knows that if he hits the Lazy O agin, this bunch would ride him out on a rail."

"Sure!" said Shorty.

"You ain't mad with us, boss, for booting Barney off?" asked Long Bill. "We sure knowed he was playing possum, and he was able to ride long ago if he'd wanted. He's sure a pizen skunk, is Barney."

The Kid shook his head.

It was devotion to the new boss that had made the bunch turn Barney Baker off the ranch. The Kid was not likely to be angry at that. But Barney Baker was a free man now, his tongue unchecked. In a few hours all Packsaddle would know what Barney could tell. They might not believe, and more likely than not the tale would be laughed at. But there was danger in it for Mister Fairfax. It was Mister Fairfax's game never to let the Rio Kid's name be spoken, or even whispered, in connection with his own.

"I guess it's O.K., you'uns," said the Kid cheerily. "It sure was time that cuss Barney hit the trail. He can blow off his mouth all he likes at Packsaddle, and it sure won't worry me any."

The Kid walked away to the ranch-house.

Long Bill and the punchers glanced after him. They did not believe that he was the Rio Kid, as Barney Baker had averred. Yet, as in the case of Buck Sidgers, the accusation left a lingering doubt in their minds. Mister Fairfax surely had not been so surprised to hear it as might have been expected. He had not denied it, but had let the subject pass without comment. That was not exactly the way a galoot would act who was accused of being the most talked-of outlaw in all Texas. They did not believe it against him, yet they gave one another curious looks.

"There ain't nothing to it," said Long Bill slowly. "Barney was jest shouting off his mouth because he's got a big grouch agin the boss."

"You've said it," said Shorty.

"All same, he sure does ride like they say the Kid rides," said Long Bill. "Look at the way he handled Apache, the maddest broncho in Packsaddle. I 'member saying that nobody could ride that cayuse excepting the Rio Kid. And Mister Fairfax rode him."

"He sure did!" said a puncher. "I guess he's as good a man with a hoss as the Kid himself. But he ain't the Kid, not by a whole jugful!"

"He ain't!" agreed Long Bill. "But if he was, it was a dirty, low-down game for Barney to give him away, seeing as Barney himself had to ride from sheriffs in San Antone country, and a heap of galoot in Packsaddle have done the same. If the boss was the

Rio Kid, fellers, here's one guy that's standing for him all the same!"

"You bet your life, Bill!" said several voices.

"But he ain't the Kid," concluded Long Bill. He believed what he said, yet there was a lack of conviction in his voice.

Mister Fairfax went into the ranch-house.

He ate his supper with his usual good appetite, and in the rich red sunset went out on the porch, to sit in the rocker and look over the wide grass-lands—a view of which the Kid's eyes never tired.

But the boss of the Lazy O was not looking over his extensive property with the same careless satisfaction as hitherto.

His thoughts were busy.

The bunch stood by him, he knew that. They discredited the story told by the revengeful foreman, a wild enough story in itself. But it happened to be true, and there was the rub. Mister Fairfax was, in point of fact, the Rio Kid under a new name, and the truth was the truth. Had the name of the Rio Kid never been mentioned in connection with him, all would have been clear. Now that it had been mentioned, the Kid realised that it would not stop at that. A hundred little trifles would crop up to confirm what actually was the truth.

Side-Kicker had come back to him in circumstances above suspicion, yet the strong bond of affection between the mustang and his master was obvious to all observers. The new boss' age, his looks, his wonderful way with horses, his amazing skill and rapidity with his guns—all tallied with the known descriptions of the Rio Kid.

And the Rio Kid had disappeared from all knowledge only a few weeks before Mister Fairfax had moseyed into the Packsaddle country as boss of the Lazy O. Barney Baker's story might be laughed at on the ranch and in the cow-town and yet, merely because it was true, it might gain credence, and evidence might crop up in all sorts of unexpected and unlooked-for ways.

The Kid had plenty of food for thought.

If the bunch tumbled to the truth, he believed that they would still stand for him. Indeed, there were members of that wild bunch of cow-men who would have been proud to call the Rio Kid their leader. On the Lazy O he had nothing to fear. In Packsaddle, Barney's story, believed or not, could do him little harm. There were too many men in Packsaddle who had their own secrets to keep, for the cow-town to worry about another man's secrets. But that was not the end of it.

Packsaddle was far from any country in Texas where the Kid had ridden as an outlaw. But seventy miles down the Pecos was White Pine, a town where a hundred galoots knew him and had vowed vengeance on him. Fifty miles to the west was another cow-town where the Kid was well known. A hundred miles away was Frio, where the Kid had been raised, and had ridden in old days as a puncher in the Double-Bar bunch.

The distances were wide; but none of them more than a hard day's ride to a man on a wiry cow-pony. Sheriffs from other quarters were loth to ride Packsaddle trails; but if they could be made to believe that the Rio Kid was ranching in Packsaddle——

ALL THE LAND HIS OWN! "It's sure going to be good, old hoss!" said the Rio Kid, as he patted the neck of his faithful mustang and surveyed the rolling land around him. "No more outlaw for me!" (See Chapter 2.)

There was danger in the air, and the Rio Kid knew it. Deep in his mind all along had been the feeling that this new life was too good to last, that once an outlaw, always an outlaw. Barney Baker, who had failed to rob him of the ranch, would not rest till he was revenged for his defeat, and Barney's mouth was wide open now.

The Kid's brow was grim.

Had he only succeeded in cinching Barney Baker, and stopping his tongue—— But even that, had the Kid only known it, would have been futile. For even as he sat there in the sunset watching the shadows lengthen on the plains, a dusty and weary horseman was spurring into White Pine, far down the Pecos—with news for Sheriff Nixon where the Rio Kid was to be found. The Kid made a gallant fight, but he was coming to the end of his rope.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Shot for Shot!

MISTER FAIRFAX was his usual cool and cheery self the next day, on the Lazy O.

If there was anticipation of trouble at the back of his mind, it did not show on his handsome, good-humoured face.

The Kid was a rancher now, and he attended sedulously to a rancher's duties. He was going to stay a rancher, if Fate permitted, and until the game was up, he was boss of the Lazy O. There was branding of cattle that day on the ranch, and the Kid superintended the work. The Kid was his own foreman, and the bunch had found him a more capable man at the job than Barney Baker ever had been.

The Lazy O was prospering, and if all went well, Mister Fairfax was going to be one of the richest ranchers in the section. And if all did not go well, the grey mustang, the walnut-butted guns, and the open trail remained for the Rio Kid. It was not the Kid's way to worry over what the future might hold, and things that could not be helped he put at the back of his mind.

At work among the bunch that day, the Kid was aware that he was the object of a curious interest among them. He knew, without being told, that the name of the Rio Kid was in every mind, if not on every tongue.

Barney Baker, disbelieved, despised, had been boosted off the ranch. Yet the truth, merely because it was the truth, was sinking into every mind. When Side-Kicker nuzzled his glossy muzzle under the Kid's arm, when the Kid gave an instinctive caress to the mustang, it told the truth. When a buck-jumping broncho pitched Sundance Sam over his ears, and dofied every rope till the boss roped him in, the outfit remembered what they had heard of the Rio Kid's magic with the lasso.

When a rattlesnake started up from a bunch of grass, and was blown into instant extinction by a shot from the Kid's hip, the punchers gave one another curious looks. There were not three men in Texas who could have got away with that shot, and the Rio Kid was one of them.

Not a word was said, but the Lazy O men knew, and the Kid knew that they knew. It was inevitable, once the suspicion was started, conviction was bound to follow sooner or later, for there never was a hole so deep that the truth could be hidden at the bottom of it.

The Kid rode back to the ranch that night knowing that the bunch were wise to his real identity—or so near to it that it cut no ice. On neither side was the matter mentioned, but there it was.

But in the bunkhouse that night, out of hearing of Mister Fairfax, tongues were unloosened.

"He's the Kid!" said Shorty, voicing what was in the minds of all present. "That durned cuss, Barney, was on the right trail. Why, dog-gone my cats, I seen the picture of the Kid posted up in Medicine Bend, and he's as like as two peas, 'cepting that the boss sports a moustache. I'd never have thought of it, but——"

"He's the Kid!" said Long Bill. "But, Kid or not, he's the whitest man that ever struck the Lazy O, and I'm telling you all so!"

"He sure is," said Mexican Dave. "He's a square man, is Mister Fairfax, and I don't give a Continental red cent what he'd done afore he hit Packsaddle. Ain't he treated us square?"

"Sure!" said a dozen voices.

"He's a man-size man, he is," said the horse-wrangler. "And what has Barney got to shout about? Didn't Barney run from San Antone after shooting up a guy? And I don't reckon that Barney gave that guy an even break, any more than he was giving Mister Fairfax."

"Dog-gone it," said Shorty. "There's a heap galoots in this bunch would hate to see sheriffs riding into Packsaddle. That pizen hound, Barney, is a dog-goned squealer, and I guess we orter strung him up instead of fanning him off'n the ranch."

"And now he's shouting it out to all Packsaddle!" growled Long Bill. "Say, you 'uns, we're standing by the boss."

"You bet your life! And I guess," said Long Bill, "that I'm asking the boss for leave in the morning, to ride into town, and I want three of you boys to ride with me. We're going to see Barney Baker and *tell him* to put a cinch on his tongue about the boss of the Lazy O. And we'll put him wise what to expect if he so much as chirps the name of the Rio Kid in the valley of the Pecos."

And there was a murmur of approval from the punchers.

Outlaw or not, there was no doubt that Mister Fairfax was backed up all the way by the Lazy O bunch.

When the Rio Kid turned out the next morning, four of his bunch came to the ranch-house to ask a day's leave. Long Bill, Shorty, and two others got their leave; the Kid was an easy-going boss. The four cowmen rode away on the trail for Packsaddle, and the Kid gave them no further thought. It was going to be a busy day on the ranch, and Mister Fairfax had plenty of matters to occupy his mind.

In the bright morning sunlight Long Bill and his friends rode at a gallop for the distant cow-town. It was their intention to find Barney Baker and persuade him to drop his feud with the boss of the Lazy O. And each member of the party had carefully packed a gun; and it was only too probable that the method of persuasion would include gun-play. The Lazy O bunch were a rough bunch, and that had suited Barney well, so long as he was holding the Lazy O against its rightful owners. If it did not suit him now that was his own funeral.

But Long Bill and his comrades did not ride so far as Packsaddle town that sunny morning. Five miles from the ranch they drew rein, to stare at a party of horsemen advancing on the trail from the direction of the cow-town.

"Say, I guess Packsaddle's coming to see us," grinned Shorty.

Long Bill's face became grim.

"Them guys ain't Packsaddle guys," he said curtly. "I guess I seen that galoot on the pinto afore. That's Jake Nixon, sheriff o' White Pine."

"Gee whiz!" ejaculated Shorty.

The four cow-men sat their bronchos at a halt, watching the approaching party. There were a dozen or more horsemen, and at their head rode a man with a hard-set face, like bronze, on a pinto horse—Jake Nixon, sheriff. Grimly the Lazy O men watched them coming on. Seldom did a sheriff ride Packsaddle trails; and it was evidently serious business that had brought Jake Nixon outside the border of his own jurisdiction. As they drew nearer, the cow-men recognised a familiar face under one of the wide-brimmed Stetson hats.

"Barney!" shouted Mexican Dave.

"That cuss Barney Baker!" said Long Bill, between his teeth. "He's sure got the sheriff of White Pine after the boss."

"They're heading for the Lazy O," said Shorty, "this here trail don't lead nowhere else. It's Mister Fairfax they want."

And that pizen skunk, Barney, along with the outfit!" growled Long Bill. "And him wanted in San Antone, the pesky polecat! Say, I guess we're going to talk to them guys!"

Each of the cow-men loosened the gun in his holster and sat his broncho, waiting for the White Pine outfit to come up. They were soon observed by the newcomers. But Sheriff Nixon and his men rode straight forward on the trail without a pause.

Long Bill hailed them as soon as they were within speaking distance.

"'Mornin', Jake!"

"'Mornin'!" grunted the sheriff of White Pine.

"What you doing in Packsaddle?" asked Long Bill, riding closer.

"Looking for a man," said Jake briefly.

"You aim to look for him on the Lazy O ranges?" asked the horse-wrangler.

"You've said it."

"I guess you've kinder forgot that you ain't sheriff hyer, Jake," said Long Bill. "This side of White Pine is off'n your beat, feller."

"That don't cut no ice when I'm looking for the Rio Kid," answered the White Pine sheriff. "I guess I'd get after that fire-bug if the trail led me up Main Street at Austin."

Long Bill and his comrades drew closer together. From among the White Pine men, Barney Baker eyed them with malicious triumph.

"You figure on getting the Rio Kid at the Lazy O, Jake?" asked Long Bill.

He spoke to the sheriff, but his gleaming eyes were on Barney Baker.

"That's how," said Jake Nixon. He made a gesture towards Barney. "Barney hyer allows that the Rio Kid is playing rancher in Packsaddle, calling himself Mister Fairfax. I'm going to see."

"You don't want to believe that pizen skunk, Jake," said the horse-wrangler. "He's sure got a grouch agin Mister Fairfax, because he aimed to double-cross him, and slipped up on it."

"Like enough," said Jake. "I ain't banking on it, feller. I'm jest going to see Mister Fairfax; and if he ain't the Kid, O.K. If he's the Kid, I guess I'll know him at once. I know the Kid like the back of my hand."

Barney Baker gave a sneering laugh.

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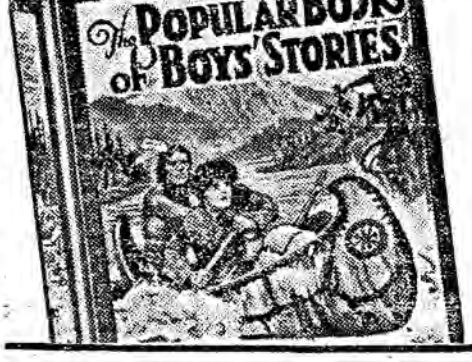

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The old Veteran recalls some very exciting internationals played between England and Scotland, in the very early days of Soccer.

"WELL, lad, and what shall we have to-night?"

I was standing before the big glass case in the old-timer's room, feasting my eyes on his football caps. The tassels and dates on each told its history. I had by now a pretty sound idea who my jovial host was and certainly his name was a very famous one, but I knew I should hurt and annoy him if I delved any further, so I had given up trying to get him to tell me his name himself! For I was very fond of Old Tiny!

"By jove, sir!" I cried. "You've played a few times against Scotland! Tell us about some of those matches!"

"Scotland, did ye say, son! England v. Scotland! Ah, the great days I've had!"

It was my cue. Abandoning the glass case I sidled quickly into my armchair, while the famous Old Veteran stuffed a cast-iron finger into his glowing pipe and stared reflectively at the fire.

"I suppose there's nothing to touch England v. Scotland at soccer!" he mused. "Nor has there been since the first International in 1872! It's the oldest International—and the greatest! I've had some lively times against Wales—specially when Billy Meredith was on form—and some merry turn-ups against Ireland! But for ninety minutes clean hard fighting, with no quarter asked or given, you can't beat England v. Scotland!

"Yes, I remember some great games! And some players! Steve Bloomer! What a forward he was! Twenty times he turned out for the Rose and scored twenty-eight goals. Never knew when he was licked and always played better for England than he did for his club Derby County. And that's saying something!

"Steve had a funny habit. He always played as though he hated the sight of the other goalkeeper, and every time he'd fire in one of his swerving cannon-balls—hummers they were—you'd hear him mutter, 'Stop that, you blighter!' or 'Hold that one a minute!'

"He scored an heroic goal one year! Scotland were leading two to one, ten minutes from time at the Crystal Palace—1901 it was! Well, son, we were fairly walloped! It was a dull, wet day, ground soaked and heavy as lead, the ball weighed a ton! Both sides were well cooked, when all of a sudden Steve got the ball!

"Off he went, dribbling, charging and barging his way through the blue shirts, nearly falling over sometimes with weariness until at last somehow or other he got within range. It took him a mighty effort to pull himself together, but he did it, and—'Stop that one!' he growled, biff! Goal!

"Poor old Steve nearly collapsed after that, but what a cheer he got!

"Then I remember another 'fighting goal.' It was the year before the War and the game was at Stamford Bridge. Both had grand sides and after a terrific game it looked as though neither would score. But England's centre-forward, Harry Hampton of the Villa, had his own ideas about that! Brownlie was keeping goal for Scotland and he'd saved no end of scoring shots. And at last, just on time, England made a final sweeping raid.

"Hampton got the last pass and let fly a scorcher! Well, Brownlie got to it somehow and cuddle it, but the force of that shot knocked him flat-footed! And, lad, before you could say 'knife,' and just as the ref. had his whistle to his mouth, up came Hampton like a runaway lorry, chucked himself about three yards through the air and into the back of the net went Brownlie, Hampton, one full back—and the ball!

"Then look at that goal Scotland won by last season. It was hard luck on our lads, but it was the cleverest corner kick I've ever seen, and the way it just curled in to beat Hacking was great! Some people said it was lucky—but that's as may-be! All I know is that a great game was won by the last kick of the match practically, and lucky or not, they're the goals I like to see, whichever side scores 'em!

"I played in a very tragic match once, too!" went on the old International. "That was in 1902 when the stand collapsed at Ibrox Park. It was a bad day for some poor fellows then, and we had a bad time playing the match while they were fetching out the injured. But it was either that or letting the rest of the crowd get out of hand—so we carried on!"

"How do the records stand, now, Tiny?" I asked.

"Played 53, won 15, lost 24, drawn 14!" answered Tiny promptly. No handbooks for him—he carried all records in his fine old head.

"England's a good way behind, then!" said I.

"Yes, they're clever footballers, the Scots!" quoth Tiny. "Their tactics are better—but their game's a bit slower. Still they haven't had it all their own way!" he smiled grimly. "We haven't won for the last two years—in fact, I try to forget the season before last at Wembley; 5—1, sufferin' cats!—but the tide'll turn, lad!

"Scotland's got some great forwards just now and we want some that can both play—and shoot! Yes, son, it's the game of the season and the cream of football—England v. Scotland! I hope I'll see many more!"

And I hoped so, too!

(*Continued from previous page.*)

"Shucks, sheriff! The whole bunch knows he's the Kid!" he exclaimed. "They sure know he's the Kid, and they're standing for him!"

"You durned double-crossing polecat!" said Long Bill savagely. "We was coming to Packsaddle to hunt for you, Barney; and I guess you've been too spry for us. You figured that this outfit would jump on Mister Fairfax and catch him napping, you pesky coyote. I guess we'll beat you to it back to the ranch!"

At a sign from the wrangler, the Lazy O punchers wheeled their horses to ride back to the ranch.

Barney gave a yell.

"Head them off, you'uns! Ride them down! Jake Nixon, if they beat us to the ranch you'll never get hold of the Kid!"

Long Bill and his comrades were already galloping. After them, in a cloud of dust, galloped the sheriff and his men. But the Lazy O were well-mounted, and they quirted their bronchos to a furious pace.

"They'll get him away!" yelled Barney. "I tell you, once the Kid's got on Side-Kicker you'll never see his heels for dust."

"Can it!" answered Jake. "We ain't burning powder—not onless we see the Kid, anyhow! We won't be long after that bunch at the ranch."

Barney spat out a curse. He drove his broncho to furious speed, but he did not gain on the hard-riding punchers. He dragged a revolver from his holster, and threw it up to fire.

Bang!

The bullet chipped the Stetson on Long Bill's head as he rode.

"Hold your hosses, you fool!" roared the sheriff of White Pine. "Ain't I telling you not to burn powder?"

Barney did not heed.

Spurring his horse savagely, he dashed ahead of the White Pine outfit, his revolver blazing off shots at the galloping cow-men ahead. Long Bill gave a yell as a bullet clipped a strip of skin from his ear.

"Ride on, you'uns!" he snapped to his comrades. "Hit the ranch and put Mister Fairfax wise!"

Long Bill's gun was barking now.

Bang, bang! roared the long-barrelled Colts. A bullet from Barney's revolver gashed along the wrangler's bronzed cheek, drawing blood. The next moment there was a hoarse yell from Barney Baker. The gun sagged in his hand, and he reeled back in the saddle.

Crash!

A riderless horse dashed over the prairie as Barney Baker crashed down into the grass.

"I guess that guy's got his!" muttered Long Bill, as he wheeled his broncho again and dashed away after his comrades.

Barney Baker, once foreman of the Lazy O, lay in the long grass. Jake Nixon drew rein as he came up to the fallen man and looked down at him. His face was grim.

"Say, Barney!"

But there was no word from Barney, no motion or sign of life. Lifeless he lay in the trampled grass; and the sheriff, with a shrug of the shoulders, rode on with his men.

Barney Baker's fight for the Lazy O was over—the foreman lay dead on the prairie as the White Pine outfit rode on to the ranch.

THE END.

(*Will the Lazy O outfit save their kid-boss from the approaching arm of the law? See next week's roaring Western yarn, entitled: "DRIVEN OFF HIS RANCH!"*)