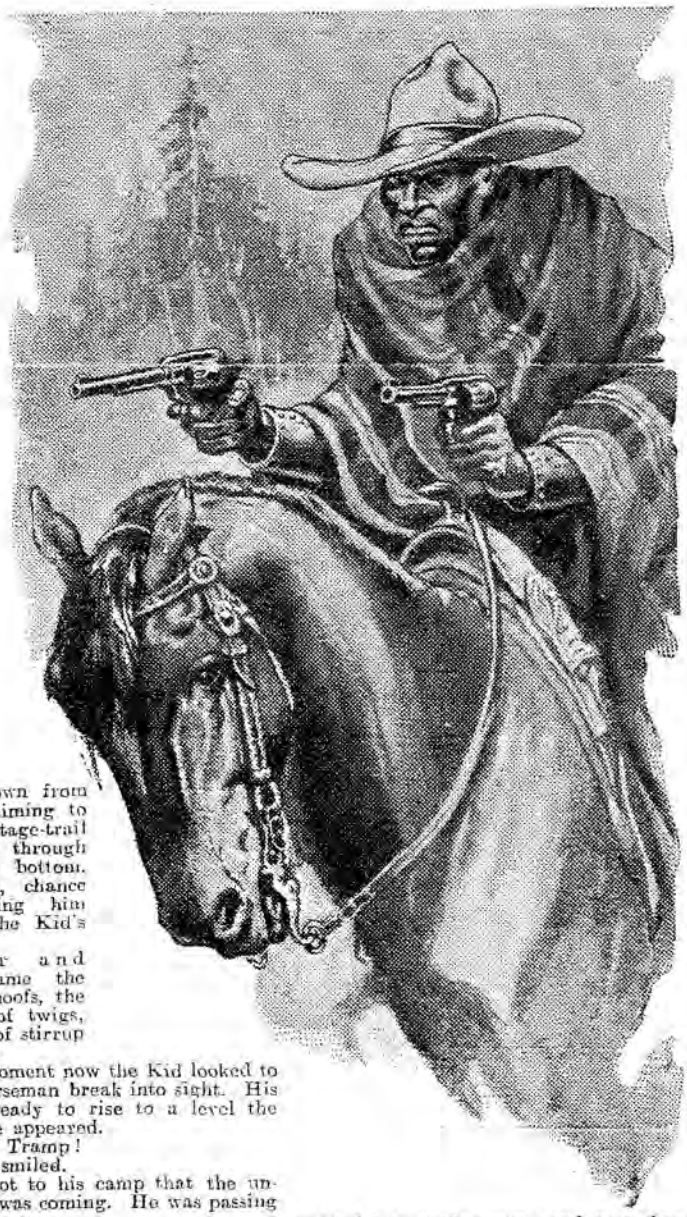
A QUICK-ACTION YARN OF THE WEST!

BLACK GEORGE!

By

RALPH REDWAY.



Like a black, menacing shadow, the road-agent stands by the trail. As the coach rattles up, the contents and passengers are rifled by this new terror, and then, as mysteriously as he has come, Black George disappears—into the unknown!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Road Agent!

THE Rio Kid awakened, as he was accustomed to wake, without a motion, and without a sound. He lay perfectly still, rolled in his blanket and slicker, listening. The grey mustang, by whose side the Kid lay, did not stir. Side-Kicker was as well trained in the ways of a hunted life as the boy outlaw himself. Only a gleam of intelligent eyes showed that the mustang, too, had awakened at the sound of a tramping horse in the thickets.

The Kid listened—and wondered.

There was a tangle of thickets round him. The Kid had picked his camp with care. Post-oaks and tangled juniper, mingled with evil-smelling greasewood, made an almost impenetrable screen round the Kid's solitary camp. It was cold weather in the Kicking Mule country, but he had lighted no fire; no trickle of smoke above the thickets betrayed his resting-place. Yet the tramping horse, unseen as yet, was heading direct for the spot where the Kid lay by his mustang.

For a full minute the Kid lay and listened; and the steady tramp of the horse, the crackling of disturbed undergrowth, grew nearer and clearer. The rider was approaching slowly—but he was approaching. And the Kid sat up at last, still without a sound, and dropped a hand on the walnut butt of a six-gun.

If some guy had spotted his camp, and was heading for it, the Kid was ready for him when he came. And if it was by chance that the horseman came, still it was necessary for the boy outlaw to be on his guard. The Kid was breaking new country in the Kicking Mule section; but in every part of Texas he had more foes than friends. When there was a reward of a thousand dollars on a galoot's head, a galoot needed to keep his gun handy.

The Kid's camp lay a hundred yards or more from the well-worn stage-trail that ran to the cow-town of Kicking Mule. From the trail the ground rose in easy slopes, to a low range of hills, thickly wooded. It was from the high ground that the tramping horse came, and it was likely that the rider was coming down from the hill, aiming to reach the stage-trail that ran through the valley bottom. But if so, chance was leading him close to the Kid's camp.

Nearer and clearer came the tramping hoofs, the crackling of twigs, the jingle of stirrup and bridle.

Every moment now the Kid looked to see the horseman break into sight. His gun was ready to rise to a level the moment he appeared.

Tramp! Tramp!

The Kid smiled.

It was not to his camp that the unseen rider was coming. He was passing the Kid's camp.

So close did he pass that the swaying twigs brushed the Kid, and through the bush he had a glimpse of a black horse, and of a rider wrapped in a baggy Mexican serape.

The tramping passed on.

Tramping of hoofs, crackle of twigs, jingle of bridle and stirrup grew fainter as the rider of the black horse pushed on down the slope towards the trail.

He was gone.

The Rio Kid's hand relinquished the walnut-butted gun.

The horseman had passed on, ignorant of the Kid's camp in the thickets, never dreaming how closely he had brushed by the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande.

The Kid wondered idly who the galoot might have been. Some man from the cow-town of Kicking Mule, probably, who had taken a short cut across the wooded hill instead of following the trail that wound round the base. It did not matter to the Kid. And, anyway, the galoot was gone; the sound of him was dying away down the slope towards the trail. The Kid had ridden long and hard that morning, and he needed his midday rest; and now that the horseman had passed he prepared to settle down to resume his interrupted slumber. Only, he waited, with the caution that was second nature to him, for all sound of the horseman to die away.

The sounds ceased—abruptly.

And the Kid, instead of rolling comfortably in his blankets and slicker, and closing his eyes, sat up and took notice.

The horseman had halted.

The Kid's ear, that nothing could deceive, told him that. The tramping of the black horse had grown fainter as the unseen man went on towards the trail, and the Kid had expected it to die away in the distance, fainter and fainter till it was gone. Instead of which, the tramping, the crackling, the jingle, ceased all of a sudden, at a distance, the Kid reckoned, of a hundred yards or so.

That meant that the horseman had halted at the stage-trail.

Quietly the Kid rose to his feet, dropped his blankets, and drew a six-gun from its leather holster.

There was a glint in the Kid's eyes,

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If this was some foe, who had spotted his camp in passing and gone on, thinking to throw dust in his eyes, intending to return by stealth and take him by surprise, the Kid was ready to deal with him.

Side-Kicker raised his head, but at a sign from the Kid laid down quietly again.

On foot, the Kid moved down the hill, the way the rider of the black horse had gone; and he made no sound as he went. Carefully as an Apache or a Yaqui stealing on a foe, the Kid parted the branches and the creepers, stepping slowly, stepping carefully, giving no warning of his movements. He was going to know what that galoot's game was, and put paid to it, if need were.

There was no sound from the stranger. If he was moving in the thickets he was moving as cautiously and silently as the Kid.

Towards the stage-trail the thickets thinned, and through them the Kid had glimpses of the open trail; and suddenly he glimpsed the black horse and its rider.

The boy outlaw stopped, and, keeping in cover, watched the man.

The figure in the folded serape sat the black horse. He had not dismounted, he had not crept back through the thickets. The Kid's suspicion had been unfounded.

Evidently, as the Kid had at first supposed, the man was unaware of anyone's presence on the lonely hillside.

The Kid returned his gun to its holster.

But he still watched—perplexed. The rider of the black horse was not aware of the Kid. But why was he there, and what was his game? Half-hidden by the post-oaks and pecans at the side of the trail, the man sat his horse, motionless, evidently waiting and watching. His back was to the Kid, and his face unseen. All the Kid could see of him was the thick serape, wrapped like a cloak round him, the riding-boots that emerged below it, and the Stetson hat above it. Motionless the horseman sat in the saddle, watching the trail, like a statue.

Minutes passed, and the horseman did not stir.

The Kid wondered.

The man was watching and waiting—for somebody. Not for a friend, that was certain. He was keeping in cover of the trees as he watched, carefully keeping out of sight of anyone approaching from either direction on the open trail. It was fairly clear that he was in ambush. If he was looking for some expected enemy, and there was going to be gun-play, it was no business of the Kid's, and the boy outlaw had no hunch to horn in. The Kid was debating in his mind whether to depart as silently as he had come and take no further heed of a matter that he now saw did not concern him personally when a sound from the distance caught his ears.

It was the distant, echoing sound of wheels and harness, coming up the valley trail from the direction of Juniper. It meant that the stage from Juniper to Kicking Mule was approaching.

The horseman made a sudden movement.

From a slit in the folded serape his arm emerged, and a six-gun glistened in his hand.

The Kid grinned.

He understood now.

The man he was watching was a road-agent, a hold-up man, and he was waiting on the trail for the Kicking Mule coach.

There could be no mistake about it, and the Kid called himself a gink for not guessing it earlier.

For a moment the Kid's hand stole to his gun.

A hold-up on the trail was about to take place, and the Kid was powerfully tempted to horn in and prevent it.

But a bitter smile crossed his face, and he shrugged his shoulders at the thought. It was not for a hunted outlaw, a guy upon whose head was a reward of a thousand dollars, to do the work of sheriffs and rangers. It was no business of the Kid's. They had made him an outlaw, in spite of himself, and it was not for an outlaw to stand in defence of law.

But the Kid did not go.

He remained where he was, silent, alert. He was rather curious about this galoot who was aiming to hold up a stage single-handed. He reckoned that the galoot had plenty of gall, for there might be half a dozen passengers on the stage, and in the Kicking Mule country every man packed a gun.

The horseman moved, drawing a little nearer to the open trail as the clatter of the approaching stage rang louder. And as he did so, the watching Kid had a view of his face.

He barely suppressed an exclamation.

He had figured that the man would be masked, but there was no mask on the face of the horseman. In the sunlight that glinted down through the trees the Kid, from his cover, stared at the rider's face—stared at the black skin, thick lips, and flattened nose of a full-blooded negro.

"Gee-whiz!" the Kid whispered under his breath.

He stared blankly.

The Kid, in his time, had struck many a hold-up man, of many and various races, but this was the first time he had struck a "coon" in the hold-up business.

The horseman, utterly unconscious of the astonished puncher watching him, moved out into the trail as the stage came clattering up.

"Halt!"

The Kid heard a startled cry from the stage-driver.

"'Black George,' by gum!"

The stage was dragged to a halt so sharply that the horses stumbled. The Kid was a stranger in the Kicking Mule country, but he reckoned that Black George was well-known there, and that Black George was a name of fear to the Kicking Mule galoots. The black horseman rode towards the halted stage, and the Rio Kid remained an interested onlooker—in cover.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The Hold-Up!

THE stage was at a standstill.

From within came two or three startled voices, calling to the driver. Jerry Cook, the driver, called back tersely:

"It's Black George! I guess you guys want to put your hands up pronto!"

The black horseman rode nearer to the stage.

Startled faces looked out at him.

Wrapped in his Mexican serape, with his Stetson hat pulled well down on his head, the trail-rider showed only his black face, and not all of that, for the edge of the serape came over his chin, and the hat covered him down to the eyes.

But enough was to be seen of his face to show that it was the face of a negro—black as the ace of spades, gnarled and wrinkled and grim. The eyebrows were so thick and heavy as almost to hide the eyes. It was a savage and ferocious face, almost inhuman in its ferocity.

"Light down!"

Black George rapped out the words.

The door of the vehicle was flung open, and the passengers alighted in the trail.

There were four of them—a fat storekeeper of Kicking Mule, a Chinese laundry-man, a "drummer" with a case of samples, and a man with a bronzed face, who wore "store" clothes and a Derby hat.

The horseman eyed them as they lined up in the trail, with their hands above their heads.

"That the whole caboodle, Jerry?" he asked.

"Yep."

The six-gun in the road-agent's hand was raised, and it seemed to each of the four that the muzzle threatened him.

Three of the passengers showed their terror plainly.

The drummer was white as chalk, the storekeeper's fat knees knocked together, and the Chinaman's slanting eyes were widely distended.

But the fourth man seemed cool and self-possessed, and he was watching the black rider quietly.

But he, like the others, had put up his hands.

Black George was well known for a great distance round the cow-town of Kicking Mule for his swift and deadly shooting, and on a dozen occasions, at least, he had shot up victims who had attempted resistance. It was not healthy to touch a gun when Black George called halt.

"Pony up, you 'uns!" said the black rider. "Drop your stuff in the trail, and I guess if you keep anything back it will be the last thing you'll do in this world!"

Three of the passengers hastened to obey, lowering their hands for the purpose. The road-agent's gun swayed from one face to another, his eyes under the bushy, over-hanging brows gleaming over it. But the man with the bronzed face seemed to hesitate.

Black George's eyes glinted at him.

He followed the example of the others, after a second's hesitation. Pockets were emptied into a little heap in the trail.

"You, Chink!" rapped out Black George.

The Chinaman eyed him in terror.

"Pick up that stuff and stack it in this grip!" Black George indicated a little leather sack strapped to his saddle.

The laundry-man obeyed.

"Hop into that hearse, you!"

The Chinaman jumped into the stage again.

"Now you, Silas Shook," said Black George, addressing the storekeeper, "I guess you can pony up more than that! You want me to believe you only got fifty dollars in your rags?"

"I guess that's every cent——"

Bang!

The six-gun roared, and the storekeeper gave a yell and a jump as the bullet clipped a strip of skin from his head.

"That's a warning, Mister Shook!" said Black George. "The next goes through your think-box! Pony up!"

With a ghastly face, the Kicking Mule storekeeper fumbled in his pockets and produced a roll of two hundred dollars. He dropped it into the sack at Black George's saddle.

"That's better!" said the road-agent. "Next time you meet me on the trail, Mister Shook, don't you try any gum-game with me, or the next heir will

by running your store at Kicking Mule! You get me?"

The storekeeper's teeth chattered.

"I've sure shot galoots for less'n that! Get in, and chew on it, you gink!"

Silas Shook clambered trembling into the stage.

"You next!" snarled the horseman.

The drummer followed the storekeeper in.

"Stand back, you!"

Black George made a motion with his revolver as the man in the Derby hat would have approached the vehicle.

"Say, feller, I've sure handed out all my dust," said the passenger. "You can search me."

"Likely enough," said Black George. "But I guess it ain't only your dust that I want from you."

The bronze-faced man eyed him, and a tense look came over his face. But the road-agent's revolver was looking him full in the face, and if he had thought of reaching for a hidden weapon he gave up the idea.

"Say, you through, George?" asked Jerry Cook. "I got to get this here shebang to Kicking Mule on time, you want to know."

"Shut your head, Jerry Cook!" snapped Black George. "I guess you'll wait till I'm through, if I keep you till sundown!"

The driver grinned.

"It's your say-so, Black George," he answered. "I sure ain't arguing with you about it a whole lot. Take your time."

"Say, you!" The black road-agent's eyes glinted at the man in the Derby hat. "What you call yourself?"

"James Johnson!"

"Blazes is full of such Johnsons!" snarled the horseman. "What you doing in this section?"

"Buying cattle."

"Sho! You're a cattle-buyer?"

"You've said it."

"Where you hang out?"

"San Fernando."

"You've come here from San Fernando to buy cattle?"

"Right in once."

"You aim to locate in Kicking Mule to buy them cattle?"

"Sure."

"And you ain't no business to Kicking Mule, 'cept to buy cattle?" asked the horseman, with an inflection of savage sarcasm in his voice.

"I reckon that's my business," said the man with the bronzed complexion. "I'm buying for some of the San Fernando ranches."

"And your name's Johnson?"

"Jest that."

"Ain't you ever been called suthin' else?" asked Black George. "Ain't you ever been called Lieutenant Jim Dixey, of the Texas Rangers?"

The man in the Derby hat stood quite still.

"You gol-darned, double-crossing gink!" snarled the road-agent. "You talk about buying cattle at Kicking Mule, when you've been sent for special to hunt this country for Black George. You come hyer as a cattle-buyer because if you come open, you know you won't have a chance of getting after the man you want. Say! You've met up with me sooner'n you allowed—sooner'n you wanted, I reckon. You get a good look at me now, Lieutenant Jim Dixey, and you'll know me ag'in."

The man in the Derby hat breathed hard.

"You'd have pulled on me, in the stage, and chanced it, if you'd knowed I was wise to you?" jeered the black rider. "I'd have riddled the hearse with lead if you had, and put paid to the whole caboodle. But if you'd knowed I was wise to you, you'd have chanced it."

"How'd you know?" asked the bronzed man quietly. "I ain't denying it, seeing you know. But how'd you get wise to it that I was sent for to pick up your trail in this section?"

The horseman laughed savagely.

"I guess I'm wise to more'n the guys at Kicking Mule reckon," he jeered. "I got you down fine, you gink! Get into that hearse, and be durned to you!"

The Ranger stepped into the stage and took his seat.

The horseman, sitting his saddle close beside the vehicle, followed his movements with the revolver muzzle. The Ranger's bronzed face betrayed nothing, but all knew that he was watchful for a chance to draw a gun. But it was instant death, and he knew it, and he did not make the attempt.

Jerry Cook gathered up his reins.

"You through?" he asked.

"I'm through," said Black George. "Tell them in Kicking Mule that they'll want a better guy than this to get Black George."

"I'll sure hand that message to Seth Starbuck, the town marshal, when we get in," said Jerry Cook; and he cracked his whip.

The black horseman stared in at the window at the passengers, his revolver still threatening them. He rode beside the stage as Jerry Cook started his team.

"You, Jim Dixey!" he said. "You're going to Kicking Mule in this hearse. When you get there I guess the galoots will be wise to it that they want a better man to pick up Black George. I guess they can send you home in a pine packet, and ask for a better man."

He fired at the last word.

There was a sharp cry, following the roar of the six-gun, and a dead man rolled on the floor of the vehicle.

A yell of terror broke from the other passengers as they started away from the falling body of the Ranger.

Jerry Cook uttered a startled oath, and dragged in his starting team.

"Thunder! What——"

"Take him to Kicking Mule—what's left of him!" shouted Black George; and he gave his horse the spur and dashed away down the trail.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Rio Kid Horns In!

"GEE-WHIZ!"

The Rio Kid stood transfixed, in the thickets by the trail.

The hoofs of the black horse clattered in the distance. Jerry Cook was holding in his team. From the interior of the stage came the startled cries of the passengers.

For several seconds the Kid was motionless.

The hold-up had passed, under his eyes, and he had looked on and listened to the talk, never dreaming of the tragedy that was to follow.

When the horseman had announced his knowledge of the Ranger's identity, the Kid's hand had sought a gun. The hold-up was nothing to him, but he would not see a man shot under his eyes, and for a moment, then, he had suspected that to be the road-agent's intention. But when the black rider allowed the Ranger to get back into the stage, the Kid supposed that the affair was at an end, and he was turning away when the roar of the robber's Colt was followed by the death-cry of the man he had ruthlessly shot.

It was almost unbelievable to the Kid. He had seen much reckless and ruthless shooting in his time, but this was the limit in the Kid's experience.

He stood still, amazed, and then, with a blaze in his eyes, he leaped out into the trail.

A gun was in his hand now, and had Black George been still at hand vengeance would have been swift.

But the road-agent was galloping, and he had already disappeared from sight down the winding trail at the base of the hill.

"The dog-goned scallywag!" panted the Kid.

He ran towards the stage.

"Say, is that Ranger guy sure shot up?" he called out.

"I reckon!" answered Jerry Cook, staring at him. "Say, where you jump from, stranger?"

The Kid, without replying, looked into the coach.

Three terrified faces were turned towards him; but his gaze was fixed on an upturned face on the floor.

Lieutenant Jim Dixey, of the Texas Rangers, lay there, still and silent, never to stir again of his own volition. He had been shot through the heart.

The Kid removed his Stetson.

"Sho!" he said. "I guess that was the durndest dog-goned game I ever struck! That scallywag knowed the guy would take a chance and reach for a gun, and he let on to be through with him, and then——"

The Kid turned away.

"Say, you puncher," said Jerry Cook, looking down at the Kid. "Where you jump from, I want to know? I never seed——"

He eyed the Kid curiously.

"You got a dead guy to carry to

Kicking Mule, hombre," said the Kid. "Say, I'm a stranger in this section, and I guess I never heard of Black George till I see him to-day. But I reckon he's some all-fired firebug from what I've seen."

"You've said it," agreed Jerry Cook. "Say, that Ranger was asking for his, if he come along here to cinch Black George. That pesky coon is wise to everything that goes on in Kicking Mule—there ain't nary a stunt that he don't get wise to. I guess he stopped this hearse special to shoot up that guy." Jerry Cook picked up his whip. "Waal, I reckon I got to make the grade, all the same. I aim to get this hearse into town on time. You want a lift, puncher?"

The Kid shook his head.

"Nope! I'm going after the road-agent."

The Kid gave a clear whistle, and Side-Kicker came plunging through the thickets to the trail.

Jerry Cook opened his eyes wide.

"You aiming to trail Black George?" he ejaculated.

"Sure!"

"Let up on it, puncher," said Jerry. "You stay where you're safe! Black George wouldn't make more'n one bite at you, kid."

"I guess I'll give him the chance."

The Rio Kid swung himself into the saddle.

"You mean it?" exclaimed Jerry Cook. "I guess you got gall, for a kid puncher. Say, your friends won't get to hear of you any more, if you follow Black George into the hills."

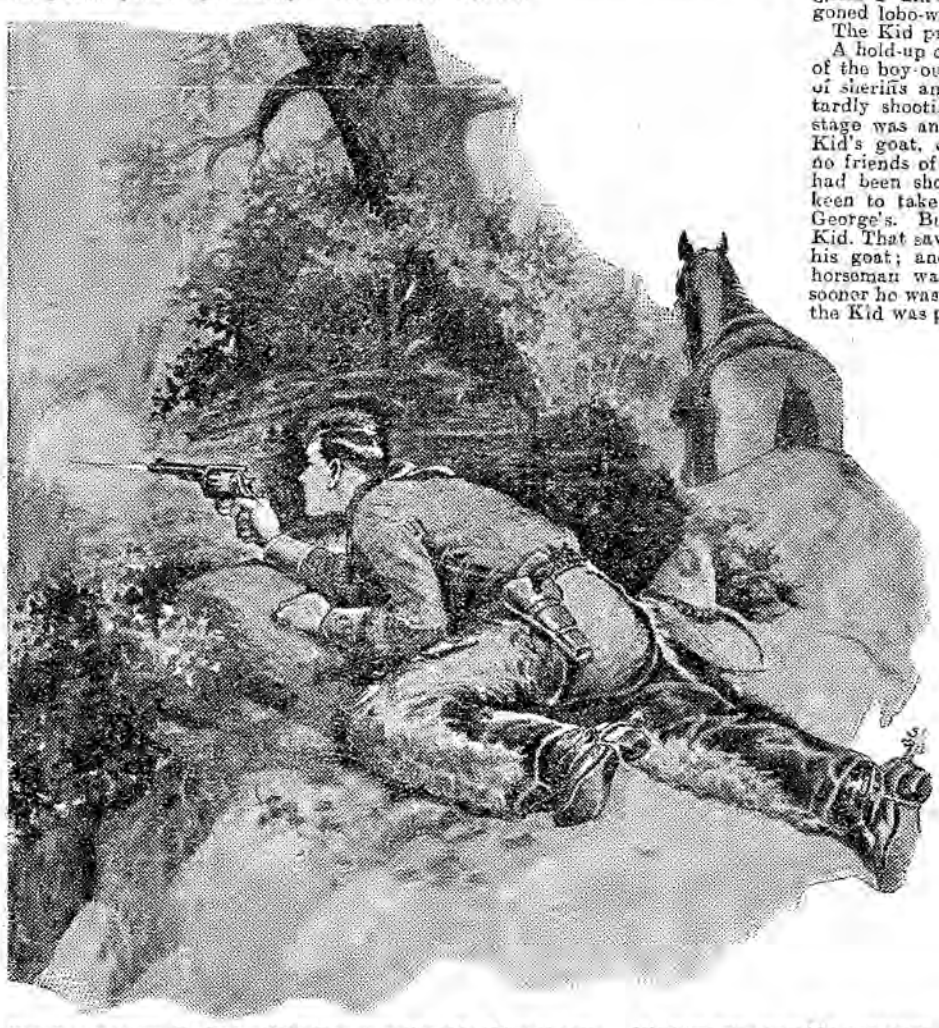
The Kid did not heed.

He shook out his reins, and dashed down the trail in the direction taken by the road-agent.

Jerry Cook stared after him and whistled.

"I guess that guy don't know what's healthy for him!" he remarked; and he drove on the stage.

The Kid vanished down the trail in a few seconds.



Keeping in cover, the Kid watched the opposite side of the chasm. His own gun roared in response to a stirring in the thickets, and there was a yell from the unseen road-agent.

At a gallop, he passed round the bend that had hidden the road-agent, and disappeared from the sight of the stage-driver and his passengers.

The Rio Kid's face was hard set, his eyes gleaming, and a walnut-butted gun was in his grasp. His eyes searched the trail ahead for the black rider.

Black George was only a few minutes ahead of him, and the Kid did not figure that he would be going all out, for the hold-up man had no suspicion, as yet, that there was pursuit behind him.

But the black rider had already left the trail, turning into the rough thickets that clothed the hillside. The Kid had a glimpse of swaying branches, and of a Stetson hat that appeared and disappeared.

He turned from the trail, and rode up the rugged slope of the hillside, the way the hold-up man had gone.

The crashing and crackling of the thickets came quite clearly, as Black George drove his horse over the hill.

The Kid followed as fast as the heavy undergrowth allowed. Had he needed a trail to follow, that left by the black horseman was plain enough for a blind man to pick up. But he did not need sign to guide him, with the crashing of the black horse audible to his ears.

"The dog-goned skunk!" the Kid muttered. "The pesky, ornery, all-fired scallywag! Shooting up a guy that a-way; it sure does get my goat! I guess I ain't quitting till that dog-goned lobo-wolf has got his!"

The Kid pressed on.

A hold-up on the trail was no business of the boy-outlaw's; it was the business of sheriffs and rangers. But the dastardly shooting of the Ranger in the stage was another matter. It got the Kid's goat, as he said. Rangers were no friends of the Kid's. The man who had been shot up would have been as keen to take the Kid's trail as Black George's. But that cut no ice with the Kid. That savage, merciless shooting got his goat; and, to his eyes, the black horseman was a wild beast, and the sooner he was wiped out the better. And the Kid was pursuing him with the fixed intention of wiping him out as ruthlessly as he had wiped out the Ranger.

A bullet tearing through the leaves and twigs warned the Kid that the road-agent was wise to his pursuit.

The Kid smiled grimly.

Shooting in that tangled thicket could only be at random, though his keen eyes were watchful for a chance at the black rider ahead.

Crack, crack!

The Kid rode on, regardless of the flying lead. The crackling in the underwood told that Black George was riding on again.

Ere long, the Kid figured, he would sight him. The belt of thickets extended up the hillside, but on the upland the woodland thinned, as the soil grew more rocky. Once through the woods he would call the black rider to a grim account. Deadly as was Black George's reputation in the Kicking Mule country, the Kid reckoned that he was as good a man with a gun as any hombre in Texas. He was only eager to get a sight of the man in the scrape.

"Sho!" ejaculated the Kid suddenly.

He dragged in his mustang, almost on the edge of a deep, wide barranca that split the hillside.

It extended right and left across the Kid's path, and yawned wide and deep in front of him, and it was clear that Black George had leaped across it to ride on his way.

The thickets grew to the very edge of the chasm. On the opposite side the thick undergrowth, mingled with pecans and post-oaks, recommenced.

"Whoa, Side-Kicker!" said the Kid.

He dropped from the saddle, and drew his horse back into thicker cover. The roar of a six-gun from across the barranca came a moment later.

The Kid had guessed that the road-agent, knowing that he was pursued, would stop at such a favourable spot to deal with his pursuer. And he had been right. Had Side-Kicker taken the leap, the ruffian, in the thickets on the other side of the barranca, would have riddled the Kid with lead as he leaped.

Thrice the six-gun roared across the chasm, the lead tearing leaves and twigs around the Rio Kid.

Keeping in cover, the Kid watched the opposite side of the chasm. His own gun roared in response, at a stirring in the thickets, and there was a yell from the unseen road-agent. The lead had gone close.

"Say, Side-Kicker, old hoss, I guess this puts paid to us!" murmured the Rio Kid.

The Kid was reckless enough, and danger had no terrors for him, but he was not the man to throw away his life. To leap the barranca, while the road-agent was watching on the other side, was death. But to go along the side of the chasm, seeking another crossing, was to lose his man. The fugitive, if he sought escape, would be gone, long before the Kid could cross in safety and get round to him. And Black George, though likely enough he did not fear to meet a single puncher in conflict, was not likely to lose more time than he could help. When the stage got into Kicking Mule, with the murdered Ranger, the country would be up, and the black rider would be hunted far and wide. Minutes would be precious to Black George then.

The Kid soon made up his mind.

Keeping in cover, he led Side-Kicker away, threading the wood along the barranca, to seek a crossing at a distance. He knew that the ears of the halted road-agent would pick up the sounds he made, and that Black George would guess his intention easily enough. In a few minutes, he figured, the rascal would be in the saddle again, riding. But his trail would be left for the Kid, and there was no Apache or Comanche in Texas keener at picking up a trail than the Rio Kid.

And that trail the boy-puncher would follow, whithersoever it led him, to Black George's death or his own.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
A Mystery!

"LEVANTED!" grunted the Rio Kid.

He had expected it.

The road-agent had long gone when the Kid reached the spot where he had stopped on the farther side of the barranca.

The Kid had followed the rift a quarter of a mile, and leaped his mustang across it, and then worked back on the farther side. He could not afford to act in haste, for it was possible that Black George was still there, deep in cover, guessing his intention, and waiting for him. And it was not the Kid's idea to let the matter end with a bullet through his heart from cover.

Cautiously he worked his way through dense thickets, on foot, his mustang following him. He picked up the spot at last where the road-agent had stopped. Black George was gone—the trail of his horse leading away up the woody hillside.

"I guess he was winged," said the Kid, as he examined the traces left by the road-agent.

It was evident that the Kid's bullet across the barranca had gone close, for he picked up several spots of blood on the herbage where the black outlaw had crouched in cover. He had not been hard hit, but the lead had touched him and drawn blood.

The Kid mounted the grey mustang, after a careful examination of the spot, and followed the trail that lay plain to the eye through the tangled thickets.

He went cautiously enough, wary of an ambush; though he reckoned that the road-agent was not wasting time. By this time the stage would have reached Kicking Mule; and it was likely that a score of riders would pour out of the cow-town to hunt for the

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THE RAID!

LIKE a lot of extremely muddy and giant moles, the men of "A" Company, of a certain regiment numbered early up on the roll of the First Hundred Thousand to volunteer for active service with Britain's Old Contemptibles in the early days of the Great War, wallowed breathlessly but happily in an excessively flooded front-line trench Somewhere in Flanders.

Breathlessly, because they had just staggered over endless miles of treacherous duckboards to relieve the Tommies who had done duty in that same trench for the previous seven days. Happily, because they had finished with those duckboards for a similar period—duckboards which, in the awful darkness of a Flanders night, would roll suddenly under your feet and flop you sideways into bottomless liquid mud.

Another reason for their happiness was the fact that this was New Year's Eve.

But scarcely have they settled in their appointed stations at the firing-step in each trench traverse than there comes word that something really is afoot. A raid on the enemy trenches!

Headquarters passed it on to various High Functionaries until it came to the ears of the General. Gradually the order to carry out this Christmas Eve raid dribbled down to the battalion's colonel. He passed the order on to the Major and the Adjutant. The Adjutant told the Captain. The Captain told a Lieutenant of "A" Company, who told a sergeant, who straightway proceeded to pour the message into the ears of six privates.

"The General wants a bloomin' captive. We've gotter go birds'-nesting," said the sergeant with a grin. "General wants a real live Jerry—and we've gotter fetch him!"

So at midnight, as New Year's Day was coming in, there crept over the parapet from the British fighting line one lieutenant, one sergeant, and six Tommies. Like enormous rats they crept out into No Man's Land on their stomachs, flattening themselves incredibly whenever a Verey Light shot up from the enemy trench—fifty yards distant—and remaining utterly immobile till that tell-tale soaring flare had spent itself.

Twenty-five yards they crawled, spread out in line an arm's length apart. Now they were up against something at which even the bravest of fighting men always shuddered. Especially in darkness such as smothered this New Year's Eve. It was barbed wire—miles and miles of it, twisted and tangled and splayed about on corkscrew iron supports, and many feet in depth.

The raiding party had to cut a passage through it, with big wire-cutters with which each of the eight was armed, additional to the lieutenant's revolver and the short club and bombs (the latter safely pocketed) with which all were provided.

But on the face of each—officer, non-com. and private—was the set grin of the British warrior put to the test. The smile that won't come off! Somehow they fumbled with their massive cutters, and strand by strand the savage, spiked wire parted. Then it flipped about, searching like a live thing for living flesh to lacerate.

With the art they had long since learned, they avoided the flailing ends, and after hours, it seemed, of working on their stomachs, the procession enemywards recommenced—this time *in single file, the officer leading. Then they spread out once* more, safely through the barbed wire gap, and wriggle by wriggle the enemy parapet was reached.

Each gripped his club and held his breath, waiting for the spring from the lieutenant which should be the signal for a united leap down into Jerry's trench. Only one enemy head was visible above the parapet, and that not-too-sharp-eyed sentry was yards to the right.

But the little band of raiders, flying into the trench, discovered otherwise; the firestep was lined with drowsy figures in field-grey.

Instantly the night was punctured by shouts and shots and sounds of heavy blows. But for a short half-minute only. The British were not there to do battle. The General wanted one live German only—and the information of the coming attack which that German could impart.

As swiftly as they arrived the eight departed. Only this time they were nine, for in their hurrying midst was a scared captive. Shots whistled after the retreating stooping figures, but the luck of New Year's Eve held, and beyond torn trousers and tunics in the passage of the cut barbed wire there were no British casualties.

Back in the trench the captive was despatched under safe escort General-wards, the raiding party had their tot of rum, the lieutenant went off to report to the captain, and the battalion settled down to prepare for the reciprocal attack which was bound to come with the dawn.

before the vacation ended. They felt that they could quite like Uncle Peter—so long as he was at a safe distance.

But coming in one day from a ramble they found Uncle Peter down, propped in innumerable cushions, before a terrific fire. He was speaking to his sister and brother-in-law when the juniors looked rather timidly in.

"A fine lad—a fine lad, Mabel! Lovell, you ought to be proud of that boy of yours. Cheeky—well, I like a lad to be able to speak up for himself. Why, here is the boy! Arthur, you young rascal, come here!"

Arthur Edward came rather gingerly. His father gave him a smile, his mother beamed on him. Uncle Peter glared at him.

"Do you know that you saved my life?" he boomed.

"Did I?" gasped Lovell. "Sorry! I—I mean, I'm jolly glad! I—I hope you're better, Uncle Peter."

"Never better in my life!" snorted Uncle Peter. "That ass of a doctor says I'm not to smoke cigars for a week at least. I'll show him! Give me a light. No, on second thoughts you needn't give me a light. Give me your fist, my boy. You're a cheeky young rascal, but you're the right stuff—the right stuff, and your uncle's proud of you!"

And Mr. Wilmington demonstrated his changed feelings by giving Lovell a grip that made him wriggle.

The last few days of the vacation were calm and bright at Lovell Lodge. When the time came to return to Rookwood Arthur Lovell was quite sorry to part with his Uncle Peter, a state of affairs that he certainly could never have foreseen. By luck and pluck he had succeeded, at long last, in placating Uncle Peter!

THE END.

(You'll find thrills, laughs, and surprises in next Tuesday's rousing long complete story of Jimmy Silver & Co., entitled: "UP AGAINST HIS FORM MASTER!" by Owen Conquest. Don't miss it!)

BLACK GEORGE!

(Continued from page 6.)

ruthless slayer. Black George was not in a position to waste a lot of time, the Kid figured. Still, he was watchful and wary as a lynx as he rode on the outlaw's trail.

To the Kid's surprise the trail led, after a short distance, not farther up the hill, but slantwise across the hillside, and then downward.

"Sho!" ejaculated the Kid.

It looked as if the outlaw was aiming to ride back to the stage-trail, and that puzzled the Kid.

He had figured that Black George was heading for some retreat, some hiding-place in the depths of the hills.

But that evidently was not the case.

From the direction the trail was taking, it looked as if it would strike the stage-trail about a mile from the spot where the hold-up had taken place.

The Kid, puzzled, followed on.

The trail of the black horse led him past the end of the barranca, and onward down the hill. It stopped, at last, on the bank of a creek that flowed down from the uplands.

The black rider had ridden into the creek; the Kid rode through it with the water up to his stirrups, and found no trace on the other side of the road-agent having landed.

Up the creek there was no riding; the watercourse was too steep. The Kid rode down in the water, and his keen eyes scanned the banks as he rode. The road-agent had followed the stream, he knew that, perhaps with the intention of throwing a pursuer off his track. A simple device like that was not likely to stop the Rio Kid. He followed the shallow stream downward, and a few minutes later picked up sign where a rider had left the water and ridden on towards the stage-trail.

The Kid followed the sign.

A quarter of an hour later he emerged into the open stage-trail that wound along the base of the hill.

The tracks of the horse he had followed led into the stage-trail, and on in the direction of Kicking Mule.

The Kid's eyes grew wide.

The stage-trail was well travelled; ruts of wheels and hoof-marks of horses and cattle were thick. But among them the Kid's eyes picked beyond doubt the trail of Black George's horse.

And that trail led on towards Kicking Mule.

The Kid followed, sorely perplexed.

"Dog-gone my cats!" ejaculated the puzzled Kid. "It sure looks as if that darned galoot rode right into Kicking Mule! If I ain't going blind, and I reckon I ain't, this here is the trail of his cayuse, and it's leading right into town. Dog-gone my boots!"

Close to the cow-town, where the earth was trampled by innumerable hoofs, the track was lost at last; it was impossible for even the Kid's searching eye to pick out the particular trail of Black George's cayuse among so many.

He halted, his brow deeply wrinkled in perplexed thought.

He had figured on tracking the black outlaw to some retreat in the hills, or some hidden den in the chaparral. But the trail had led him to the cow-town of Kicking Mule; and unless the Kid's eyes had deceived him it was into the cow-town that Black George had ridden, after that long and winding circuit among the woods on the hillside. Yet that surely was impossible; for a glimpse of the black outlaw would have caused every gun in Kicking Mule to leap from its holster. Yet the Kid had not been deceived by his eyes—and the trail of the outlaw's horse had not lied.

"Jumpin' Jehosophat!" ejaculated the Kid at last. "It beats me—it sure beats me to one frazzle! I don't get it—I surely don't! That guy's got me guessing!"

And, in sheer perplexity, the Kid gave up the problem for the moment, and rode on into Kicking Mule.

THE END.

("THE MARSHAL OF KICKING MULE!" is the title of next week's roaring long Western yarn.)

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