GREAT NEWS FOR ALL READERS THIS WEEK!

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The POPULAR

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"ON THE STROKE OF TWELVE!"

A LONG STORY OF DETECTIVE THRILLS AND MYSTERY!

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE!

FRIENDS OR FOES?

By RALPH REDWAY.

For his boss' sake, the Rio Kid tries to be friendly with the wayward scallywag of the Bar-One Ranch. But it is written that he is to be his foe!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Rough on the Kid!

YUBA DICK pulled in his broncho on the summit of a high grassy knoll, and stared across the plain under the setting sun.

"Sho!" he ejaculated.

The horse-wrangler of the Bar-One had ridden five miles out of the ranch to meet the Rio Kid on his way back from Lizard Creek.

Heading towards the ranch, rolling along in a cloud of dust, came the herd of cows that the Kid had gone twenty miles that morning to collect and drive in.

On the skirts of the herd rode the Rio Kid and Frank Sanderson, the boss' son, whom Yuba had expected to see. But there was a third rider whom he had not expected to see. And the third man, a dark-skinned Mexican, was roped to his horse and led along at the end of the Kid's riata. Which made Yuba raise his eyebrows as he stared, and ejaculate "Sho!" in tones of astonishment.

"That guy sure is Mexican Pete," said Yuba to himself, "and Two-gun has got him dead to rights! I sure wonder what sort of Cain that hombre has been raising."

And after a long stare at the approaching riders, Yuba Dick rode down the grassy slope to meet the advancing herd.

He rode round the herd in a wide detour, and joined the Kid behind the lumbering cows, waving his Stetson as he came careering up.

"Say, Two-gun, I figured I'd take a pasear this-a-way and meet you coming in!" said the horse-wrangler. "You got the cows, but what you doing with that greaser?"

The Kid smiled and nodded to his comrade. He was glad to see Yuba Dick.

Yuba wheeled his broncho and rode with the Kid, casting curious glances at the scowling prisoner.

"I guess I'm taking that pizen skunk to the ranch for Colonel Sanderson to handle," said the Kid.

"What's he been doin'?"

"Brand blottin'!" said the Kid tersely.

"The dog-goned polecat!" said Yuba, with a black look at the Mexican. "You caught him blottin' brands?"

"Yep! There was three of them—Jas Cassidy and Frenchy and this guy," said the Kid. "Franchy's gone up in the shootin', and Cassidy got away; but I reckon I got this galoot. The boss'll know what to do with him."

"Sure!" said Yuba. "Like as not to hang him over the corral gate. And I'll sure lend a hand with the rope."

Mexican Pete gritted his teeth and scowled sullenly. Yuba glanced across at Frank Sanderson, who was riding on the other side of the herd.

"You got on all O.K. with the boss' son, Two-gun?" he asked.

The Kid hesitated a moment.

Since they had driven the herd away from Lizard Creek, a good fifteen miles across the rolling prairie, Frank Sanderson had not approached him, or spoken a word to him.

There was a dark look on the young rancher's face; and when his eyes turned on the Kid it was not with a friendly glance.

"I guess he looks as if he's got a grouch!" remarked Yuba. "Say, you ain't had trouble?"

"Nary trouble," said the Kid slowly.

He did not feel disposed to confide to Yuba, friend and comrade as he was, that he suspected—more than suspected—the young rancher of setting free the chief of the brand blotters whom the Kid had roped in. The less that was said about that, the Kid reckoned, the better.

"Waal, he don't look a whole lot pleased with his day's ridin'," said Yuba, with a grin. "I guess he don't take kindly to punchin' cows, Two-gun. Playing poker and getting around boot leg whisky is his long suit. The boss has got all his work cut out to make a real man of that boy of his'n, feller."

"You've said it," agreed the Kid, with a sigh.

"I guess it gets my goat," growled Yuba. "The boss is the whitest man in the Kicking Mule country, and that boy of his'n is as yellow as a greaser! Three years ago he shot up a man in Kicking Mule, and had to skip the country; and I'll tell the world that he's come back a durnder scallywag than he went. You hear me toot!"

The Kid made no rejoinder.

Frank Sanderson was not popular with the Bar-One bunch; and there was not a man in the outfit, from Mesquite Bill, the foreman, down to the ranch cook, who did not look on him as a scallywag.

"He's coming this-a-way!" added Yuba.

Frank Sanderson swung round his pinto and came riding across the rear of the herd.

"Say, you got help now, Two-gun," he said surlily. "You won't want me helping to drive in the herd."

"That's so," said the Kid. "If you want to ride on to the ranch, sir, I guess I can handle the cows with Yuba here."

"I'll sure help," said the horse-wrangler. "You won't want to stop along, Mister Frank, if you'd rather hit home."

Frank Sanderson gave no heed to the horse-wrangler. His eyes were on the Kid in the furtive, sidelong way he had.

"I reckon that prisoner had better be taken to Kicking Mule and put in the calaboose," he said.

"I'm taking him to the ranch," said the Kid.

"So you've allowed before," said Sanderson. "But I'm saying that he'd better hit Kicking Mule and the calaboose."

The Kid looked steadily at the rancher's son. Sanderson's face grew obstinate and sullen; but he did not meet the Kid's steady eyes.

"You'll take the herd on, sir, while I tote the Mex along to the town?" asked the Kid very quietly.

"Nope! I'm done punchin' cows for to-day," grunted Sanderson. "I'm hitting Kicking Mule with the prisoner now you've got help with the herd."

The Kid drew a deep breath.

"I got to see that brand-blotter safe, sir," he said. "I sure got to hand him over."

"Don't you figure that he'll get safe to the calaboose in my hands?" demanded Sanderson.

The Mexican looked quickly from one to the other. There was a flush of hope in his face, an eager glitter in his black eyes. But he said no word.

The Kid found a difficulty in answering Sanderson's angry question. For the boss' sake, he wanted to ride clear of trouble with the boss' son.

"Say, Two-gun, what's the matter with that?" asked Yuba Dick, puzzled. "The greaser's roped up safe; Mister Frank can sure land him safe in the calaboose at Kicking Mule, if he wants."

There was the rub, though the Kid could not say so. He did not believe that Frank Sanderson intended to land the brand-blotter safe in the calaboose. He hesitated and shook his head.

Frank Sanderson, with a set jaw, pushed his horse closer. Taking hold of the Kid's riata, he threw it from the prisoner and took hold of Mexican Pete's reins.

"I'm taking this hombre in charge," he said. "I guess you can leave him to me, Two-gun, jest as I say."

The Kid's eyes flashed; and for a moment it looked like trouble. But he controlled his anger.

"Jest hold on a piece, sir!" said the Kid very quietly. "Jas Cassidy got away when I left him in your hands, way back at Lizard Creek. If that greaser gets away, too——"

"You sure chew the rag a whole lot, puncher," sneered the rancher's son. "You want to can it right now."

And, turning his back on the two cowmen, Frank Sanderson rode away across the rear of the dusty herd, leading the Mexican with him.

The Kid drew a deep, quivering breath. He had been defied and outfaced by a man who, he was assured, intended trickery. And yet he could not pull a gun—not on the son of the whitest man in Kicking Mule.

He sat the grey mustang, looking after the rancher's son. In the growing dusk of the prairie, the two riders soon disappeared in the direction of the cow-town—Frank Sanderson leading the bound cowthief's horse by the reins. Once out of sight, the Kid figured, the Mexican would not long remain bound.

But there was no help for it. He could not pull a gun on the boss' son, and there was an end.

The Kid rode on again with the dusty, lumbering herd, and Yuba Dick rode with him.

"Say, Two-gun!" said Yuba slowly.

"Shoot!" said the Kid, as the horse-wrangler paused.

"I guess that young scallywag must have riled you some. I reckon he's glad of an excuse for hitting Kicking Mule. He's sure going to paint the town red," said Yuba. "Ain't that why he was so dead set on taking the greaser to the calaboose?"

"Mebbe!" said the Kid.

"You wasn't here in the old days," said Yuba. "In them days, Two-gun, Mister Frank used to cavort around a whole lot with Jas Cassidy and his crowd—they was friends, and Mexican Pete was one of the bunch. Say, it strikes me powerful strong——" He paused again.

The Kid looked at him.

"Spill it, Yuba."

"Waal," said Yuba, "I guess I ain't going to be surprised to hear that that greaser gets a loose leg on the way to Kicking Mule. If I hear that to-morrow, Two-gun, it ain't going to surprise me none."

The Kid made no reply. It was his own thought, and he figured that the horse-wrangler's shrewd surmise would prove correct. In a glum silence, the Kid rode on with the herd to the ranch.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The Scallywag!

COLONEL SANDERSON listened to the Rio Kid's report with a grim brow. After herding the cows into the home pasture, Yuba went to the bunkhouse, and the Kid to the ranch-house to see the boss. His report was brief. There were matters he could not touch upon in speaking to Frank Sanderson's father. But he noted that the colonel's steely, keen eyes watched him very sharply.

"I guess we got the goods on Jas Cassidy and his crowd now," the rancher said. "All Kicking Mule knows that Jas never raises the cows he sells off the Bar Cross. He's been suspected of rustling, and changin' brands for years. Now we got the goods on him."

"We sure have, sir," said the Kid. "I got cows in the herd here now, with the Bar-Cross brand burned over the Bar-One—the cows that Jas was handlin' when we run him down at Lizard Creek."

"That cinches it!" said Colonel Sanderson. "And I guess I'm going to hit Kicking Mule pronto, and put the marshal on to him. We got a new Marshal at Kicking Mule now, and I guess he will be pleased to round up Jas Cassidy—if he ain't hit the trail out of the country. Say, you too tired to ride with me?"

The Kid smiled.

"I guess I'm ready to ride, sir. I ain't tired a whole lot."

"Get you supper, then, and come round with the cayuse."

"Sure."

The Kid walked away to the bunkhouse.

Half an hour later he was riding for the cow-town with the boss, under the glistening stars. The Kid and his mustang had had a hard day on the plains, and the Kid, who thought of his horse always before himself, left Side-Kicker in the corral, and picked out another mount for the ride to Kicking Mule. For a good distance the rancher and the puncher rode in silence, till the lights of Kicking Mule showed over the dusky prairie ahead. Then the boss of the Bar-One slackened rein, and drew his horse nearer to the Kid.

"Say, how did Jas get away after you'd roped him in?" he asked.

The Kid shifted uneasily in the saddle. He had dreaded to hear that question.

"I guess he lit out while I was going after Mexican Pete, across the creek, sir," he answered slowly.

"Wasn't Frank around?"

"Yep, he was around."

"Didn't you leave Jas roped up?"

"Yep."

"How did he get loose, then, with Frank around?"

"I reckon I wasn't careful enough with the rope, sir," said the worried Kid. "He sure did get loose and hit the horizon."

The colonel grunted.

"You ain't generally careless with a rope," he said. "Look here, hombre! That guy Cassidy was a friend of my son's in the old days—and a bad friend he was, and led him into a lot of trouble. You don't figure that Frank let him loose?"

"I sure wouldn't like to think so, sir," said the Kid uneasily.

"Waal, we'll see if Frank has got that greaser safe to the calaboose," said the rancher. "If he hasn't——"

He did not finish the sentence, but rode on towards the cow-town in grim silence.

The Kid was feeling deeply troubled. He had no expectation whatever of finding that Mexican Pete was in the calaboose when they reached Kicking Mule. And he could see that the old rancher shared his own suspicion.

They rode into the lighted street, and the colonel drew rein at the marshal's office. In the doorway of the timber building stood Mr. Piper, the new marshal of Kicking Mule. He nodded to the rancher, and removed the pipe from his mouth.

"Say, Piper, you got Mexican Pete in the calaboose?" asked Sanderson.

"Nope!"

"Didn't my son bring him in?"

"He sure did not," answered the marshal. "There ain't nary guy in the calaboose, colonel. What you got agin Mexican Pete?"

"Brand-blottin', along with his boss, Jas Cassidy."

The marshal nodded.

"I guess I've suspicioned that galoot for dog's ages," he said. "If you got proof, we've got the goods on him!"

"Proof enough!" grunted Sanderson. "You seen my boy Frank in town this evening?"

The marshal made no reply to that. The Kid, watching him, could guess that Piper had seen Frank, and did not care to tell his father where he had seen him.

"Spill it, Piper!" snapped the colonel.

"Waal, I reckon I seen him," said the marshal vaguely. "I seen him around town somewhere, Colonel. I don't exactly remember where."

"Did you see him ride in?"

"Yep, I saw him ride in."

"Was he alone?"

"He sure was alone, colonel."

The rancher compressed his lips. He wheeled his horse, and rode slowly back along Main Street, the Kid following him, and the marshal staring after him with a faint grin on his rugged face.

The colonel stopped at the Golden Mule Hotel, and hitched his horse to the rail.

"Light down, hombre!" he said curtly.

The Kid dismounted, and hitched his cow-pony.

"I got to find Frank and tote him home," said Sanderson gruffly. "I guess I'll get news of him here. Wait a piece."

The rancher went into the hotel.

The Rio Kid waited, in an uneasy mood. He figured beyond doubt that the scallywag of the Bar-One was painting the town red, and it looked like trouble between father and son when they met. And that prospect got the Kid's goat sorely.

After waiting a few minutes, chewing it over, the Kid left the horses and walked quickly down the street towards the Ace of Spades. He guessed that that "joint" was a likely place to look for Frank Sanderson.

He was right. As he entered the saloon, his eyes fell on the rancher's son sitting at a poker table, deep in draw poker with two others. Frank's rather handsome face was flushed; it was evident at a glance, that he had been putting away bootleg whisky. The Kid quietly made his way to the table, and touched the young rancher on the shoulder.

Frank started, and stared round. His brow blackened at the sight of the Kid.

"What you want?" he snarled.

"Your father's in town, sir," said the Kid quietly. "I guess he's looking for you to ride home."

"Aw, can it! I ain't going home," growled the scallywag of the Bar-One. "Keep clear, and mind your own business, puncher."

Sanderson laughed mockingly, and called to the barkeeper. A glass was in his hand, raised to his lips, when a sudden grip fell on his arm, and the glass went to the floor and was shattered into a score of pieces. The young man spun round with an angry oath, but the rage died out of his face as he found himself looking at the grim face of the boss of the Bar-One.

"Get to your cayuse!" said Colonel Sanderson curtly.

Without a word, the scallywag of the Bar-One turned to the door. The rancher and the Kid followed him out. Frank fumbled unsteadily with his horse.

His father's hand fell on his shoulder.

"Steady! What you done with Mexican Pete?"

"He got away," muttered Frank sullenly.

"You let him get away?"

No answer.

"Get on that cayuse," snapped the rancher. "I guess I'll talk to you in the morning."

Frank clambered clumsily on the horse. It was a silent, gloomy ride back to the Bar-One under the stars.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
In Exile!

"HARD tack for you, Two-gun!" said Mesquite Bill.

The Kid looked at the foreman of the Bar-One inquiringly.

"How come?" he asked.

"You're for the Pecan Spring range."

"I guess some guy's got to be for the Pecan Spring range," said the Kid cheerfully. "Me for the Pecan Spring, then."

"You ain't grousing?" asked Mesquite, with a grin.

"Not in your lifetime."

"I guess the boss wants to see you afore you vamoose," said Mesquite, with a nod towards the ranch-house.

The Kid walked slowly and thoughtfully towards the house. By that time, the new puncher in the Bar-One outfit knew all the wide ranch, from border to border. And the stockman's hut at Pecan Spring was the least desirable post on the whole ranch. It was far from the home ranch, lonely amid the boundless plains, and a week on duty there meant a week of blank solitude, far from the sound of any human voice, or the sight of any human face. But, as the Kid remarked, some guy had to be posted at Pecan Spring, and he was ready and willing to take his turn.

It was several days since the episode of the brand-blotters. The marshal of Kicking Mule and his deputies had visited the Bar-Cross ranch, but as they expected, found no one there. Jas Cassidy and his crowd were gone; and the general opinion was that they had "skipped" the country. The charge of changing brands on cattle had been fairly brought home to them at last, and nothing remained for the brand-blotters but to go while the going was good. Nobody expected to see Jas Cassidy or Mexican Pete in Kicking Mule again; it was more likely than not that they would be lynched if they showed up there.

During those days, the Kid had seen little of Frank Sanderson, and was glad of it. What had followed the return of the scallywag that night from the cow town, the Kid did not know, but from distant glimpses of the rancher's son, it was easy to see that the wastrel was not enjoying life. Whenever he came in contact with the Kid, Frank gave him black looks, the Kid, on the other hand, treating the boss' son politely, and keeping away from him as much as he could. He was haunted with the fear of trouble with Frank Sanderson, trouble that he wanted to avoid for the rancher's sake. And so the news that he was to take over the Pecan Spring post was not wholly unwelcome to the Kid.

"Mornin', Two-gun," said Colonel Sanderson, as the Kid came on the porch. "Mesquite told you?"

"Sure, sir," said the Kid, "and I'm ready to ride."

"You'll find Tucson at the Pecan Spring shanty," said the colonel. "You'll tell him to ride in."

"Yep!"

"And—you ain't going alone, Two-gun," added the colonel.

The Kid brightened a little.

"What about Frank?"

"Frank!" ejaculated the Kid.

"I'm sending Frank to Pecan Spring," said the rancher. "I guess Frank has got to learn to be a man, and he won't learn it none cavorting around Kicking Mule. A week at Pecan Spring will give him time to think a piece, and he sure won't get any poker or bootleg poison there. You get me?"

"Yep!" said the Kid slowly.

"You ain't kicking?" asked the colonel. "Frank don't seem to take to you a whole lot, but you're the man in the bunch I'd like him to be with. I ain't giving you orders, Two-gun; you can take it or leave it, but I'd like you to be with Frank."

The Kid drew a deep breath.

"I'm ready and willing, sir."

"You'll be kind of patient with him, Two-gun," said the colonel quietly. "I got hopes of that boy still, if he's kept out of bad company. I'm wise to it that he let Jas Cassidy and Mexican Pete loose, though they was found stealin' his father's cattle—but they was friends of his once, and I guess that was the reason. I ain't going to be hard on him for that—I reckon he felt it was up to him. Let that go! They've skipped the country now, and won't be seen around Kicking Mule agin, that's good enough. You'll ride with Frank?"

"Sure, sir!" answered the Kid as cheerfully as he could. "You done too much for me, sir, for me not to be willing to do anything you want."

"It's a cinch, then," said the rancher.

An hour later the Kid's pack was ready on Side-Kicker, and he mounted the mustang and rode away from the ranch. Frank Sanderson rode with him on his pinto.

The Kid gave one glance at the scallywag's face as they started. It was black and sullen. Evidently his banishment to Pecan Spring was a heavy blow to Frank.

It was thirty miles to the lonely station, and during that ride not a word was spoken.

In the sunny afternoon the two riders came in sight of the lonely stockman's hut. There was no sign of life about the place—no smoke rising from the iron chimney.

"I guess Tucson ain't to home," remarked the Kid, breaking the long silence.

Frank Sanderson grunted.

They rode up to the hut, and the Kid dismounted, turned Side-Kicker into the corral, and threw open the hut door.

As he expected, the hut was vacant. The stockman was out on the range looking after the cattle that fed on that distant pasture.

Frank stood in the doorway, glancing occasionally at the Kid and staring out over the boundless sea of grass. The sullenness in his face grew darker and darker.

The Kid, keeping up a cheery humour, stacked pine-chips and pecan-twigs in the rusty iron stove and started a fire, and smoke was soon pouring from the chimney. He unpacked provisions, and began to prepare a meal. His companion offered no help; but the Kid did not care for that.

When the meal was ready Frank dropped heavily on a stool at the rough log table to eat.

He ate in moody silence.

The sun was low in the west when Tucson, the stockman, came in from the range. Afar he had seen the smoke from the chimney, which warned him that his relief had come from the home ranch.

"Say, I'm powerful glad to see you-uns," said the cowman, as he tramped in. "I wasn't expecting to see anybody for two-three days yet. What's the big idea?"

"Boss' orders," said the Kid. "You sure won't be sorry to hit the ranch early, Tucson."

"You bet your life!" said the cowman, grinning. "Mister Frank rode out with you, Two-gun. Goin' back with me?"

"Nope; staying."

"Sho!" said Tucson in surprise. He looked curiously at the rancher's son, who spoke no word, remaining sunk in black, sullen ill-humour.

Tucson slept in the cabin that night; and at dawn mounted his horse and rode back to Bar-One, leaving the Kid with his sullen companion.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Trouble Ahead!

THE horseman was vanishing in a fold of the prairie under the red sunset; all the Kid had was the glimpse of a Stetson hat as it disappeared. He wondered who had been at the lonely hut in his absence.

Four days had passed at Pecan Spring. Every day, from early morn till dewy eve, the Rio Kid was in the saddle, riding hard.

There were five hundred head of cattle on the lonely pasture, and it was all one man's work to keep tabs on them. The Kid shifted the herd from one feeding ground to another, from one water-hole to another, taking the care of his boss' property that a good cowman takes—and always alone.

Not once did Frank Sanderson ride herd with him. His days were spent loafing about the hut, or the corral; and every night when the Kid rode in he found the rancher's son sulky and sullen.

It was the evening of the fourth day at Pecan Spring when the Kid, riding in, saw the Stetson of the unknown horseman vanishing over the prairie in the sunset. The thought crossed his mind that perhaps Frank Sanderson had hit the trail at last, unable to stand the monotony of the lonely post any longer; but it was not likely that he would hit the trail when night was falling on the plains.

The Kid reckoned that some galoot had dropped in during the day, and as he came up to the hut he had proof that there had been a visitor; for there were fresh horse-tracks, which the Kid's keen and experienced eye knew at once were not the tracks of any of the four horses at the station.

Frank Sanderson came into the doorway as the Kid dismounted.

"Say, you've had a visitor, sir!" said the Kid cheerily, as he came in, Frank stepping back as he entered.

"No!" said Sanderson shortly.

The Kid gave him a steady look, and then turned away to prepare his supper. He had seen the Stetson hat vanishing to the northward, and the tracks outside the door told their own tale. Why Sanderson had lied to him the Kid could not figure.

On the table lay a deck of cards, and he did not reckon that Frank had been playing poker all by himself. Sanderson hastily gathered up the cards and slipped them into his pocket.

"I guess I've been playin' dummy poker to pass the time," he remarked. "It's dog-gone slow here, Two-gun!"

"It sure ain't a lively place, sir," said the Kid. "I reckon you'd find it a whole lot better if you'd ride the range with me."

"I sure been thinkin' of that," was the unexpected answer. "I been loafin' around and leaving all the work to you, Two-gun; and I guess to-morrow I'm riding and giving you a rest."

The Kid smiled.

"I sure ain't wanting a rest, sir," he answered. "If you'll ride, I'll be glad to ride with you."

Sanderson made no reply to that.

When the Kid turned into his bunk that night he was wondering.

It was past midnight when the Kid—who slept as lightly as a cougar or a lynx—awakened at a sound. Without moving, he grasped the six-gun that was at his side and stared round in the darkness of the hut.

There was a faint red glow from the dying fire in the stove. The Kid knew what had awakened him; the pine-wood bars had been removed at the door, and the door opened.

The Kid did not close his eyes again. He knew that he was alone in the stockman's hut; Frank Sanderson had left his bunk and gone out.

The Kid sat up, six-gun in hand, and waited for him to return.

More than an hour had passed before he heard a sound at the door again. It was opened softly, and a light footfall entered; the door was as softly closed.

In the faint, dim glow from the stove a creeping figure crossed the hut stealthily towards Frank Sanderson's bunk.

Quietly and cautiously the rancher's son packed himself into his bunk, evidently desirous of not awakening the Kid—who was broad awake and watchful. It was a long time before the sound of steady breathing across the hut told that the rancher's son was sleeping at last.

Then the Kid laid his head on his pillow again.

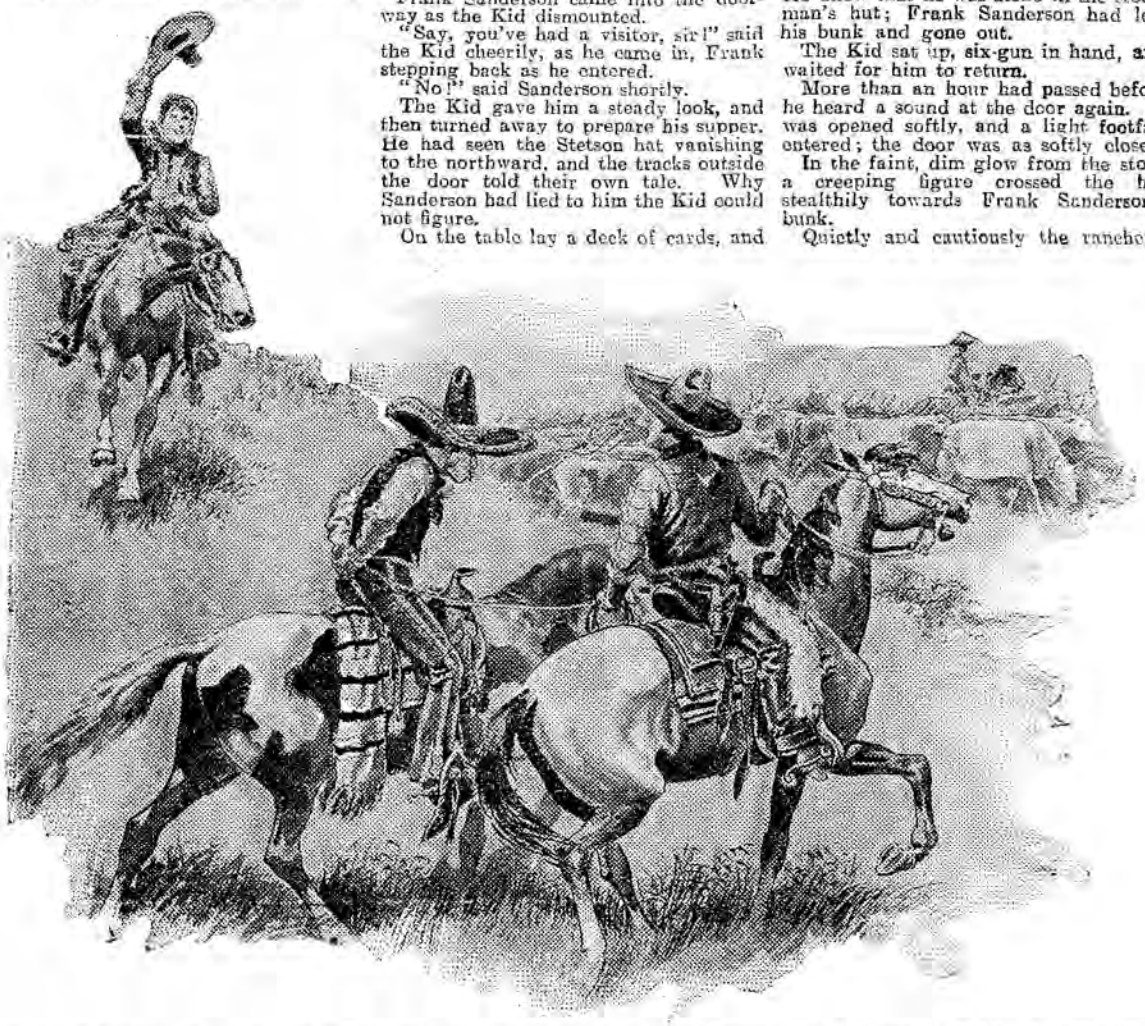
But it was long before he slept.

The Kid's suspicions were vague as yet; but there was one thing that was clear in his mind—there was trouble coming. As sure as the sun was to rise on the prairie in the morning, trouble was to come with the new day. And the Kid, though with a heavy heart, made up his mind to it.

THE END.

(Next week's Western yarn is entitled: "THE CATTLE LIFTERS!" and is full of thrills. Don't miss it!)

THE POPULAR.—No. 561.



As the herd of steers advanced, with the Rio Kid riding beside his captive cattle thief, Yuma Dick came galloping to meet them.