THE RIO KID'S QUEST!

A DANDY LONG TALE OF THE WEST!

An Old Acquaintance!

CHIEF MANY PONIES peered through the screen of sage and greasewood, and his black eyes glittered at the horseman who was riding up the sandy ridge. He muttered a word in the guttural dialect of the Apache, and the tattered braves round him lay low in cover. A savage grin was reflected from one coppery face to another. There were twenty or more of the ragged Apaches crouching in the thicket that crowned the ridge, in the desert of the Staked Plain, and the white man, unknowing, was riding directly towards them—directly into their hands. Chief Many Ponies watched the rider as he advanced.

He saw a cow-puncher, mounted on a mustang covered thick with the dust of the plain; but the brim of the Stetson hat hid the face from his view. The Apache chief sank back into cover, and waited. The beat of the mustang's hoofs came to his ears, coming nearer and nearer. In a few minutes more the horseman would be among the crowd of crouching Redskins.

The Rio Kid rode on.

His eyes were scanning the ground about him as he rode. But he was not aware of the camp of the Apaches in the thickets ahead. He was looking for sign—for long hours riding under the burning sun the Kid had been looking for sign.

Many a long mile lay between the Kid and the valley of the Yaqui, from which he had fled in the dawn. Long ago he had dropped the last of his pursuers. He was hunting now for sign of the trail of Slick Singer, the gunman of Packsaddle, who had escaped from the Yaqui encampment in the lost valley, with the boy prisoner of whom the Kid was in quest. But what direction the gunman had taken in his flight, and whether the Yaqui had overtaken him, the Kid did not know. He had little hope that either the Packsaddle gunman or the boy still lived. But he aimed to know for certain before he hit the trail out of the desert. He scanned the sun-baked earth for sign as he rode up the ridge towards the thickets of sage and greasewood. There was no sign. But the Kid figured that from the top of the high ridge he might pick up some sight either of the fugitives, or of the pursuing Yaqui on the boundless expanse of the level plain beyond. He pushed his mustang into the thickets of dusty sage and evil smelling greasewood, and a moment later dark faces and glittering, black eyes, and dusky hands grasping spear and tomahawk, rose round him in a swarm.

"Great gophers!" ejaculated the Kid.

His guns were in his hands in a second. The rifle of Chief Many Ponies was aimed at his breast.

But neither the boy puncher nor the Apache chief pulled trigger. There was an exclamation on both sides of surprised recognition.

"Chief Many Ponies!" exclaimed the Kid.

"Wah!" The Apache chief waved back the crowd of braves that swarmed round the Kid. "Chief Many Ponies did not know that it was his white brother."

He dropped the butt of the rifle to the earth. The crowd of weapons that had been raised round the Kid were lowered—reluctantly. But the word of Chief Many Ponies was law to the gang of ragged outcasts who followed his lead.

The Rio Kid's face brightened. He slipped his guns back into the holsters, and held out his hand to the copper-skinned chief.

"Say, feller, I'm powerful glad to meet up with you!" he exclaimed. "I figured that I might come across you in the Staked Plain, Many Ponies. And this sure is a sight for sore eyes."

Many Ponies, tattered and dusty in dingy leggings and ragged blanket and draggled feathers, saluted the Kid with the grave dignity of an Indian chief.

"The heart of Many Ponies is light to see his little white brother," he declared. "The little chief is welcome to the camp of the Apache."

The Kid slipped from his mustang.

Few white men would have been glad to fall in with Chief Many Ponies, and his ragged horde of outcasts in the desert of the Staked Plain. But the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande and the chief of the outcast horde were old acquaintances and friends, and the meeting was good fortune to the Kid.

"What you doing here, chief?" he asked.

Many Ponies waved a dusky hand towards the distant south-east. He did not need to answer in words—that gesture in the direction of the cow country was enough. The Kid's face clouded for a moment. Outlaw as he was, he was a cowman born and bred, and cattle-lifting got his goat. The Apaches were on a raid to lift cows from the ranges that bordered on the Staked Plain. But it was no business of the Kid's, and he dismissed it with a shrug of the shoulders.

The Rio Kid Borrows a Redskin Tribe

To Help Him in a Strange Quest!

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"I reckon you can help me, chief, if you want," said the Kid.

The Apache chief waved his dusky hand again, this time towards the watching crowd of bucks, and then touched his own breast. The Kid understood the silent language of the taciturn Redskin. The chief was offering him the services of himself and his tattered following.

"Good!" said the Kid.

"My brother's enemies are trailing him in the Llano Estacado?" asked Chief Many Ponies.

The Rio Kid shook his head with a grin.

"I guess the sheriffs ain't honing to trail me in the Staked Plain, chief," he answered. "I reckon they'd be food for the coyotes and the turkey buzzards if they did. It ain't that. I guess I'm looking for a galoot that's riding the Staked Plain, if the Yaqui haven't got him yet."

"The Yaqui are dogs," said the chief sententiously. "They flee like coyotes before the braves of the Apache."

"You've said it," agreed the Kid. "Them Yaqui sure is pizen. I guess I'll put you wise, chief. And if you want to help me out, I'll sure be powerful pleased. I been looking for a white boy that was a prisoner in the Yaqui Valley. There's a big ranch and a fortune waiting for him in San Antone. But there was another guy looking for him—Slick Singer, the gunman of Packsaddle, that I reckon you've heard of."

The Apache nodded.

"That guy was roped in by the Yaqui," went on the Kid. "And I figure that the boy let him loose, and they got away together last night. The Yaqui was after them, but whether they got them or not, I ain't found out. I got to find out, chief."

Another nod.

"But that ain't all," said the Kid. "That fire-bug, Slick Singer, is after the boy to shoot him up. And I guess if the kid gets away from the Yaqui he won't get away from Slick. I'm sure a whole heap worried about that kid. I guess there ain't a dog's chance that he's alive yet. But if that gunman has wiped him out, I'm going to get that galoot." The Kid's eyes gleamed. "I'll sure trail him till I get him, if he's harmed that papoose. But hunting for them in the Staked Plain is sure like hunting a flea on a Mexican dog. Say, you want to help?"

"Chief Many Ponies can trail the wind in the desert," said the Apache. "My little white brother has spoken. It is enough."

"Good for you!" said the Kid.

The chief turned to his braves, and there was a muttering for a few minutes in the Apache dialect. He turned back to the Kid.

"My young men have seen the trail of many horses," he said. "In the sunrise we passed the trail."

The Kid nodded eagerly.

"I guess that'll be the trail of the Yaqui that was after them," he said. "I guess it's a Texas dollar to a Mexican cent that the Injuns have got them—but I sure want to know. We want to hit that trail, chief."

"Wah! It is good!" said Chief Many Ponies.

When the Rio Kid rode out of the thickets he was riding by the side of Chief Many Ponies, with the score of tattered Redskins following. Ere long they struck the trail of the Yaqui riders who had pursued Slick Singer and the boy.

The Kid dismounted to examine the trail.

It showed the passage of many riders—not less than twenty-five, the Kid reckoned. Some of the tracks were fresher than others, and there was no sign of returning hoof-prints. It was easy for the Kid to read the sign. A bunch of the Yaqui, he reckoned, had followed Slick Singer in the night, and others had followed on at dawn.

But many hours had passed since that trail was made, and in those hours what had happened to the fugitives? That the Kid could only learn by following the trail. He remounted the grey mustang, and rode on with the Apaches.

The Man on the Mesa!

CRACK!

The rifle rang from the summit of the mesa, and the shot was answered by a Yaqui yell.

Slick Singer gave a snarl of savage satisfaction.

Another of the Redskins had gone to his account; though it made no difference, he knew, to the finish. They had him—they had him dead to rights. And all that was left to the gunman of Packsaddle was to die fighting, like a rat in a corner, and sell his life dearly.

He lay on the summit of the mesa—a steep mass of rock that rose fifteen feet or more from the level plain. The rugged sides were steep, almost as walls; not easy to climb with a desperate rifleman watching from the summit.

Twice the Yaqui had attempted to rush the mesa, and each time the gunman had driven them off, and round the lonely rock six or seven of the Yaqui lay still. And the rest, crouching round the tall rock in the cover of sand-ridges and bushes, watched and waited, every now and then loosing off a bullet. But the lead whistled harmlessly over the desperate man who crouched above.

Round the mesa, mile on mile, as far as the eye could reach, lay the dry desert, with clouds of dust stirring in a hot wind, the level broken only by arid ridges and patches of dusty sage and greasewood, and tall cacti lifting their skeleton arms.

Overhead, the hot sun blazed, and the rock on which the gunman lay was almost burning to the touch. Heat as of a furnace tormented him, as he lay unsheltered in the pitiless blaze of the sun, and thirst parched him, and ached in his throat. Not a drop of water passed his lips during the long, hot hours, while he held his position against the Redskins, and the savages of the desert howled round him.

More than once the gunman had been tempted to let the enemy scale the mesa, and to end his torment in a last hand-to-hand struggle, and death. For there was no hope, no chance of hope. But the instinct to live, and to kill, was strong on him. There was a savage satisfaction in making the Yaqui pay dear for his scalp.

He watched with savage eyes. A Yaqui had stirred from cover, and the shot from the top of the mesa laid him out in the sage. A fierce yelling and a spattering of bullets on the rock answered.

"Dog-gone their red hides!" muttered Slick Singer. "Dog-gone 'em! They got me! But I guess the boy's safe!"

It was strange enough that that thought should give him satisfaction in the last hours of a wild and misspent life. The boy was heir to the big ranch at San Antone, and if he had died in the Staked Plain his only relative would have stepped into his shoes. And it was with the ruthless intention that Dick Singer should die in the Staked Plain that the gunman had sought him. And he had found him in the encampment of the Yaqui in the lost valley. But it was as a helpless prisoner, doomed to death, that the gunman had reached the lodges of the Yaqui.

And the boy, knowing nothing of his ruthless scheme, had saved him, and fled with him, trusting his life innocently in the hands of the man who sought his death. And somehow that innocent faith had worked a change in the gunman's hard heart and seared mind.

His heart was not, perhaps, so hard as he had fancied; perhaps, when it had come to the test, he would have been incapable of the dastardly deed he had schemed. He hardly knew. But he knew that when the test came, his good angel had won, against the counsels of evil, and he had forced the boy to flight, and remained behind, dismounted, to face the pursuers.

Somewhere, in the far distance of the desert, the boy rode free, on the chestnut cow-pony. And Slick Singer, surrounded by merciless foes, waited for death.

Already the Yaqui had paid dearly. Seven of the savage braves lay dead round the mesa. At a further distance lay the chief Black Hawk. Others among the savage gang were wounded. But sixteen or seventeen savage braves still watched the mesa, and though they did not attempt to rush the rock again, the end could not be far off.

They had only to wait till fatigue and thirst delivered the paleface into their hands. Slick Singer longed for another rush, but it did not come. Long before the burning day was over he knew that he would be lying helpless there, conquered by heat and thirst, unable to defend himself when the Redskins came clambering up. And the Yaqui knew it, too, and they waited.

"Dog-gone 'em!" growled the gunman, between his teeth.

The hot wind seared his face; the dust of the desert was thick on his cracking lips, in his parched throat. The sun was past the meridian now, blazing down on him, scorching him with heat. A draggled feathered headdress showed among the sage on the plain, and the gunman fired. But the bullet went wide, and he cursed. His dazzled eyes were losing their keenness, his scorched and burning hands their skill. The end could not be far off now. The rifle in his hands almost burned his fingers.

His haggard eyes swept the far plain from the height of the mesa. The boy was saved. He had seen the Yaqui who had ridden after him, ride back to join their comrades who besieged the mesa. The boy was saved. But nothing could save the man who had ridden into the Staked Plain seeking a fortune by a crime, and who had found there repentance—and death!

Dust-clouds, stirred by the hot wind, floated on the plain. A thicker cloud than the rest caught the gunman's eye, and he knew that it was caused by approaching horsemen. He watched it idly. No help could come to him. In that remote desert the only riders were the outcast Redskins—Yaqui, Navajo, and Apache—who preferred the deso-

late waste to the Indian reservations. Through the dust-cloud he caught the gleam of spears, the nodding of feathers. Another gang of Yaqui, he reckoned, coming to join the copper-skinned demons who surrounded him—there were more than enough of them already.

From the top of the mesa he saw the advancing riders long before they were visible to the Yaqui on the plain below. But when the Redskins became aware of them there was a sudden excitement among the braves who besieged the mesa. The gunman heard guttural exclamations in tones of excitement and alarm. A word floated up to his ears, "Apache!" And there was a sudden rush of the Yaqui, who had been lying in cover, towards the horses they had left in the shelter of a hollow at a little distance. The gunman knew now what was the matter. The newcomers were not a fresh gang of Yaqui, but some rival gang of Apaches, and they came as foes to his foes.

It meant nothing to him. From Apache he had as much to fear as from Yaqui. Any white man was fair game to any of the outcast Redskins who haunted the solitary desert. But he grinned over his rifle as the Yaqui broke cover and ran for their horses. Twice he fired among them, and one, at least, of the braves rolled over and did not rise again. He was losing his grip now, his shooting was wild. But one, at least, of the enemy had gone down.

The Yaqui mounted in hot haste, and dashed away over the plain. They did not ride to meet the approaching Apaches. Evidently they were thinking only of escape. The odds were on the side of the newcomers, and the Yaqui rode for safety. They gave no glance to the mesa, or the desperate man who had so nearly fallen into their hands. He was forgotten now, as the Yaqui urged their shaggy ponies to top speed, with their backs to the advancing Apaches.

The gunman watched idly with dizzy eyes. The outcome of the trouble was nothing to him; his doom was the same.

He saw the Apaches sweep past the mesa at a furious gallop, and ride after the fleeing Yaqui. But one remained behind, and Slick Singer rubbed his dizzy eyes and stared again at the man in chaps and Stetson.

"The Kid!" he muttered hoarsely. "The Rio Kid!"

He rose to his feet, and waved wildly to the boy puncher. The sight of a white man in that wilderness of death was like wine to him. They had parted on bitter terms. The Kid knew his design, and had come near to shooting him out of hand when he discovered it. But the sight of the Kid brought hope to the man who had lain for hours in the torture of thirst, in the grim fear of death. He waved to the Kid, and shouted hoarsely in a cracked voice. Throwing down his rifle, he scrambled headlong down the steep side of the mesa.

"Water!"

The Rio Kid looked at him. His face was grim, his eyes glinting. But he unhooked his can, and handed it to the gunman, and Slick Singer placed it to his lips, and drained the water to the last drop.

The Kid on the Trail!

THE Kid stood silent, waiting. His face did not relax; his lips were set hard, and his eyes glinted at the gunman. His hand rested on the butt of a gun. Slick Singer, having drained the last drop from the can, leaned on the mesa, panting. But the quenching of his thirst had given him new life, and he was pulling himself together. He fixed his haggard eyes on the Kid, and, reading the expression on the boy outlaw's face, he groped at his belt—for a weapon that was not there.

Slick Singer rose to his feet, and waved wildly to the Rio Kid in the plain below.

"I guess you looking for me to shoot me up?" he sneered. "You can sure get on with it, dog-gone you! I reckon I'd have got worse from the Yaqui."

"Where's the boy?"

The Kid's voice was hard and cold, and full of menace.

"The boy?" repeated Slick.

"You got away from the Yaqui Valley with the boy," said the Kid. "I was there, among the lodges; I heard the Injuns get after you when you made your break. The boy let you loose, I reckon."

"You've said it."

"He went with you——"

"Sure!"

"Where is he?"

The Kid's gun was in his hand now.

"Shoot, if you durned well like!" said Slick sullenly. "I ain't asking nothing of you, you durned fire-bug."

"I guess if you've hurt that papoose I'll fill you so full of holes you'd be useful for a colander," said the Kid. "You durned lobo-wolf, you came to the Staked Plain to find him, and put him out of your way, to step into his shoes at the Singer Ranch at San Antone. I reckon I was some gink not to shoot you up when I found out your game; but I sure never did calculate that you'd got hold of the boy. But you got hold of him, and you lit out of the Yaqui Valley with him, and now I want to know what you done with him, Slick Singer?"

The gunman sneered.

"You reckon I shot him up?" he asked.

"Ain't that what you was searching for him for?" demanded the Rio Kid.

"Correct! But——"

"But what, you lobo-wolf?"

"The boy lot me loose, when the Yaqui had me fixed dead to rights," said the gunman. "After that——"

He broke off.

The Kid scanned his haggard face curiously.

"After that, even you wasn't durned skunk enough to shoot him up?"

"You get me!"

"Then where is he? You was cornered on that mesa. What's become of the boy? He ain't there?"

The Kid nodded towards the rock.

"He sure ain't."

"I want to know," said the Kid quietly. "I know what you was after, Slick Singer; and if you done got away with it, you're a dead gun-slinger. If the boy's gone over the range, you go after him, pronto. Speak, you scallywag, afore I let drive a bullet through your durned cabeza." He half-raised his revolver. "Where's that boy Dick?"

"You can search me."

"You want me to believe you don't know?"

"Jest that."

"Put it clear. What's happened to him?" said the Kid. "I ain't giving you the benefit of any doubt. If you've harmed him——"

The gunman laughed sardonically.

"Spill it, you durned polecat!" snapped the Kid. "I'll say it ain't safe to keep me waiting."

"The boy's gone, on my horse," said Slick sullenly. "The Yaqui was riding us down, and the cayuse couldn't carryin' double, and I drove off the hoss with the boy on it, and took to the mesa to hold off the Injuns. I guess he rode clear."

The Kid eyed him.

"You want me to believe that?" he said contemptuously.

"Jest as you durned well choose."

"You came to the Staked Plain to find him and kill him, because he stood between you and a fortune way back at San Antone. You want me to believe that you gave him your cayuse to escape on, and stayed behind to face the music on your lonesome—and you the hardest cuss in Texas, a gun-slinger that's shot up more galoots than he's got fingers and toes! Aw, give a guy something easier than that, Slick Singer."

"I guess you won't believe it," said the gunman, with a nod.

"I jest don't."

"But that's the how of it, Kid, believe it or not. After what he did, I jest couldn't hurt the boy—he trusted me."

"He trusted you?" said the Kid. "He sure did not know you, Slick."

"He sure did not!" said the gunman. "And he trusted me, and I saved him; and if I get out of this cussed desert alive, it's me for Packsaddle and the poker joints, and the boy'll go to San Antone to his ranch and never see hide nor hair of me. But what's the good of chewing the rag—you ain't believing me."

"I sure am not!" said the Kid. "More like, I guess, that you gave him his last sickness, and left him to the Yaqui. But I ain't shooting you up till I make sure. I guess there's a dog's chance that you're telling me the truth; and I reckon I'm hunting for that boy. If I don't find him, Slick Singer, you need not tell me any more lies—it's you for the long jump."

Chief Many Ponies came riding back to the mesa. His braves followed him. The Yaqui were already far away, riding for their lives, and the Apaches had dropped the pursuit. They had roped in nine or ten horses belonging to the Yaqui, who had fallen round the mesa, and some of the braves dismounted to gather up scattered rifles and cartridges and tomahawks. All was grist that came to the mill of the tattered outcasts of the Staked Plain.

Many Ponies looked at the sullen-faced gunman leaning on the rugged side of the mesa, and looked inquiringly at the Rio Kid. The Kid's face was dark with thought. There was a possibility that the gunman had told him the truth, and that the boy yet lived. To one knowing Slick Singer as the Kid knew him, the chance seemed slight. More likely — much more likely—it was a false tale to avert vengeance. But there was a chance.

The Apache chief touched his tomahawk, with a significant gesture. Slick Singer stared sullenly on. His life was the Kid's, to spare or to take. The Kid shook his head.

"Not yet, chief! If that scallywag ain't harmed the papoose, I guess I want him to ride safe."

"Where papoose?" asked Many Ponies.

"That lobo-wolf allows that he rode off, when the Yaqui surrounded him at this mesa," said the Kid. "I guess if it's true I'll pick up sign. I've trailed with that geck, and I know the track of his hoss like it was my own. Say, you lend him a cayuse, chief, and rope him on it safe an' sound; while I'm hunting sign."

"Ugh! It is good!" said the Apache.

"Where'd you last see the kid, if you've told me straight?" asked the boy puncher, turning to Slick again.

"Yonder was the way he went." The gunman pointed. "I guess you'll find all that's left of Black Hawk, the Yaqui chief, on his trail. He was riding after the boy to spear him, when I shot him in the back from the top of the mesa."

"I guess I'll soon know."

The Rio Kid moved off to the spot indicated by the gunman. Two or three of the Apaches, at a sign from Many Ponies, seized the gunman and roped him on the back of one of the captured horses. He submitted sullenly; resistance was impossible. Then the whole party, with the prisoner in their midst, followed the Kid.

Slick's eyes dwelt on the boy puncher anxiously. His life depended on the Kid picking up the trail of the chestnut cow-pony, on which the boy had escaped.

The Kid moved along slowly, his eyes on the sun-baked earth for sign.

His face was clouded; he had little hope that the boy yet lived. But he was clinging to what chance there was. On one point he was grimly determined; if he failed to find the trail of the cow-pony, Slick Singer's life was numbered by minutes. The gunman's face was dark with anxiety as he watched the boy outlaw seeking sign.

Many Ponies joined the Kid. He pointed with a brown finger to a scarcely distinguishable mark on the hard earth.

"Cayuse pass here!" said the Indian.

"I guess so," assented the Kid, with a nod. "But that ain't enough to tell me what I want to know."

He moved on, with his keen eyes on the ground. There was a sign that a horse had passed, but so faint that only the eye of a Redskin or of the Rio Kid could have picked it up. It was not sufficient to identify the track.

Step by step the Kid and the Indian picked up the trail and followed it, the Apaches following behind it, the gunman bound on his horse.

The Kid uttered a sudden exclamation and darted forward. There was a patch of soft sand, in which the marks of hoofs lay legibly written. The Kid dropped on his knees and examined the sign eagerly.

"By the great horned toad, that's the tread of Slick's cow-pony!" he muttered.

The gunman caught the words, and he gave a gasp of relief. The trail had been found.

The Kid rose to his feet.

"I guess you got a dog's chance for your life, Slick," he said. "That sure is the trail of your cow-pony. He went this way, and I guess he was going hard. You still allow that the boy was on his back?"

"Sure!"

"I'm following that trail," said the Kid. "If it leads me to the boy, you'll live, Slick Singer; if it don't, you're meat for the coyotes! You wait a piece."

The gunman, roped to the back of the Yaqui pony, waited, while the Kid talked to Chief Many Ponies. He needed no more help from the Apaches, and the chief was anxious to get on his own trail. A few words, and the Kid grasped the dusky hand of his Indian pard, and they parted.

The Apaches rode away to the south-east, and soon disappeared in a cloud of dust. The Kid turned back to his mustang, and mounted.

With his riato tied to the gunman's horse, he led Slick Singer after him, as he pushed on the trail of the chestnut cow-pony.

Faint as that trail was, it was clear enough to the keen eyes of the Kid. He followed it at a loping trot, and behind him rode the gunman, bound to his horse, his hands tied down to his sides, and hope and fear mingled in his breast.

If the trail led the Rio Kid to the lost boy, his life was safe; but if it did not—— The gunman's face was haggard as he followed behind the Kid through the long hot hours, in the silence and solitude of the desert.

The Home Trail!

THE boy lay sleeping in the shadow of a bush, his head pillowed on his arm—the sleep of weariness. Beside him lay the chestnut cow-pony, equally weary. How far he had ridden after escaping from the Yaqui at the mesa, Dick Singer did not know; but he had ridden until the flagging horse had stopped and refused to go farther.

He was safe from the Yaqui now; there was no sign of pursuit when the weary boy lay down to rest in the shade of the bush.

His thoughts, as he sank into slumber, were of the man who had saved him, who had driven the horse into flight, and remained behind to die at the hands of the Yaqui. By that act of self-sacrifice Slick Singer had saved him from the Redskins. But whether the boy, alone in the desert, could ever find his way out of the wilderness to the settlements was another matter.

Slick Singer had done all that he could, and the boy, who would gladly have stayed with him and shared his fate, thought of him with gratitude.

But his thoughts were dimmed by weariness, and he soon sank into a deep sleep, and lay unconscious of the hours that passed.

From the dusty sage a skinny animal, with glaring, hungry eyes, crept, and whined softly, watching the boy and the horse. Both were sunk in deep slumber, and did not heed the coyote. But the scavenger of the desert knew that they lived, and dared not touch them.

Another and another gaunt brute crept from the sage, till more than a score of the fierce-eyed animals squatted round, watching, waiting, but not daring to approach close. Still the boy slept.

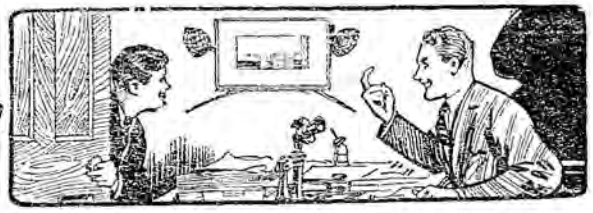
He was unconscious of the sound of hoof-beats that broke the silence of the desert as the sun was sinking to the west. He did not hear the startled howls of the coyotes as they scattered and fled before a lashing quirt.

His eyes did not open till there was a heavy tread close by him and the sound of a voice in his ears.

Then they opened, with startled terror, and for one fearful moment he fancied that it was the Yaqui who had run him down. His hand went desperately to the knife in his belt. Then he saw that it was a white man who bent over him—a man in Stetson and chaps. His hand dropped from the knife; he raised himself on his elbow, and stared

(*Continued on page* 12.)

A CHIN-WAG with YOUR EDITOR!



OH, WHAT AN ISSUE!

I'VE got so much to say about next week's issue—so many new and wonderful features to announce—that I really don't know where to begin. (This is where you chaps are going to sit up and gasp.)

Let's make a start by saying a few words about the Popolaki Patrol. I mentioned in last week's issue the start of a grand new series of stories dealing with the adventures of a patrol of Boy Scouts in the wilds of the Congo. This series starts next week! To those of you who might have missed my previous announcement of these stories, let me say that the Popolaki Patrol are some boys. Headed by Lyn Strong, their leader, and backed up in their stormy adventures in the jungles by a giant native chief, Bobo, they will give POPULAR readers all the thrills they'll want for a long time.

There are five of 'em that wear the colours of the patrol—Lyn Strong, Fatty Page—who eats all day and night, Pip Parker—the smallest member, but nevertheless a tough 'un, Smuts—the Dutchman, and a great man in a fight, and Stacpoole—the dandy. (Stac's such a dandy that he carries a clothes brush in case he soils his trucks on trek.) Take a peeper at the sketch at the foot of this page—and you'll see what they're like.

The Popolaki Patrol will be here next week!

NOW FOR A SCREAM!

I suppose you're wondering what all these little figures are doing on this page, and what they're supposed to represent. Well, it's like this. I've been thinking of adding another new feature to the programme of the POPULAR. Then I had a brainwave—a 100 per cent, gilt-edged wheeze—in other words, a COMIC SUPPLEMENT! There, now you know what good news number two is.

My word, we are going strong! A laugh a day keeps the doctor away. Well, here's something to put all the docs in the world out of commission: A comic supplement, with more laughs in it than you have hairs on your head—bald men and babies not counted!

Didn't I tell you I'd got a lot to say to you this week? Well, I've not finished yet. Look out!

This comic supplement, which starts next week, is going to make a sensation, believe me. All the best comic artists have been wearing out the seat of my visitors' chair and walking threadbare my carpets in their countless visits to my sanctum concerning this supplement. Many a head has been scratched—leave out that joke about splinters!—in the endeavour to tickle up the jolly old brain box. And we—that's the artists and myself—have compiled what we feel sure will bring down the house—in jokes.

OUR COMIC CHARACTERS!

To start with, there's Monty Baggs, the sheriff who goes about dressed up to "kill." He's a nut, a dude, a soft-looking guy. But you mustn't go by appearances with this chap. He's all there when it comes to catching gunmen, hoboes, and such-like insects. Of course, he gets it in the neck at times, and at those times you really wonder whether you are going to bust a waistcoat button with laughing.

Jerry Jinks of Funnycutts School is another breezy joker who figures in our Comic Supplement. And with him are two flappers, the Head's daughters, who help to keep up the fun and spirit at Dr. Birch's Academy for young sparks.

Here's a little Eastern touch—Ali Hoop-la, and his snakey snake—a pair

of fun-merchants you'll simply go crazy about. Ali likes to help the world go round on even wheels—but he's not always successful in this. Then we can't help bursting into song again (laughter, I should say) when he comes a cropper and sits counting the stars float about. Still, I must say Ali is a tough 'un to trip.

"I still have you, Sonny Boy." Yes, we've got old Sonny Boy billed in the supplement—and his pop, too. Good old pop—he's got such a sweet singing voice. Sonny Boy doesn't stand more than three feet, but what he lacks in inches he makes up for in jokes.

Now I've given you the once-over about the characters that are appearing in our new Comic Supplement—all you've got to do is sit tight and wait for it—next week.

FREE GIFTS FOR YOU!

Ah!

Did I hear you say: "What's this!" in tones of great excitement? Yes, I think I did—and rightly so. For now I'm going to make you stand on your feet and give three hearty cheers!

Who'd like a Bowman Engine? Or a Schneider Seaplane? Or a box of Conjuring Tricks? Or a fountain-pen? Or a model yacht? Or a—steady, let's

get this right. Am I offering you these and many other gifts FREE? YES! Am I asking you to solve picture puzzles? NO! And this is where I ask you to take special notice!

In next week's issue you will find full particulars of a Grand Free Gift Scheme. In this there are no picture puzzles to be solved, no entry to a competition—nothing to do, in fact, but to send in your name and address on the specially provided registration form.

Each week, starting from next week, I shall allot a number of Free Gifts to registered readers—and when you see your name in the prize list, it will be necessary for you to claim your gift. Now there's nothing more simple than this—and the hundreds of presents I have to give away are sights to gladden the eyes of every boy and girl.

Engines, aeroplanes, seaplanes, conjuring tricks, fountain pens, tanks, Spring-heel Jack novelties, model speed boats and yachts, and many other things.

In next week's issue you will find the first list of readers' names to whom gifts have been allotted.

THE POPOLAKI PATROL.

ing, beneath the bedclothes. In his mouth Cornelius carried a young rabbit, for Cornelius was an unblushing poacher. And as Cornelius proceeded to trot homewards, the eyes of Thunder and Blazes rested on him. Without letting go the ruins of the hat-brim Thunder and Blazes swept forward in pursuit like one dog.

Over the hat-brim went Beilby, his feet wrenched from under him, and over the hat-brim went Bindley also, prone in the dust. Cornelius looked over his shoulder, and began to hurry. Dropping the hat-brim, the two bulldogs raced their hardest, and Mr. Whiffler's horse, that had been sound asleep in the shafts, woke up and went jogging onwards.

"Oh, rats to the dogs!" said Bindley, picking himself up. "Ouch! I flopped with a bit of a jar."

Beilby picked himself up, too, not quite so mirthful as he had been. The lean face of Mr. Whiffler and the plump face of Mr. Bloomby worked spasmodically, and these gentlemen slowly, and with the greatest care, extricated themselves from the thorns. The alderman was out first, as there was not so much of him for the thorns to cling to. He folded his arms and glared at the ground in a terrible and tragic manner, and spoke in sepulchral accents apparently from the lowest button of his frock-coat.

"Capering whelk!" said Alderman Whiffler. "The time is not yet, but we shall meet again. Base poltroon, who dare not meet me man to man, but who walks abroad surrounded by a pack of ferocious mongrels and urges them on to devour me! Blatant, bloated bloater! Ha, ha! Beware, Bloomby—bewar-r-re! The day will come, Bloomby, when I will crush you, er-rush you, cr-r-rush you, ker-r-rush you, Bloomby, like a wur-r-rum under my heel.

After this bloodcurdling prophecy, Mr. Whiffler turned and strode away, with a majestic air, quite forgetting in the tremendous agitation of his mind that he had come out with a hat and a horse and cart, and was going home without them.

Mr. Bloomby wiped the perspiration from his brow and removed a thorn from his neck.

"Here, you fork out quick, Mr Bloomby!" said Beilby. "Look at that! All that's left of my new straw hat! Your beastly dogs have ripped it to rags, and I believe they've bitten me, too. What are you going to do about it?"

The mayor thrust a couple of notes into Beilby's clutching hand.

"Leave—phew!— leave me in peace!" panted Mr. Josiah Bloomby. "Leave me —phew!— in peace, that is all I ask!"

Beilby did not even say "Thank you!" He sprinted up the road. He had quite expected ten shillings, and hoped for a pound; but the mayor had given him two. Beilby let no grass grow under his boots, but left the district before Mr. Bloomby could discover his mistake and ask for the return of one of those precious scraps of paper. Two pounds for a last year's straw-yard, when he could buy a brand new one for four-and-sixpence!

It was a joy ride, a gilt-edged stunt that filled Beilby's greedy little heart with rapture. To get as much as he could for nothing was his one aim in life. His luck was at full tide, and in his joy he forgot the ink on his face, and cautiously opened the class-room door, intending to slip into his seat when he saw Mr. Pycroft's back turned.

The chance was there for the taking. Mr. Pycroft was at the blackboard writing.

"Kindly spell apparition, Sargent," he said, without turning. "The word—er —I am about to write."

Sargent was not sure how many p's there were in the word, but, prompted in a whisper by Reffel, he spelt it accurately.

"Good!" said Mr. Pycroft, as Beilby tiptoed to his seat in the back row. "Define its meaning, Haik."

"A—a sort of spectre, sir, a—a sort of ghost thing," replied Haik. "You see it, and you know it isn't real, and can't be there."

"Dear me," said Mr. Pycroft. "You see it, and you know it—er—can't be there, do you? In the name of the most elementary logic, Haik, can you see a thing that you know can't be there? What an extraordinary definition."

"I believe, sir, that a better definition would be a preternatural appearance, sir," put in Nathaniel Wilberforce Welby Stott.

"Thank you, Stott," said Mr Pycroft "It is—er—better, but it is somewhat vague. Probably the dictionary will carry us a little further than that, but it is not satisfying, it is not—ha!—sufficiently complete. Let me see," went on the senior Housemaster, knitting his learned brows, and glancing round. "An apparition is—— Goo-oo ood gracious!"

Mr Pycroft's startled gaze fell upon Beilby. Even if Mr. Pycroft could not define the word to his own satisfaction, he had found an apparition. Nobody else had noticed Beilby in his secluded corner. Six hasty strides brought the Housemaster to the spot. He clutched Beilby by the collar, and dragged him across the class-room.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!" shrieked the juniors as Mr. Pycroft hauled forth his dusky victim. "Want any coal?"

The mirth died away. With their mouths open and their eyes big and round, the boys of the Fourth Form stared at the window. Mr. Pycroft, still holding Beilby, stopped too, staring like the others. Apparitions seemed fairly cheap that day, for Alderman Whiffler's horse had arrived, still wearing the alderman's tall hat, and that ancient and sagacious steed had thrust its bony neck into the class-room, and was falling into a gentle doze.

A howl of laughter shook the rafters, and it took something to shake those sturdy old beams. And then Cornelius the cat, who had been chased round the quadrangle twice by Thunder and Blazes, bounded into the carr like a yellow streak, every hair bristling. The two bulldogs followed. There was a horrible squelching of new-laid eggs, fresh eggs, breakfast eggs, and just ordinary eggs, a pandemonium of growls and barks and snarls and hisses, and then Cornelius alighted. Calcroft's famous midnight songster leapt clean over Mr. Pycroft's head and hurled himself out of the opposite window, with Thunder and Blazes still hot on the scent, tearing across the class-room in chase.

"Goo-oo-oo-oood gracious!" said Mr. Pycroft. "Goo-oo-oo-oo——"

He was too amazed to say anything more.

THE END.

(A stirring tale of Jimmy Silver & Co., of Rookwood, appears in next week's issue. Look out for the title: "THANKS TO TURBY!")

The Rio Kid's Quest!

(Continued from page 6.)

up blankly at the tanned face of the puncher.

"By the great horned toad!" said the Rio Kid. "Say, sonny, I guess you'll be Dick Singer!"

"Yes," breathed the boy.

"This sure is a sight for sore eyes!" chuckled the Kid. "I done found you, sonny!"

The boy sat up.

"You don't want to worry none," said the Kid reassuringly. "You're with a friend now, boy, that'll see you safe to white men's country. Say, put a galoot wise. How'd you come by this hoss?"

"He gave it to me," said the boy. "My Cousin Slick, who saved me. He gave the horse to me."

"Great snakes!" murmured the Kid.

The gunman had told him the truth, and it astonished the Kid to know it.

"They've killed him!" muttered Dick. "I would have stayed with him, but he drove the horse away, and the Yaqui were following; I could not get back to him And they've killed him——"

"Forget it, sonny!" said the Kid. "They ain't killed that guy a whole heap; they sure ain't!"

The Kid turned away, and trod back to where he had left the gunman, beyond the bushes. Slick Singer eyed him.

The Kid drew his knife, and cut through the rawhide ropes that bound Slick to the horse.

"I guess this lets you out," he said. "I've found the boy."

"Alive?"

"Jest alive and kicking," said the Kid. "He allows that you gave him the hoss and made him ride, jest as you let on!"

The gunman grinned sourly.

He slid from the horse, made a step towards the bushes, hesitated, and turned back to the Kid. There was a strange expression on his hard face.

"The boy trusted me—he trusts me!" he muttered. "You don't want to put him wise—you don't want to tell him what I rode into the Staked Plain for, Kid! You can go easy on that!"

The Kid, with a curious look at the gunman of Packsaddle, nodded.

"I ain't putting him wise," he said. "You've let up on that durned gum-game, Slick; I guess you ain't the all-fired lobo-wolf you figured you was. I sure ain't spilling the beans!"

And the gunman tramped through the bushes, and reached the spot where the boy lay Dick sprang to his feet. The Kid heard his cry of gladness, and he whistled softly.

* * * *

Three rode on the trail with the earliest gleam of dawn, and two days later they were riding the lower grasslands of Texas.

There, at a hospitable ranch, the boy for whom a fortune was waiting at San Antone found friends, and he needed the Kid's help no more.

It was long afterwards that the Kid heard of him again—heard of him as a rich rancher at San Antone; and of Slick, once the desperate gunman of Packsaddle, as foreman of the ranch.

THE END.

(Next week a grand new series of adventure yarns commences. First story: "THE POPOLAKI PATROL!" It's great!)