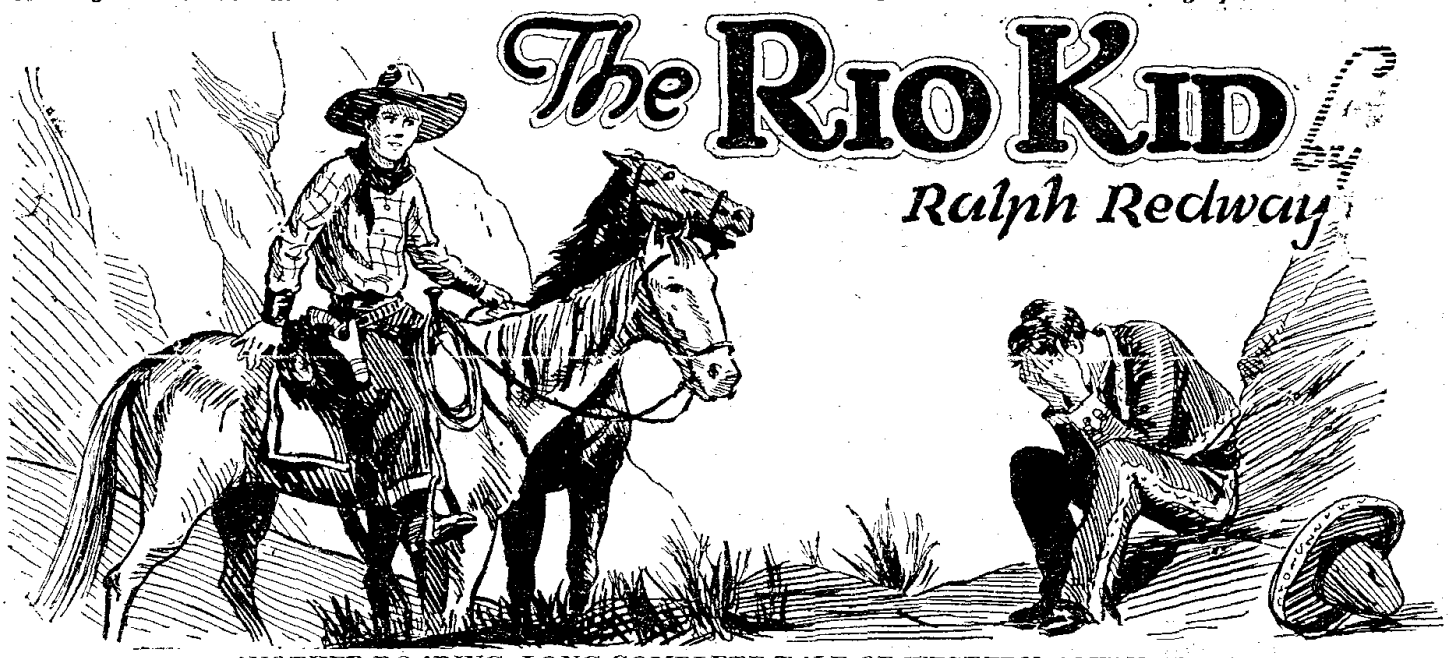
He was sitting on the trail crying when the Rio Kid first met him—this tenderfoot. What he was doing in such a wild country as Colorado the Kid did not know—but he did know that this greenhorn wanted looking after!



The Rio Kid

Ralph Redway

ANOTHER ROARING, LONG COMPLETE TALE OF WESTERN ADVENTURE!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Kid In Colorado!

THE few pilgrims whom the Rio Kid passed on the Hard Tack trail, in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, stared at him. The Kid knew why, and he did not mind. He knew that he cut a rather singular figure in the mountain mining country.

It was long since the Kid had ridden with the Double-Bar bunch, on the banks of the Rio Frio; but the Kid was never anything but a cowpuncher, in outward aspect, at least.

The Stetson hat and the neck-scarf were common enough in the Hard Tack country; but the baggy goatskin chaparejos and the jingling spurs were rare; and the riata coiled at the Kid's saddle-bow was probably the only lasso within fifty miles of Hard Tack. He looked like a puncher who had wandered far—very far—from the cow country, and the pilgrims who passed him on the trail no doubt wondered what he was doing there.

The trail he was following led to nowhere but Hard Tack; and Hard Tack was a mining town, tucked away in the remotest recesses of the sierra.

But the Kid rode cheerily on his way, heedless of curious glances. The pilgrims who passed him were few; and fewer and fewer as the steady lope of the black-muzzled mustang carried him higher and higher into the rugged mountains.

There was little traffic to Hard Tack—far from the railways, far from telegraph and telephone, unvisited even by a stage-coach. Traffic to Hard Tack went on foot or on horseback; baggage went on packed burros; and there was little enough of either.

The trail, scarcely marked, followed the bottom of a vast canyon, with rugged steeps and rocky ridges on either side, deep rocky draws, and arroyos dried up in the sun. Somewhere at the upper end of the canyon lay the camp of Hard Tack—as wild and primitive a mining-camp as any in the Rocky Mountains.

In a day's ride the Kid had passed only three or four pilgrims—all but one obviously mining prospectors. One had looked more like a gunman; and that one, after staring at the Kid's chaps and riata, had measured him carefully with his eye. Whereupon the Kid had smiled, and carelessly dropped his hand on a gun. And the stranger, thinking better of it, had passed on his way, having read in the Kid's sunburnt face that he was not a suitable subject for a hold-up.

This week:

"THE TENDERFOOT!"

Hold-ups, the Kid had been told, were common enough on the Hard Tack trail. He had no objection whatever to breaking the monotony of a lonely ride by a little "rookus" with a hold-up man. The Kid was not looking for trouble; in fact, it was to get away from trouble that he had left his own country of Texas; but if it came along the Kid was cheerfully prepared to meet it.

For some hours now the Kid had passed no one, and heard no sound but the clinking of his mustang's hoofs on the hard trail. Once or twice he had picked up signs which showed, to the puncher's keen eye, that there was another horseman ahead of him on the trail, and he had wondered whether he would overtake the rider before he reached Hard Tack.

When the silence of the great canyon was broken at last, the break came suddenly. Ahead of the Kid, the encroaching rocks of the canyon sides narrowed it to a mere gorge, through which the trail wound irregularly. From the gorge came a sudden clatter of hoof-beats, and a riderless horse came charging wildly back towards the Kid, with reins and stirrups dangling.

The Kid grinned.

The rider ahead of him, whoever he was, had lost his horse. The Kid had all a cowpuncher's contempt for a galoot who could not ride. But he was good-natured. The man who had been dismounted, and whose horse had run away, was in a hard case; for it was still some miles to the camp, and the going was rough. The Kid was more than willing to help. He drew in his mustang, and jerked the riata loose from the bow of his saddle.

The runaway came galloping down the rocky trail with clattering hoofs and tossing head. He shied away from the Kid, and rushed on. And as he rushed the Kid cast the rope with an unerring hand.

Whiz!

The loop settled over the tossing head.

The black-muzzled mustang braced himself for the shock, with forefeet firmly planted, as in the old days when the Kid had roped in steers on the grasslands of Texas.

The runaway rushed on till the slack of the rope tautened out; and then came the shock.

As if a giant's hand had plucked him from his feet, the runaway went over, with flying heels.

There was a wild crashing of hoofs, as the terrified horse scrambled to its feet.

The Kid smiled, and drew in the slack of the rope.

The horse, wild enough a few moments before, came in like a lamb. The Rio Kid caught the dangling reins, and then unhooked the lariat and coiled it. Leading the recaptured horse, he rode on into the gorge.

The horse's owner could not be far away, he knew. He wondered what sort of a tenderfoot it was who had allowed his horse to throw him and get away.

"Shucks!" ejaculated the Kid.

He came suddenly in sight of the stranger.

On a boulder by the side of the trail a figure was seated—a slim, slight figure, which looked like that of a boy, younger than the Kid himself.

His hat had fallen off, revealing thick, glossy black hair. From that, and the velvet jacket, the red sash, and

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the long spurs, the Kid guessed that the dismounted rider was a Mexican.

The Kid made a grimace.

"A greaser!" he murmured. "And what the thunder is he doing?"

The stranger's face was buried in his hands.

The Kid stared at him blankly

He could not believe his eyes or his ears: but there was no doubt about the fact.

He was crying!

"Well, carry me home to die!" ejaculated the Kid.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The Tenderfoot!

"SAY, bo!" the Kid shouted as he rode up, leading the horse.

The lad seated on the boulder gave a convulsive start, and dropped his hands from his face, and stared at the puncher.

His cheeks were wet with tears.

The Kid grinned; he could not help it. The face he was looking at was a very good-looking face—a smooth, beardless face, almost too soft in its outlines to be called handsome. That the fellow was a tenderfoot was obvious at a glance; and he was about the tenderest tenderfoot that the Kid had ever struck.

Contempt the Kid could not help feeling. That any galoot more than six years old could sit down and cry because his horse had thrown him and run away, the Kid could not have believed had he not seen it with his own eyes, and undoubtedly it got his goat. But his contempt was good-natured. He slipped from his mustang, still holding the reins of the recaptured runaway.

"Say, bo! Is this your critter?" he grinned.

The tenderfoot started up.

His handsome, dusky face was flushed.

"Oh, senor! You have caught him for me!" he exclaimed.

"Just that!" grinned the Kid. "I guess it was easy enough to rope him in, feller. Don't you know how to ride?"

"Si, si, senor! But——"

"He's sure an ornery cayuse," said the Kid. "You going on to Hard Tack?"

"Si, senor!"

"You're a long way from your country, feller," said the Kid, eyeing him. "I guess there ain't many Mexicans up here in Colorado."

"Si, senor."

The boy stepped towards the horse.

"You figure you can manage him now?" asked the Kid. "I'll sure put the rope on him if you say so."

The boy flushed again.

"But I can manage him," he said. "He would not have thrown me, but—but I was tired, and—and——" He broke off and picked up his hat, and then swung himself into the saddle.

"If you're hitting Hard Tack, I guess I'll ride a piece with you, feller," said the Kid. "I'll sure keep an eye on that cayuse, and see that he don't play any more tricks."

"Muy bien, senor."

The soft Spanish came pleasantly to the ears of the Rio Kid. It was a tongue he had hardly heard since the day he had ridden out of Texas across the Staked Plain. The Kid did not like greasers. He had all the prejudices of the Texas cowpuncher. But he could not help taking some interest in this tenderfoot—the most utterly helpless tenderfoot he had ever struck, and who seemed so utterly out of place in the wildest section of the mining country of Colorado.

"You ain't on the wrong trail, feller?" he asked.

The boy started.

"Is not this the trail to Hard Tack?" he exclaimed.

"It sure is."

"Then it is the right trail for me."

"Now, look here, feller!" said the Kid seriously. "It ain't my business to horn in, and I guess I've no call to sling around advice to strangers. But a galoot of your heft had better keep clear of Hard Tack. Savvy?"

"Porque? Why?"

The Kid grinned.

"Hard Tack is sure a rough proposition," he answered. "It's the wildest camp left in these parts. They pack guns at Hard Tack, feller, and use them mighty sudden, so I've heard. It sure ain't any place for a tenderfoot, and you're likely to hit up against a lot of trouble. You want to hit the back trail, feller, and get out of this country jest as fast as your cayuse can scatter the dust."

The boy shook his head.

The greenest tenderfoot in the West—but the Rio Kid's strange companion through many still stranger adventures.

"Look here!" said the Kid. "I ain't pressed for time. I reckon I'm my own boss these days. I'll sure ride back down the trail with you, and see you come to no harm. I'll land you at White Pine, where you can pick up a hack for the railroad and get clear. You don't want to be cavorting round in this sierra hunting for trouble. You'll find a whole heap. Is it a cinch?"

The boy looked at him, and, to the Kid's surprise, smiled.

"You are very good, senor. But I am going to Hard Tack."

"You don't belong there, I guess?"

"No, I am a stranger in this country. But I have business at Hard Tack, and I must go."

"You got friends there?"

"No; I know no one."

"Shucks!" said the Kid.

It was no business of his, he told himself. If this tenderfoot wanted to horn into the wildest, roughest mining camp in the Rocky Mountains, it did not matter to anyone but himself. That he would hit trouble there was certain, and the Kid had not come into Colorado to collect up other galoot's troubles. But the Kid simply could not let the matter rest where it was.

"You pack a gun?" he asked.

"No, senor."

"Know how to use one?"

"Very little."

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid again. "I tell you, feller, what you want to do is to beat it out of this country jest as fast as you know how. Why, they hold up pilgrims on this trail every other day. Half the hombres at Hard Track are wanted by sheriffs all over the State. I tell you it's a bad man's camp."

"I know it all," said the boy, with a nod, "and I am going there. Adios, senor!"

He rode up the trail.

The Rio Kid stared after him, gave his mustang a touch, and followed. They rode up the gorge side by side.

"I reckon we'll hit Hard Tack together, feller," said the Kid cheerfully. "I reckon we'll make it by nightfall."

The Mexican nodded, and they rode on side by side. Many times the Kid's puzzled glance rested on his companion. What business the little tenderfoot could have at Hard Tack was a puzzle to him. The Kid judged his age at about sixteen. If he was older he did not look it. He could hardly be a prospector. He had no miner's outfit, and the Kid grinned at the thought of the boy prospecting for gold in the rugged mountains among the rough men of Hard Tack. He had sat down and cried when his horse threw him and left him. Yet there must be pluck in him somewhere, or he would not have kept on the trail after the warning the Kid had given him. The Rio Kid made a grimace. He knew what was going to happen. He was going to take this ornery tenderfoot under his wing and see him through. It was his way to help a lame dog over a stile, and he could not help it.

Thinking of his companion and of that troublesome prospect in store, the Kid was perhaps a little off his guard. Certainly he was taken by surprise when a horseman suddenly pushed out of a rocky draw, with a Winchester rifle at a level in his grip, and rapped out:

"Hands up!"

And the Kid, starting from his reverie, looked into the muzzle of the levelled Winchester and shrugged his shoulders, and obediently lifted his hands above his head.

It was a "hold-up"!

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Kid Takes the Chance!

"PONY up!"

The command came harshly and gruffly.

The man with the rifle held the drop, and the Rio Kid knew better than to disregard a levelled Winchester with a finger on the trigger, and a keen, ruthless eye gleaming over it. He held his hands steadily above his head, submissive, smiling, watchful as a cat for a chance to come his way. The Rio Kid was not an easy man to hold up, or to go through when he was held up. But while he looked steadily at the road-agent, with the tail of his eye he observed the boy tenderfoot. He expected to see the dusky lad crumple up with terror, perhaps burst into tears. The Kid would have been surprised at nothing of that sort after what he had seen before. But he was surprised at the coolness of the tenderfoot, which was unexpected. The lad held up his hands as ordered over his sombrero, but they did not tremble, and his dusky face was calm, his black eyes steady.

The Kid was glad to see it. For although he was sitting his horse quietly with his hands up, covered by a repeating rifle ready to eject a stream of bullets at a second's notice, the Kid had a hunch that matters were not going all the hold-up man's way. And he did

not want any sob stuff going on when the shooting started.

Certainly, at the moment, the Rio Kid did not look as if he was thinking of shooting. There was a resigned grin on his face, and he nodded to the horseman, whose face was hidden behind a black scarf, drawn round it to hide his identity, only the eyes being left visible.

"You call the game this time, pardner," said the Kid cheerily. "If there's anything you want give it a name."

"I guess I want your roll, puncher," said the masked man, "and I sure hope they paid you off when you left your ranch."

The Kid chuckled.

"I guess it's dog's ages since I was paid off on a ranch, feller!" he said. "But there's sure a roll in my belt. I guess I'm willing to oblige; but how am I going to pony up while I'm reaching for the sky, pardner?"

"Keep 'em up!"

"It's your say-so," assented the Kid amiably. "I'll keep 'em up till the cows come home if you want."

"And not so much chewing the rag!" grunted the road-agent. "You try any tricks, puncher, and this hyer rifle goes off, pronto."

"Do I look like trying tricks?" said the Kid in a pained tone. "I sure know when I'm at the little end of the horn, pardner, and I ain't bucking agin a Winchester at close range."

The horseman pushed closer. Keeping the rifle at a level, with the butt under his right arm, his finger on the trigger, and the muzzle nearly touching the Kid he reached out with his left hand and jerked away the puncher's guns.

It was neatly done—the Kid covered all the time, without a chance to resist unless at the price of a bullet through his body. As a man who knew how to handle guns himself, the Kid rather admired the road-agent's style; though his determination was not lessened to get the better of him before they parted. Evidently the man knew the game, and this was not the first time he had held up pilgrims on the trail. For, all the while, he had one eye on the tenderfoot, and was ready to shift the rifle and shoot him down if he showed a sign of lowering his hands. But the boy remained motionless on his horse, his hands up, evidently not dreaming of resistance.

"Now light down, puncher," came the order.

"Sure!"

The Rio Kid alighted.

"Up with 'em!"

The words were snarled out as the Kid's hands strayed seemingly by accident towards the pocket in his chaps. And the Kid laughed and his hands went up again. The road-agent leaned over and jerked out the little hidden derringer from the pocket of the chaps.

"You know the whole game, feller," said the Kid. "I guess you've sure had some practice on the trails."

"I reckon I've seen a puncher shoot from the pocket before now, hombre," answered the road-agent. "Stand back and keep 'em up!"

"You bet."

The Rio Kid began to wonder whether he really was beaten to it this time He was disarmed now, and the eyes that gleamed over the black scarf were watchful as a cougar's.

The road-agent turned to the tenderfoot, and yet he was watching the Rio Kid all the time.

"Light down, tenderfoot!"

The boy obediently alighted.

AT CLOSE QUARTERS. The Kid plunged at the robber so quickly that the rifle was knocked up even as it was turned upon him. Bang! The bullet sped over the Kid's shoulder, and the next moment the road-agent staggered back under a crashing blow. (*See Chapter* 3.)

"Line up beside that hombre."

"Si, senor."

The tenderfoot backed to the side of the trail, standing beside the Rio Kid, only a couple of feet from his side. The Kid's mustang was standing like a rock in the trail; but the young Mexican's horse was pawing the ground restlessly. Suddenly he swerved round and dashed away back up the trail, with a jingle of bridle and stirrup. The road-agent took no heed; but there was an exclamation of dismay from the tenderfoot.

"My horse——"

"I guess he's gone. Stand back, you locoed geck!" snarled the road-agent; and the tenderoot, who had made a move forward, stood back obediently.

The runaway horse vanished in the shadows of the canyon.

"I guess I'll give you a lift on my mustang into town, when this gent is through with us," said the Kid cheerily. "That cayuse is sure ornery."

"Pony up!" came the rapping order from the road-agent. "You first, puncher. Show up your roll."

He dismounted, and stepped towards the Kid.

"Pronto!" smiled the Kid.

"You can put down your paws. Get a move on!"

The Kid drew a roll from the little pouch inside his belt. There were fifty dollars in that roll; and the Kid's face did not betray there was twenty times as much concealed in his boots.

Since he had lost a roll in the sheep country of Wyoming, the Kid had been very careful. He tossed the roll to the road-agent, who caught it with his free hand, looked at it, and dropped it into a pocket. Fifty dollars was as much as he expected to raise from a fellow who looked like a cowpuncher, and he gave a grunt indicating that he was satisfied. He returned to the tenderfoot.

"Here you, Mex!" he snapped.

"Senor, I have very little——"

"Every little helps, I reckon!" grinned the hold-up man. "I ain't grumbling at that, if you hand over all you've got. Pronto!"

The tenderfoot hesitated.

"Pony up, feller," advised the Kid. "This gent holds the drop, and he ain't here to argue. You want to pony up."

"You sure do, Mex," said the road agent. "I guess you want to hurry, too, if you ain't looking to be fixed for the coyotes."

Slowly the tenderfoot drew a little leather purse from an inner pocket of his velvet jacket.

He opened it and took out a small roll of bills, which he handed over to the trail-robber.

"Hold on!" grinned the road-agent,

as the boy was about to replace the leather sack. "I reckon there's more to it than that."

"Oh, no, senor; I have given you all the money I have!" exclaimed the Mexican. "I have left only papers."

"Hand them over!"

"They belong to me, and I cannot give them to you," said the tenderfoot in an unsteady voice, but with an obstinacy that astonished the Kid. "I swear that they are only papers, and I must keep them."

The road-agent stared at him, over the black scarf that disguised his hard face.

The muzzle of his rifle was only three feet from the graceful, delicate figure of the tenderfoot. A pressure of his finger was instant death. Yet the boy replaced the little leather sack in his pocket and faced him, pale as death, but evidently determined.

"Oh, sho!" gasped the Kid.

This was the tenderfoot he had seen weeping on the trail—defying an armed thief to whose demands the Kid himself had yielded, knowing that the cards were against him. The Kid felt a throb of shame for the contempt he had felt for the boy.

"Waal, search me!" ejaculated the road-agent in astonishment. "If you want to hear this rifle talk, I guess it's your say-so, Mex. I guess I can lift that grip from your carcase after I've spilled your vingear over these here donicks. Hand over that grip, sharp, or——" !

"I will not!" exclaimed the boy passionately. "I tell you it is only papers, and I will not give them up!"

The blaze of ferocity that came into the road-agent's eyes over the black scarf told of his intention. On his own account the Rio Kid probably would not have taken the chance. He knew when to take a chance, and when not to take one; and this was a chance that was not to be taken by a wise man, if he could help it. But to see the tenderfoot shot down by his side was not in the Kid's programme.

If he had any chance at all it was because the road-agent's rage and amazement at the boy's defiance fixed his attention on the little Mexican. And when the Kid moved it was with the swiftness of the lightning flash. He plunged at the robber so suddenly that the rifle swung round on him a second too late as it roared. Instead of the muzzle meeting the Kid's chest, the barrel struck on his shoulder six inches from the muzzle—a fraction of a second made all the difference. The bullet rushed, with the stream of smoke, behind the Kid, as his clenched knuckles drove like a mallet into the masked face.

As he staggered under the crashing blow, the road-agent fired again, but his rifle unconsciously lifted as he staggered, and the bullet smashed through the crown of the Kid's Stetson, barely grazing the top of his head.

For a third shot the trail-thief had no time, for the Kid grasped the rifle with his left and forced it up, and his knee jammed into the pit of the robber's stomach with sickening force. The masked man crumpled up and fell on his side, gasping stertorously; and the next second the rifle was in the Kid's hands, the muzzle thrust into the bull neck of the trail-thief, grinding into the flesh.

"You want to keep quiet, feller!" drawled the Kid, and the dazed and breathless ruffian, who was grabbing at a gun in his belt, desisted, just in time to stop the bullet from speeding.

"You durned gink!" he panted.

"Give your bean-box a rest, feller," smiled the Kid. "I guess this is my game, after all! I sure don't know why I don't blow your cabeza into little pieces, you gold-darned geek; but I sure will if you give me any trouble. Lie still, you coyote!"

And the road-agent lay still, his eyes burning at the Kid over the black scarf that masked his face.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
At Hard Tack!

"MADRE di Dios! Nuestra Senora!" panted the tenderfoot breathlessly.

He reeled against a rock by the trail, as if the strain had been too much for him, and he was shaking from head to foot.

"I guess it's all O.K. now, feller," said the Kid. "This gent is sure being resonable, like a good little man. I guess you can take off his hardware."

"Si, amigo mio."

The tenderfoot pulled himself together.

While the Kid held the rifle-muzzle jammed in the trail-robber's neck, the tenderfoot bent over him and removed the revolver from his belt. He tossed it away among the rocks.

"Now pick up my guns, feller."

The tenderfoot handed the Kid his guns. The Kid lowered the rifle, and stamped on the lock, and tossed it away. A six-gun was in his hand now, and the road-agent, watching him like a cat, did not move. The Rio Kid would have shot him up without the slightest compunction had he resisted, and his icy glance showed as much.

"Now take that rag off his face and tie up his paws with it, feller," drawled the Kid.

"Si, senor."

The road-agent made a convulsive movement, but he did not resist. The Kid's six-gun enforced obedience.

The black scarf was unwound from his face, and the Kid looked at him rather curiously. He saw a hard set of features—the face of a "bad" man, hard and ruthless; but the face was that of a stranger to him. With deft hands the tenderfoot bound the ruffian's wrists together.

'I reckon you can get on your hind legs now, hombre," said the Kid. And the man scrambled up.

He stood panting, his face contorted, far from recovered from the hard usage he had received at the Kid's hands.

"I guess I'll trouble you for my roll, hombre," said the Kid, and he took back his fifty dollars and the smaller roll that had been handed over by the Mexican. "You sure ran up against a snag when you horned in here, hombre."

"Ah, but you are a brave caballero, senor," said the Mexican, his dark eyes on the Kid's face.

The Kid laughed.

"I guess I'd never have taken the chance," he said. "I sure allowed it wasn't good enough, if you hadn't been such an ornery little cuss and as obstinate as a Mexican burro. Next time you get held up by a gunman, feller, you don't want to argue with him while he's got a gat in his grip. You want to talk turkey to a galoot with a gun."

"I could not give up the papers, senor," faltered the Mexican.

"They must sure be valuable papers, feller; but I guess they wouldn't be much use to you on the other side of Jordan."

The tenderfoot shook his head.

"I will die rather than part with them," he said.

"Then I reckon you shouldn't have toted them into the Hard Tack country," grinned the Kid. "Now you've had a sample of the country, do you want to hit the back trail? I'll sure make good my offer to see you safe down to White Pine."

Again the Mexican shook his head.

"I must go on," he answered. "I must go to Hard Tack. You do not understand, senor; but I have no choice."

"I sure don't catch on a whole lot," admitted the Kid. "But if you're still for Hard Tack, that goes. I reckon we'll tote this galoot along and hand him over to the town marshal."

The Mexican glanced down the canyon. The shadows were lengthening as the sun sank lower behind the mountains of Colorado, and the hoof-beats of the runaway had long died into silence.

"My horse is gone."

"You can sure borrow this galoot's cayuse," said the Kid. "He ain't fixed to raise any objections."

The tenderfoot smiled.

"Si, senor."

"You're going to hoof it, hombre," said the Kid. "Hit the trail ahead of us, and walk. Pronto!"

"You ain't toting me into Hard Tack?" muttered the road-agent savagely.

"I sure am," replied the Kid. "And if you figure on dodging away, hombre, remember that this six-gun will go off the same minute."

"I guess——"

"Quit chewing the rag, you gink! It ain't your say-so now! Get moving!"

A glint in the Kid's eyes warned the trail-thief to obey, and he slouched savagely along the trail. The Kid held the robber's horse for the tenderfoot to mount, and then swung himself upon the grey mustang.

With the road-agent, his hands bound behind him, tramping and stumbling along the rocky trail ahead, the Kid and his companion rode on towards the camp of Hard Tack.

There was a smile on the Rio Kid's sunburnt face. Every chance had been

(*Continued on page 28.*)

Are YOU Starting Wireless?

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THE RIO KID!

(Continued from page 6.)

against him in the tussle with the road-agent, and he knew that he would never have taken that desperate chance had it not been to save the life of the young Mexican. But he had got away with it. And the Kid was glad that he was not, after all, going to ride into a town like Hard Tack without his guns. For the roll he cared little; but in Hard Tack it was much more likely than not that he would want his guns. Every man at Hard Tack packed a gun, and from what he had heard, the town marshal, Jeff Oakes, was as rough-and-ready as any gun-man in the camp. He needed to be, to keep anything like law in the wildest camp in Colorado.

"I reckon I ain't horning into your business, feller," the Kid remarked, as they rode at a walk behind the stumbling, cursing road-agent, a dozen paces ahead of them on the trail. "But if them papers in your sack is so pesky valuable, you want to keep 'em safer."

"They are of value, senor," stammered the Mexican. "At least, one paper is valuable——"

"Then why the thunder did you bring it into this country?" asked the Kid. "It ain't safe in your hands, feller, nohow."

"I know—I know! But it is only of value here——"

The Kid chuckled.

"You've got some prospector's map to a gold-mine, I guess," he said, and he chuckled again as the tenderfoot started and coloured. "Sho! I ain't asking you questions, feller; but if it's any good, don't tell them about it at Hard Tack. And don't keep it where it is now. There's galoots in this section who will have it off you before you can say, 'no sugar in mine.' You got a lining in your hat?"

"Si, senor."

"Stick the paper under it, then, and keep it there. I guess your pockets will be gone through a dozen times before you've been a week in this country."

"Quien sabe?" said the Mexican, with a sigh. "It is good advice, senor, and I will take it."

The Kid rode a little ahead, placing himself between the tenderfoot and the road-agent, in case the latter should glance round. He was not keen to see the paper that the Mexican drew from the leather purse and concealed under the lining of his hat. It was no business of his; moreover, the Kid did not believe for a moment that there was any value in it, as the little tenderfoot did. This tenderfoot was not the first, by many a hundred, who had come up into the sierra believing that he held a clue to a gold-mine.

With a clatter of hoofs, the Mexican rejoined him. He gave the Kid a smile and a nod.

"All O.K. now?" asked the Kid, smiling, too.

"Si, senor."

A few minutes later the camp of Hard Tack was in sight—a straggling row of shacks and cabins strung along the vast wall of the canyon, with a mountain stream leaping and splashing by. Among the smaller buildings one large timber edifice stood out prominently, which the Kid guessed was the Hard Tack Hotel. Miners could be seen in the distance coming in from the claims—rough, red-shirted men with picks, and every man with a gun in a holster at his belt. Outside the hotel six or seven men were lounging. The stumbling road-agent turned his head, and gave the Kid a glare of savage enmity.

"You reckon you're toting me into camp?"

"I sure do!" called back the Kid amiably. "Hoof it!"

"I guess you'll be sorry."

"I'm taking my chances on that," smiled the Kid. "Hoof it, I keep on telling you!"

The road-agent turned again, and stumbled on. Then, with a sudden bound, he sprang away among the rough boulders beside the trail.

The Kid's hand flashed to a gun.

The man, with desperate haste, scrambled away among the rocks, where a horse could not follow him. But the Kid's gun gleamed out in the sunlight, and in a second more a bullet would have sped. But the tenderfoot reached over and caught the Kid's arm.

"Senor! Stop!"

"Let up!" shouted the Kid.

"Senor——"

For a moment the Rio Kid's eyes glinted with anger. With a wrench, he tore his arm loose from the tenderfoot's grasp. The revolver gleamed up, aimed after the fleeing trail-robber.

But the respite, brief as it was, had been enough for the fugitive. He had plunged out of sight among the broken rocks and boulders. His scrambling movements could still be heard, but he was no longer to be seen.

"Thunder!" exclaimed the Kid angrily. He jammed the revolver back into its holster. "You dog-goned gink!"

The tenderfoot flinched under his angry look.

"I could not see you shoot him, senor! He is a thief, but his life——"

"You locoed mosshead!" growled the Kid. "Did you figure that I was going to send him up the flume, and him with his paws tied? I'd have dropped him with a crease on his cabeza, like I used to the ornery steers down in Texas, and he wouldn't have been a red cent the worse. Now he's got clear—unless I stalk him among them donicks like a pesky jack-rabbit, which I reckon I ain't going to do, nohow. Durn your ornery sass——"

"Oh, senor!" The tenderfoot's lips quivered and the Kid, to his alarm, saw traces of coming tears on the dark eyelashes.

"Oh, can it!" exclaimed the Kid. "I guess it's all right, feller. You sure got my goat, but I ain't mad with you, boy. Forget it."

He burst into a laugh.

"You're sure too soft for this country, boy. Look here, I guess I've told you before that you want to hit the back trail, and I'll ride herd over you and see you safe to White Pine. Hard Tack isn't the place for a baby tenderfoot. Say!"

The boy shook his head.

"I must go on," he said. "I must."

"Oh, shucks!" grunted the Kid. "You sure make me tired! Then it's me to ride herd over you at Hard Tack and see you through."

And they rode on together into the straggling street of Hard Tack.

(You'll learn more about this strange tenderfoot in next week's stirring tale of the Rio Kid. Don't miss: "THE MARSHAL OF HARD TACK!"—it's a brilliant yarn, and quite the best of this grand Western series!)

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(See the Roaring Western Tale inside.)

LOOKING AFTER A LONELY TENDERFOOT!

The Rio Kid guessed he was in for a pretty lively time when he championed the lonely little tenderfoot, Alvaro. And he is not disappointed—for trouble certainly comes his way!

The RIO KID!

ANOTHER ROARING FULL-OF-THRILLS WESTERN YARN. FEATURING AN AMAZING BOY OUTLAW.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
A Strange Recognition!

HARD TACK CAMP lay in the red glow of the setting sun when the Rio Kid rode in from the mountain trail. There was a half-thoughtful, half-amused expression on the Kid's sunburnt face as he rode the black-muzzled grey mustang into the straggling street of Hard Tack. It was a new experience for the Rio Kid to be riding herd over a tenderfoot, and that tenderfoot a dusky Mexican. Mexicans, to the Kid, were "Greasers," and he did not like Greasers; and he had no use for tenderfeet. In a camp like Hard Tack, where every man packed a gun, and shooting affrays were rather the rule than the exception, a galoot had enough to do to look after himself and keep his own end up, without a tenderfoot to look after. And the tenderfoot who rode beside the Kid was the softest, tenderest, most helpless tenderfoot that the Kid had ever struck, with his delicate figure, his good-looking face and dark eyes with long lashes, his timid manner, his evident fear of the strange, wild country to which he had come for no reason that the Kid could understand. The mere sight of that helpless greenhorn was calculated to get the Kid's goat. Why he had made up his mind to befriend the fellow who was an utter stranger and to take on his own shoulders the trouble that was certain to come to him, the Kid could not have told—unless it was that the very helplessness of the boy made some appeal to him, or unless it was that the Kid's heart beat responsive to the thought of trouble. It was not by his own fault that the Rio Kid was an outlaw in his own country of Texas, but he had to admit that a heap of the trouble he had struck had come to him because he never could keep from horning into other galoots' difficulties.

This Week:
"The Marshal of Hard Tack."

"Why couldn't he mind his own business?" was a question the Kid asked himself many times. He couldn't, that was clear; for he was making it his business to see this timid tenderfoot through, in the wildest and roughest mining-camp in the mountains of Colorado.

He noted, with amusement, the boy's startled look as they rode together into Hard Tack. Miners were coming in from the gulches, burly men in red shirts and Stetsons, rough and bearded. Outside the big timber building that bore the sign of the Hard Tack Hotel, a dozen men were lounging, and they all stared curiously at the strangers as the two pilgrims came in from the dusty trail. One of them, a tall, black-bearded man, was dressed in "store" clothes, though he wore a Stetson like the rest, and he was the only one who displayed no gun in his belt. But a bulge in the breast of his coat indicated that Jeff Oakes, the marshal of Hard Tack, was "heeled," though he did not carry a gun in a holster at his belt. All eyes were fixed on the strangers as they came up—they were rather an uncommon sight in Hard Tack: one of them obviously a tenderfoot, and the other a cow-puncher in chaps and spurs. Tenderfeet seldom or never came to Hard Tack; and it was rare for a puncher to ride so far from the cow country.

"Evening, gents!" said the Kid, in his cool Texas drawl. "I reckon this hyer shebang is the hotel, fellers?"

"You've said it. Lost a cow?" asked one of the loungers, and there was a laugh from the rest, at the idea of a puncher having trailed a lost cow so far up the sierra.

The Kid laughed, too.

"I guess not," he answered. "I ain't lost a cow, though I reckon I've found a burro."

There was another laugh, and the questioner frowned: "burro" being equivalent to "ass."

"I guess they fired you off your ranch for being too fresh," he remarked.

The Kid was about to reply, when his attention was drawn to the tall, black-bearded man who strode out of the group towards the boy who had ridden in with the Kid.

The young Mexican had dismounted, and stood by his horse, his big sombrero shading his face. The marshal of Hard Tack, towering over the boy, struck the hat upward, and stared hard at the startled, olive face under the wide brim.

"Thunder!" he exclaimed.

The boy shrank back, startled and scared.

The black-bearded man's sharp, glinting eyes were fixed on his face with an intense, penetrating stare. There was recognition in that stare, and the Kid, as he looked, wondered. The boy, whose name even he did not know, had told him that he was a stranger in the mountain mining country, and knew no one at Hard Tack. But from the marshal's looks, it was plain that he

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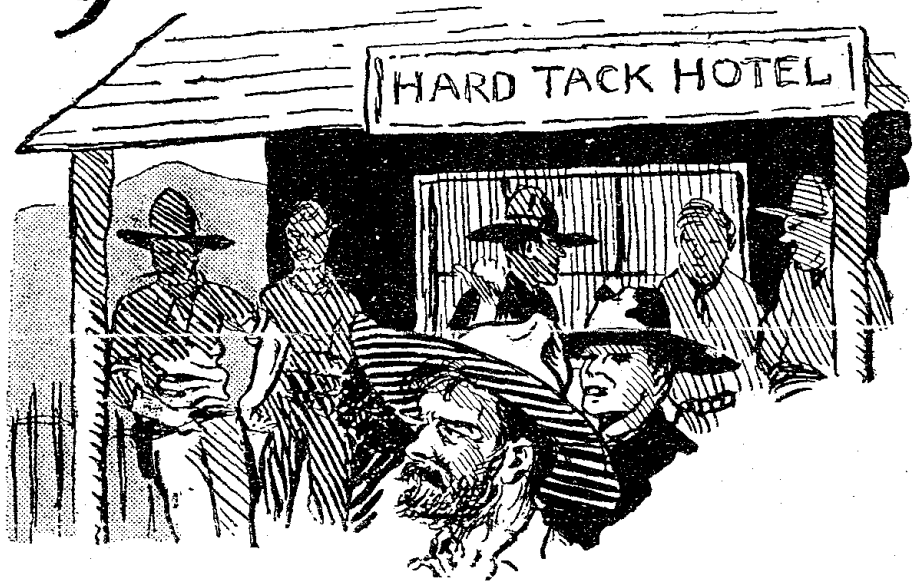
by RALPH REDWAY



knew, or thought he knew, the tenderfoot.

"Thunder!" he repeated.

"Senor——" faltered the boy.

The black-bearded man grasped him by the shoulder and drew him nearer, to scan his face more intently in the failing light.

The boy gave a cry.

The Rio Kid slipped from his mustang. His face was grim, and his hand was very near his gun as he stepped up to the black-bearded man.

"Let up, feller," said the Kid coolly. "I guess my pardner ain't used to being handled that-a-way."

The marshal did not seem to heed him, but his hand dropped from the boy's shoulder. His gaze remained intently fixed on the startled olive face.

"It's the son of Escobedo!" he exclaimed.

There was a buzz at once.

The name was strange to the Rio Kid, but evidently it was well known in Hard Tack. A dozen men were crowding round, all of them staring hard at the startled olive face of the little Mexican.

"Spill it, boy," snapped the marshal. "You're the son of Escobedo, trailing back here to look for the old man's mine."

"No, senor," faltered the boy.

"You lie!" exclaimed the marshal savagely. "I'd know the Escobedo face anywhere. You're his son."

"I am not his son!" exclaimed the Mexican.

"Your name, then?"

"Alvaro."

"I guess he's got the Escobedo face, marshal," drawled one of the loungers. "He looks soft to be that old fire-bug's son, but he's sure got the Escobedo face."

"He sure has," said the marshal.

The Kid whistled softly. He drew nearer to the slim Mexican. He had had little doubt that the tenderfoot would hit trouble in a wild camp like Hard Tack, but he had not looked for this. He could see that the mention of the name of Escobedo had caused a sensation. Quietly the Kid interposed between the shrinking tenderfoot and the curious, staring crowd.

"Let up, gents," said the Kid. "I guess I don't savvy who Escobedo is, or was, but if he's some galoot who's got your goat——"

The black-bearded marshal turned to him.

"You don't know who Escobedo was?" he exclaimed.

"Never heard the name, feller."

"You're a stranger in this country, then?"

"Right in once," assented the Kid. "Texas is my country. I reckon I'm jest down from the sheep country in Wyoming. Who's this hyer Escobedo, who seems to have got the goat of all this camp?"

"I guess you know as well as I do, when you've come riding in with his son," snapped Jeff Oakes.

"I am not the son of Escobedo, senor!" exclaimed the tenderfoot. "If I look like him, I cannot help it: I am not his son."

"You hear what my pardner says," drawled the Kid. "What he says, goes. But suppose he was the son of the galoot you call Escobedo, what about it? Any law in Colorado agin a galoot being the son of Escobedo?"

"I guess if he's the son of Escobedo, he knows where to look for old Escobedo's mine, the richest strike ever made in Colorado!" snapped the marshal.

"Sho!" ejaculated the Kid.

He remembered the paper which the Mexican had refused, at the risk of death, to hand over to the hold-up man on the trail, and the Kid thought that he knew now why the tenderfoot had come to Hard Tack.

The marshal's intent stare at the Mexican relaxed, and he stepped back.

"Well, if you allow you ain't Escobedo's son, that goes," he said.

And he went into the timber hotel.

Under the staring eyes of a score of men the Rio Kid and his companion turned their horses into the corral. The tenderfoot's face was pale, and the Kid murmured in his ear:

"I guess if you want to hit the back trail, feller, I'll ride herd over you as far as White Pine and see you clear."

"No."

"There's trouble in the air here," prophesied the Kid. "The galoots sure have a hunch that you're the son of the pilgrim they call Escobedo, and that seems to be a name that gives them the jumps. And that fire-bug with the black beard ain't let the matter drop, not by long chalks he ain't, if I'm any judge, though he lets on he's satisfied. And seems like he's the marshal of this burg. You want to mount and ride."

"No!"

The Kid laughed.

"Let's get into the shebang, then."

And the Rio Kid and his protege entered the timber hotel together, still under many staring and curious eyes.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The Story of Escobedo!

HARD TACK was a rough camp, and the accommodation at the timber hotel was of the simplest. The building was all on one floor, with wooden shutters to the windows, glass being unknown in the camp. There was a corral for horses, and bare rooms, with a plank bed each for guests; guests in Hard Tack brought their own bedding or went without. The proprietor, a fat man with one eye—the other having been gouged out in some trouble—told the newcomers they could pick their rooms; there were no other guests at the Hard Tack Hotel. There seldom were; the business of the place was chiefly in the saloon branch, where fiery fire-water was sold in open disregard of all laws to the contrary, and a faro-table was run by hard-faced gamblers who found their last resort in that remote mountain camp.

The Rio Kid, with his slicker pack on his arm, went to look at the rooms, of which there were five or six in a row, opening on a passage behind the saloon, with windows looking over waste ground towards the towering wall of the canyon.

"I guess, feller," said the Kid cheerily, "that we'll bed down in one room; it will be safer for you, I reckon."

The tenderfoot gave a start.

"Oh, no, senor!" he exclaimed.

"E porque?" asked the Kid, in astonishment. "Why? I tell you that you ain't safe in this camp, boy; you don't even pack a gun, and I reckon you wouldn't know how to use one if you did. That black-bearded galoot means you no good, feller, for all he allows he's let the matter drop. Don't I keep on telling you I'm riding herd over you?"

The boy smiled faintly.

"You are too good, senor!"

"Oh, shucks!" growled the Kid. "I guess I ain't letting a benighted tenderfoot like you run loose. You're going to bed down in my room, and I guess if any fresh galoot horns in, he'll find me at home, sabe?"

"No, no!" The boy seemed strangely alarmed. "Oh, no, senor! I will fasten door and window, and I shall be safe!"

"Now, ain't you an ornery little cuss?" complained the Kid. "But have your own way! I guess I know your reason, too!"

The boy gave a violent start.

"Senor, you—you know——" he faltered.

The Kid chuckled.

"Yep! You being a Mexican greaser, you want to fix up a crucifix over your bed, and you don't want a Gringo around!" he grinned. "Ain't that it?"

"Oh, senor!" exclaimed the boy.

He did not answer directly, but he looked relieved, as if he had feared that the puncher had found some other explanation.

The rooms having been selected, the Kid deposited his slicker pack in his own. But the Mexican had no pack.

"I guess there's a store next door to this shebang," said the Kid. "You want to buy some things, boy. They don't

give you nothing but a plank bed to sleep on in this hyer palatial hotel. I reckon your hoss ran away with all your fixings in the hills, and you won't never see that cayuse again. Lucky we cinched that hold-up gent's cayuse for you to ride into camp. You come with me, and I'll see the storekeeper don't rob you, as he sure would if I didn't ride herd."

From the timber hotel the two strangely assorted comrades went into the store adjoining.

The storekeeper stared at them hard as they came in, ceasing to pick his teeth with a jack-knife in his keen interest.

"Sho! Young Escobedo!" he exclaimed.

"I see it's all over the town!" grinned the Rio Kid. "But you've got it wrong, feller; my pardner's name is Alvaro!"

"I am not the son of Escobedo!" said the Mexican wearily.

"I guess fellers fit up with a lot of new names sometimes!" said the storekeeper, with a wink.

"Oh, can it!" said the Kid. He leaned on the counter while the tenderfoot proceeded to select his few purchases. "Look here, feller, who's this Escobedo that the whole camp seems wild about? I never heard the name before I horned into Hard Tack."

"I guess you're the only galoot in this country that ain't heard it, then!" grinned the storekeeper.

"Well, who was he? And what was he when he was at home?" asked the Kid.

He was curious on the subject.

"Well, he was a Mexican, and it's ten years since he was in Hard Tack," said the storekeeper. "I reckon there never would have been a camp here at all but for old Joaquin Escobedo. He was a prospector up from Mexico, and he struck it rich hereabouts. He used to come down the mountains with a burro and bags of gold-dust and nuggets. The boys got the office at last and trailed him up to this canyon. There was some strikes made round about, and the camp grew up, but old Escobedo's strike was never located. He used to disappear into the sierra, and when he came back that old burro of his carried plenty gold, but where he got it no galoot ever knew."

"Sho!" said the Kid. "I sure wonder that no galoot ever got on his trail and located the mine."

"More than one galoot sure got on his trail," grinned the storekeeper, "but them galoots never came back! It was sure talked up and down the camp that old Escobedo laid for them in the hills and shot them up!"

The Kid whistled.

"And what became of Escobedo?" he asked.

"He was shot up at last by a galoot who was trailing him for his mine," answered the storekeeper. "Leastways, he was found spread out on the trail, with his burro standing beside him, and as full of holes as a colander. The boys planted him, and that was the end of Joaquin Escobedo!"

"And they never found the mine?"

"Nix! I guess there's pilgrims hunting for it still. Every galoot that goes out fossicking from this camp has got a hunch that sooner or later he'll hit up against the Escobedo mine." The storekeeper grinned. "But nobody ain't found it—yet!"

"I guess that's a fortune waiting for some lucky galoot!" remarked the Rio Kid.

"Sure!"

"And he never staked out a claim and registered it?" asked the Kid.

"He sure never did. He kept it a secret. I guess his claim would have been jumped if he'd made it known!" grinned the storekeeper. "The boys round here sure wouldn't have let a greaser walk off with the richest strike in Colorado. I guess Hard Tack wouldn't have stood for that. But it's known that he used to send letters from White Pine to his people in Mexico, and when he was drunk sometimes he used to talk about his son. So the boys figure that sooner or later Escobedo's son will come along hunting for the lost mine."

He gave the tenderfoot a grinning look.

"And that boy has sure got the features of old Escobedo," he added. "I reckon the whole camp will have a hunch that he's Escobedo's son. He is sure the first greaser to come up to Hard Tack since old Escobedo was rubbed out. Mexicans don't come here. Why, the whole camp has been waiting for the son of Joaquin Escobedo to turn up. He was sure to show up here sooner or later, looking for the old man's strike. And I sure reckon he's come!" added the storekeeper, with a grin.

The Kid's face was thoughtful as he left the store with his companion, carrying the purchases back to the hotel. It was dark now in Hard Tack; and a naphtha lamp was flaring outside. By the gate of the corral a group of men stood in talk, among them the black-bearded marshal.

"Feller," muttered the Kid. "You've given me your name as Alvaro, and that goes, so far as I'm concerned. But if you are the son of that old Mexican fossicker, Escobedo, this hyer camp ain't a healthy place for you."

"I am not his son."

"That goes, then," said the Kid cheerily.

The group by the corral gate moved out as the Kid and the Mexican came along to the hotel, and the marshal held up a hand to arrest their progress.

"The boys have been looking at the critters you'uns rode into camp," said the marshal, "and it sure looks like one of you has rode in on a stolen horse."

"Oh, can it," said the Kid. "I guess my cayuse has carried me all the way from Texas."

"It's this boy's horse I'm speaking of," said the marshal. "Fellers here have recognised it as belonging to a Hard Tack man."

"Oh, sho!" ejaculated the Kid. "I'll put you wise at once, marshal. We was held up on the trail coming here, by a fire-bug that was riding that hoss—a durned pesky dog-goned road-agent. I guess he came out at the little end of the horn, and he beat it when I was walking him into camp to hand him over. My pardner's hoss took a scare and hit the trail, and I reckon we had a right to rope in that trail-thief's hoss in it's place."

There was a murmur.

"That cayuse belongs to Four Kings, a Hard Tack citizen," said the marshal. "You allow that Four Kings held you up on the trail?"

"He sure did, if that's his call-by," said the Kid. "I'd know the galoot anywhere, and if he's got the gall to step into this camp, I'll put it to him in plain language. The man we got that hoss from is a road-agent, a thief, and a gol-darned fire-bug, and you can tell him so from me."

The marshal eyed him narrowly.

"Well, that's your say-so," he remarked. "I reckon Four Kings may have another story to tell when he comes into camp."

"I'm sure ready to ram his story back down his throat, with a bullet to follow it up," said the Kid pleasantly.

"You'll sure have a chance," said the marshal. "Four Kings ain't the man to take tall talk from a cow-puncher."

"He'll find me at home," said the Kid disdainfully, and he walked into the timber hotel with the tenderfoot.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Trouble Ahead!

MANY of the Hard Tack citizens came to supper at the trestle table in the long shed which was called a dining-room at the Hard Tack hotel. The fare was rough and ready—and the guests helped themselves—and one tin plate had to serve all needs. But supper was welcome to the Kid, hungry from a long trail through the mountains; though his companion ate little. The crowded room was noisy; the shifting of benches and boxes and heavy boots incessant, and Carlos Alvaro could scarcely conceal the nervous uneasiness that filled him. And the Kid guessed that the crowd in the chuck shed was more numerous than usual, many pilgrims having been drawn there by the rumour that Escobedo's son had come to town. The storekeeper had put the Kid wise on that subject, and he knew why the mere rumour of an Escobedo in camp raised such keen interest. But for the fact that the Kid was obviously protecting the tenderfoot, and equally obviously, quite able to do it, the boy would have been subjected to a good deal of rough questioning. But the Kid looked—what he was—a tough proposition. He wore two guns slung low from his belt, in the gunman style, and the look in his eye was enough to tell that he knew how to use those guns, and was ready to draw if crowded. And no one seemed keen to crowd the Kid nor the tenderfoot, so long as the Kid was riding herd.

The Hard Tack citizens were a hard crowd, one of the hardest the Kid had ever seen, and he had been in many a hard place. But most of them were miners and prospectors, not looking for trouble, at least, when they were sober; though the Kid guessed that few of them would have hesitated to "jump" the rich mine that old Escobedo was said to have located in the hills. There were two or three hard-faced gamblers in the bunch, men who lived by taking the miner's hard-earned dust over the poker table or the faro lay-out. Among the crowd the Kid calculated that there were, at least, a dozen likely enough to take "hold-ups" on the trail, if a claim petered out and left them stranded. He had not been surprised, therefore, to hear from the marshal that the man who had held him up, on his way to Hard Tack, was a citizen of the camp. Under his eye at the present moment were some more "citizens" of the same calibre. On the whole, however, the Hard Tack pilgrims, rough as they were, were neither hold-up men, nor gunmen; but more likely to have lynched the road-agent had the Kid "toted" him into camp. While the Kid was eating his bacon and beans, with the healthy appetite that was always his, he was sizing up the crowd round him, and he figured that a guy could depend on fair play from most of the

bunch. Indeed, two or three fellows, whose rough aspect made the tenderfoot shrink as they came near, gave the Kid a good-natured warning on the subject of the man called "Four Kings." Few, if any, doubted the statement the Kid had made, that the tenderfoot's horse had been taken from a trail robber. Four Kings evidently had a bad reputation even in that hard camp. But some of them warned the Kid to watch out for trouble when the gunman came in. At the same time, they were openly looking forward to what would happen when he did.

"Thar'll be shooting, pardner," a big, brawny prospector said to the Kid. "You want to keep your eye peeled. Four Kings is a bad man when he's riled, and I guess he will be riled some, when he finds his hoss in the corral, and you calling him a hold-up man."

The Kid smiled.

"I'll sure watch out," he assented, "and I'll call him a hold-up man so loud that all Hard Tack will hear me toot."

"You've sure got some gall, for a kid puncher," said the big miner, grinning. "Four Kings has got six notches on the handle of his gun."

"I guess he will be packing a new gun," grinned the Kid. "He lost his gun when he held me up on the trail."

"Sho!" Long Bill whistled. "I guess the marshal don't believe that Four Kings held you up on the trail, puncher."

"I guess the marshal don't wan' to," said the Kid. "But I ain't asking the marshal to horn in. All I want is a fair break when the band begins to play."

"You'll get it here, puncher. I guess most of the bunch would be some glad to see Four Kings get it where he lives. There's six galoots in the camp cemetery now what would be walking about if that gunman hadn't pulled on 'em. He is sure a hard cuss. But when it comes to a hold-up story, I guess it's your word agin his, and you're a stranger here."

Long Bill strolled away, evidently in a state of happy anticipation of what was to come. The tenderfoot glanced at the Kid, almost fearfully. The Kid gave him a reassuring grin, and finished his bacon and beans. He rose from the trestle-table, pushing back the packing-case he had been seated on, and strolled from the chuck-shed. Every eye was on him as he went, the Mexican at his side. The Kid turned into the passage that gave on the sleeping-rooms.

"Now, feller," he said. "Reckon you want to go to your little bunk. You ain't horning into what's coming to me."

"That man will kill you!" muttered Carlos.

The Kid chuckled.

"I guess not. But if he did, I sure tell you you want to git on my mustang, and beat it before another sun rises on this sierra. That black-bearded galoot, Jeff Oakes, the marshal, has got his eye on you. That galoot is after old Escobedo's gold-mine, and he sure allows that you know something about it. And I reckon he won't believe that Four Kings is a thief and a road-agent, because he wants the fire-bug to shoot me up, and then you'll fall to him like a ripe plum. Savvy?"

"Dios!" muttered the Mexican. "I could see it in his face. You are in danger because you have befriended me, senor."

"Jest that," assented the Kid. "If that fire-bug Four Kings gets away with it, I reckon the marshal will run you into the calaboose with a story of having stolen that horse. And once in the jug, I reckon he will make you tell him all you know about the Escobedo mine."

The Mexican's dark, long-lashed eyes sought the Kid's face, in the dusk of the passage.

"You think I know something of the Escobedo mine, senor?"

"That ain't my funeral," answered the Kid. "What counts is, that the marshal reckons you do, and he's sure after that lost mine like an Injun after tanglefoot. He ain't asking for trouble with a two-gun man, if he can get away with it easier, and I reckon I'd fill him full of holes if he tried to run you into the calaboose while I'm around. He won't show his hand till after Four Kings has tried on his game with me. I tell you, feller, I've got that galoot placed, and I know his game."

"Oh!" muttred Carlos.

"But you don't want to worry," said the Kid reassuringly. "I've woke up worse fire-bugs than that galoot Four Kings, and I ain't gone up the flume yet. You was sure a locoed guy to come to a camp like this. If you was to strike the lost mine, I guess it would be the last thing you'd do on this side Jordan. Now you go to your bunk, and don't you worry if you hear gun-play."

The tenderfoot was trembling.

"Good-night, nino!" said the Kid. "Bolt your window-shutter, and put the bar across your door. I reckon there ain't no locks in this hyer shebang, but you can keep safe."

"Si, si, senor! Buenas noches."

The tenderfoot went into his room, and the door closed. The Kid turned away, relieved. For the coming trouble he had no fear; but he was glad to have the tenderfoot off the scene.

He strolled into the saloon, which was crowded. The one-eyed fat man presided over the wooden bar at one end of the long room, busily serving drinks to many thirsty customers. The faro lay-out was in full blast, the table crowded by miners, still in the heavy boots and dusty red shirts in which they had come in from the gulches. The air was heavy with the fumes of tobacco and the reek of spirits, and hummed with many voices. The Rio Kid's eye took in the whole crowd at a glance, and he smiled pleasantly to several men, who greeted him with friendly nods.

"Four Kings is back in camp, feller," called out Long Bill.

"Sho!" said the Kid indifferently.

The Rio Kid leaned idly on the bar, his look cool and careless. But where he leaned he could keep an eye on the wide-open door that gave on the dusky, straggling street of Hard Tack.

The Kid watched the busy scene before his eyes with mild interest. But the

(*Continued on page* 28.)

AFTER THE GUN-PLAY! The Kid strode into the passage, and through the open door he caught a glimpse of the tenderfoot. "Senor, you are not hurt——" asked the boy, with trembling lips. The Kid laughed. "I guess not!" he replied. "Get back to your bunk, amigo, and sleep sound!" (*See Chapter* 5.)

"THE RIO KID!"

(Continued from page 5.)

usual evening programme at the saloon was not absorbing the attention of the Hard Tack citizens. Even the gamblers at the faro table looked away continually from their stakes, to keep an eye on the open door. There was a sudden murmur when the tall, black-bearded figure of the marshal strode in, and by his side a hard-faced, burly man, whom the Kid instantly recognised as the road-agent who had held him up on the mountain trail. The murmur died away, and there was a breathless silence as the two men turned towards the Rio Kid, lounging carelessly on the wooden bar.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Gun Play!

"EVENIN', marshal!" drawled the Rio Kid, with a cheery nod to the marshal of Hard Tack.

For the moment, at least, he had no open hostility to look for from Jeff Oakes. That the man had an iron will and plenty of courage the Kid did not need telling, and he had not the slightest doubt that Oakes was gunning after the lost mine, and intended to wring from the tenderfoot what he knew about the Escobedo strike. But it was not the marshal's cue to make such a play openly for all the camp to see, even in a rough hole like Hard Tack; the town marshal had a reputation to consider. That he was the most dangerous man in that wild camp the Kid was assured; but that he would, so far as he could, strike from cover, he was equally sure. It was likely that half the citizens of Hard Tack had already resolved to get at what the Mexican boy knew of the Escobedo mine, by fair means or foul; but no man cared to reveal his intention openly, least of all the marshal of the town. And Jeff Oakes returned the Kid's salute with cool civility.

"Evenin', feller! I guess you've seen this galoot before!" He indicated the scowling gunman at his side.

"I sure have," assented the Kid. "I reckon he's got the marks still on his face that I gave him on the trail."

Four Kings made a movement.

"Hold on," said the marshal. "Let's have this fair and square. You allow that Four Kings held you up on the trail in the hills, and you got his cayuse when he lit out."

"That's so, marshal."

"This here camp don't stand for that sort of game," declared the marshal. "If you kin prove it up, I guess there's a rope and a branch waiting in this very street for a road-agent. But Four Kings allows that you and your pardner stole his horse while he was fossicking in the hills."

The Rio Kid laughed.

"Is that your say-so, feller?" he asked, with his eyes fixed on the scowling face of the gunman.

"Yep!" snarled Four Kings. "You're a gol-darned hoss-thief, and your tenderfoot pardner, too, I'll tell a man."

"And you're a dog-goned liar, hombre," said the Kid cheerfully. "You're a road-agent and a thief!"

The Kid, lounging against the bar, did not touch a gun. But his eyes were warily on the eyes of the gunman. He was ready for the draw, and the Rio Kid was lightning when it came to pulling a gun. But Four Kings, for the moment, made no hostile movement, and the Kid did not need telling that it was the marshal of Hard Tack who was running this game.

"Well, your talk sure don't agree," said the marshal. "I guess there ain't no proof on either side, and I don't see how I can chip in. I reckon it's me to step out and leave you to argue if you want."

"That's it, marshal," said Long Bill; and there was a murmur of approval from the breathless crowd looking on at the scene.

The marshal moved along the bar, and the fat man behind it spun a bottle and glass across. The marshal filled his glass and drank, with the air of a man who had washed his hands of the matter in dispute. But even while he was drinking his eyes did not leave the Rio Kid and the gunman.

There was a shuffling of feet in the crowded room as men backed away from the line of fire. In a few seconds now bullets would be flying, and all present knew it, and no pilgrim there wanted to stop a bullet.

The Rio Kid had straightened up from the bar, and stood at ease, his hands within easy reach of the low-slung guns at his sides. But he did not draw; he was waiting for his enemy. Neither did Four Kings draw, though his hand was very near his gun. Pace after pace he backed away, the Kid watching him intently, never leaving his eyes. A tenderfoot might watch a man's gun; but the Kid knew better than that. It was in the eyes of his enemy that he could read when the draw was to come.

Four Kings stopped. He was standing on the tips of his feet in the half-crouching attitude of the practised gunman. When the draw came it would be sudden and swift; and many times had the gunman taken an adversary by surprise by his swiftness. The silence, the breathless excitement, were growing almost painful; as life or death for one man, perhaps for both, trembled in the balance.

It was with a swiftness that beat the eye that Four Kings suddenly pulled the gun from his belt.

Swift as the action was, the boy puncher from the plains of Texas was swifter. It was the Kid's gun that rang a fraction of a second sooner.

Bang!

The gunman's revolver followed it like an echo. The two shots were blended almost into one.

There was a breathless roar on all sides, the relief to pent-up excitement.

For a second it seemed that neither shot had taken effect. The Rio Kid passed his hand across his cheek, where a bullet had grazed the skin. The gunman sagged heavily, his knees gave under him, and he crumpled down to the floor.

"Gee!" yelled Long Bill. "He's got his!"

Still the crowd held back, for they knew the desperado, and they knew that if there was life enough in him to pull the trigger he would fire, and fire again. But the gunman lay where he had fallen, and the gun rolled from his relaxing grasp. And then the crowd surged forward again, and there were shouted congratulations to the puncher who stood by the bar, his smoking gun still in his hand. The corner of the Kid's eye was on the marshal of Hard Tack; but the marshal gave no sign. If he had put up the gunman to this deadly game, and if he was angered to see him fall, he did not betray as much.

From the buzzing room the Kid strolled out into the passage to the sleeping-rooms. Through the half-open door he had caught a glimpse of a white face.

"Senor, you are not hurt?"

The Rio Kid laughed.

"I guess not! Get back to your bunk, amigo, and sleep sound."

"Si, senor."

And the Rio Kid, after he had heard the tenderfoot's door barred, went to his own room—but not to sleep. There was no sleep for the Rio Kid that night.

THE END.

Whatever the Kid's faults are, no one can say he is not a sticker. He sticks to the little tenderfoot through thick and thin, and you will read more about these two strange companions in next week's story of the Wild West.

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All the biggest rascals and gunmen in Hard Tack are after Carlos Alvaro, the tenderfoot. But the Rio Kid is looking after this strange little Mexican, and in their turn the Kid's guns are looking after him!

The Rio Kid

by RALPH REDWAY

A STIRRING LONG COMPLETE YARN OF THE WILD WEST, STARRING AN AMAZING BOY OUTLAW—THE RIO KID!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Kid Chips In!

"SEARCH me!" murmured the Rio Kid.

Midnight had long passed in the camp of Hard Tack, high up in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado.

Hard Tack did not really wake till dark, and at midnight it was a lively place. But now the liveliness had died out; the naphtha lamps no longer flared over the saloon, the faro table was closed down, and the doors were shut, the last roysterer had wended his uncertain way home to cabin or shack. Only the stars glimmered down on the straggling street that lay between the high canyon wall and the murmuring creek, on the long, irregular row of wooden shacks and shanties. Hard Tack, at last, was sleeping; but the Rio Kid was wide awake.

The half-dozen sleeping-rooms of the Hard Tack Hotel looked on a stretch of waste ground at the back of the building, plentifully sprinkled with disused cans and tins. Beyond lay rocks and straggling bushes, and then the vast slope of the canyon wall, rising into the dark heavens. The windows were fastened with wooden shutters—glass was an unknown luxury so high up in the sierra. Any pilgrim who so desired could step in and out by his window instead of using the passage that ran through the building. Some of the window shutters stood wide open all night, for the night was hot and the wind from the pine-clad slopes high above refreshing. The Rio Kid's window shutters stood wide, and just within the window-frame the Kid was seated on a packing-case, wrapped in darkness, and watching.

The next window, a few yards away, was shut, and in that room slept the tenderfoot, whom the Kid had taken under his wing. Carlos Alvaro, as the tenderfoot called himself, was sleeping the sleep of deep fatigue; but the Kid, in the adjoining room, had not closed his eyes. The Kid seemed impervious to fatigue. A smile flickered over his face in the darkness as a dim figure emerged from a distant clump of bushes and approached the building with stealthy tread, and stopped outside the tenderfoot's window.

The Kid made no movement, no sound. He watched. His hand had dropped silently to the butt of a gun.

The figure stood motionless, listening.

This week

"The Tenderfoot's Secret!"

For a full minute it stood, without a movement. Then a hand was lifted in signal, and two other dark forms came stealing from the bushes, joining the first at the tenderfoot's window. There was a murmuring of whispered voices. The Rio Kid sat close, his grip on his gun. Through the deep silence of the night, broken only by the rippling of the mountain creek, the whispering voices came to his intent ears.

"I guess it's a cinch, marshal. This hyer is his room, and I can hear him breathing—fast asleep."

The Kid smiled again. That the tallest of the three figures was Jeff Oakes, the marshal of Hard Tack, he had guessed already. Now he knew. But he still waited quietly. He knew that the tenderfoot had barred his window shutter within, and the ventilating slits were too narrow for a cat to enter. Until the shutter was forced the boy was safe. The Kid was in no hurry to chip in.

The tall man placed his ear to a slit in the closed shutter and listened. No doubt the breathing of the sleeper within was audible to him, for he drew away again and nodded.

"He's asleep, Euchre."

He stepped back and glanced up and down the row of shuttered windows. His face was not visible in the starlight. A neck scarf was tied across it to conceal the features. The Kid noted it with a grin. There was no one abroad at that hour, and Jeff Oakes certainly did not guess that the Texas puncher was on the watch; but he was careful to guard against chance recognition. Hard Tack was a hard camp, and its citizens a hard crew; but the town marshal did not want even the rough crowd at Hard Tack to be put wise to his present proceedings.

"The shutter's fixed inside, marshal!" muttered the third man.

Oakes laughed softly.

"That cuts no ice. It's only a bolt, and a shove of your shoulder will send it open. But——"

"The boy'll wake."

"Let him! A tap on his cabeza will quiet him. I guess I'm thinking of that fire-bug who came into camp with him—the galoot who shot up Four Kings. He's in the next room, and if he wakes I reckon he will chip in."

"His winder's open, boss. I guess it would be easy to fix it for him not to wake."

"I reckon that's what I was thinking, Dave. He rubbed out Four Kings, who was our pard, and I guess it's him for the long trail," muttered the marshal of Hard Tack. "He's a gunman from Texas, and he's sure dangerous. He's here after the Escobedo Mine, I guess, or he wouldn't have come into camp with old Escobedo's son. I guess I'll leave him to you, Dave, and Euchre and me'll fix the tenderfoot."

"I guess I'll fix him, marshal."

The Rio Kid rose silently from the packing-case and stepped back into the cover of the open window shutter, which opened inwards. A few moments more, and Dave was leaning into the room, peering and listening. The silence reassured him, and he stepped over the low, timber window-sill, and set one foot in the room.

Then the Rio Kid moved, and he moved like lightning. The barrel of his revolver was in his hand, and the heavy butt swung through the air and came down with a crash on the back of the intruder's head.

One startled gasp came from Dave as he pitched heavily forward and fell headlong into the Kid's room. He did not move again, and the Kid did not even look at him. He knew that that crashing blow had stunned him.

The tall, black-bearded marshal of Hard Tack had set his shoulder to the shutter of the tenderfoot's window. But he started away again as he heard that heavy fall.

"What the thunder——" he muttered savagely.

"I guess Dave's took a tumble over suthin'," said Euchre.

Crack!

From the Kid's window came the sudden report of a gun. The bullet cut a patch of skin from Euchre's cheek. A startled yell rang out in the silence of the night.

Before the report had died the marshal was springing away, and he vanished round a corner of the building. Euchre, with his hand to his bleeding cheek, stood dazed and staring. The Rio Kid leaned from his window with a grin on his face, his revolver aimed at the staring ruffian.

"You want to beat it," he remarked casually. "I guess if this gun pops again, feller, you won't know what hit you."

"Thunder!" gasped Euchre.

He did not need a second warning. A moment more, and he had raced away round the corner of the building.

The Rio Kid chuckled.

"I guess them galoots have sort of slipped up on it," he murmured, as the hurried footsteps died away in the night.

There was a faint groan from the man at his feet. The Kid sat down on the packing-case again, having taken the gun from Dave's belt and pitched it into a corner. With an amused grin he watched the ruffian struggling back to consciousness. Dave groaned again and opened his eyes, and his hand went to his aching head. Then he sat up suddenly, gasping, and glared round him, and his hand shot to his belt.

"Forget it, feller," drawled the Kid. "I've sure borrowed your gun, and I've got a .45 lookin' at you. Forget it!"

The man peered at him dizzily.

"Shucks! You was awake, I guess," he muttered.

"I sure was," agreed the Kid. "I guess you was looking for a sucker, feller, and you've found a bad man from Texas. You want to keep your eyes peeled next time you horn in while I'm around."

Dave staggered to his feet.

"Beat it," said the Kid cheerily. "I guess I ain't fixing you for the camp cemetery this time. Beat it, pronto, before I change my mind."

The ruffian eyed him as he backed to the window. He stepped out, his eyes still on the boy puncher from Texas.

"I guess I'll fix you for this!" he muttered hoarsely, glaring in at the dim form of the Kid when he was outside. "I guess——"

A gun glinted as the Kid lifted it.

"Pronto!" he said.

There was a scurry of footsteps along the timber building, and Dave was gone. The Kid chuckled as he put his gun back into the holster. There was no sound of alarm in the timber hotel or in the camp. Shots at all hours of the night were not uncommon in Hard Tack. Not uncommonly, late roysterers, too full of the potent fire-water, blazed away with their guns.

"I guess them jaspers won't horn in again to-night," mused the Kid. "But that tenderfoot sure would have been corralled if I hadn't been riding herd. I guess he sure was plumb loco to mosey into this hyer burg."

The Kid, seating himself on the packing-case, leaned back on the timber wall by the open shutter and closed his eyes. He slept as lightly as a cougar crouched in the branches of a cottonwood. The lightest alarm would have waked the Rio Kid. But there came no alarm, and the Kid did not open his cheery eyes until the dawn was glimmering down on the camp of Hard Tack.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Not Wanted!

ONE-EYE, the landlord, served breakfast in the chuck shack, otherwise the dining-room of the Hard Tack Hotel. The tenderfoot was late, and the Rio Kid waited for him; so they had the room to themselves when they breakfasted.

"'Morning!" said the Kid, when Carlos Alvaro came in. "Had a good night's rest, feller?"

"Si, senor! Es tarde," added the boy, as he sat down.

"Yep; it's late," said the Kid. "But I guess you wanted some rest, feller. You didn't wake?"

"Not once. I was very tired."

The Kid grinned. He had no intention of alarming the tenderfoot by telling him of his narrow escape during the night.

They breakfasted, the young Mexican very silent and thoughtful. The Kid was thinking, too.

He had not thought of remaining long at Hard Tack. He had taken in the place, on his way south, simply because he had been told that Hard Tack was the roughest and wildest and most lawless mining camp in the mountains of Colorado, and the Kid had been rather curious to see it. A few days more or less made no difference to the Rio Kid. Indeed, he doubted the wisdom of his decision to return to his own country of Texas; and perhaps, for that reason, any delay en route was more or less welcome to him. And it went against the grain with the Kid to ride on, and leave this benighted tenderfoot alone in such a wild hole as Hard Tack. But he smiled at the idea of hanging on indefinitely to "ride herd" over a galoot he knew nothing of, and whose business in the camp he did not know, though he might guess.

The boy rose from the table at last, and made the Kid a graceful bow.

"Adios, senor!" he said.

"Hold on," said the Kid good-humouredly. "You going?"

"Si, senor."

"Might a galoot ask where?" grinned the Kid.

The boy stood by the table, hesitating and colouring.

"I have business, senor," he said at last.

"In the camp?"

The boy did not answer.

"Outside the camp?" persisted the Kid.

"Si, senor."

"And you figure that you'll get on with it, boy?"

"Si."

"Sit down again, and let's talk," suggested the Kid.

"But, senor——"

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid. "You've given your name here as Carlos Alvaro. A dozen galoots have recognised you by your likeness to old Escobedo, and reckon that you're his son, come back to look for the old man's gold-mine."

"But I have said that I am not, senor."

"I guess that cuts no ice, with the pilgrims who have been hunting for ten years to find the lost mine of Escobedo," answered the Kid. "They figure that you're old Escobedo's son; and if they knew about that paper you've got hidden in the lining of your hat, I reckon they'd jump to it that you've got a map of the Escobedo Mine."

The boy crimsoned.

"Oh, senor!"

"I guess it's nothing to me," grinned the Kid. "I ain't after the Escobedo Mine, feller. I'm only telling you. A good many galoots in this camp have a hunch that you can tell them where the mine is, and they reckon they're going to make you do it. Among them, that galoot with the black beard—the marshal of the town. Now I ain't horning into your business, feller; but I ain't letting you run loose on this range. I'm riding herd over you. Savvy?"

"But——"

"You don't even pack a gun," said the Kid commiseratingly; "and I guess you couldn't handle one if you did. I tell you that you're in danger every minute you stay in this camp; and the minute you set foot outside it you'll be roped in by some fire-bug, who will ask you to guide him to the old greaser's mine with a pistol to your head. Got that?"

The boy did not answer.

His face had paled, and the Kid could see that his hands were trembling. But his expression was one of passionate resolve.

"I reckon I'm going to see you through," explained the Kid. "If you're going out for a leetle pasear, I figure on coming along. What say?"

The boy shook his head.

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid. "I guess you're right not to trust a stranger at sight, feller; but you ain't got any choice in this matter. You're a gone coon if I don't ride herd over you."

Alvaro smiled faintly.

"I do not distrust you, senor," he said. "It is not that. You saved me from the road-agent on the trail. But——"

"Well, give it a name."

"But it is a secret, senor. I can tell no one. I have sworn secrecy, and I can tell no one—not even a generous friend like you, senor."

"You don't want my company for that leetle pasear this morning?" grinned the Kid.

"No, senor."

"Suppose I tell you that three goldarned fire-bugs—one of them the marshal of this camp—tried to get in at your window last night, and I stopped them," said the Kid.

"Oh!"

"You'd sure have heard a gun talking if you hadn't been so sound asleep," chuckled the Kid.

"Gracias, senor! I thank you; but I—I must go alone where I have to go. If there is danger, I cannot help it. I must go, and alone."

"But I tell you——"

"Adios, senor."

And with that the boy left the chuck shack, leaving the Rio Kid sitting alone at the table. For several long minutes the Kid sat in thought.

He lounged out at last, and walked round the corral.

There the black-muzzled grey mustang gave a whinny at the sight of his master, and the Kid stroked his glossy muzzle.

"We ain't wanted, old hoss," smiled the Kid. "It's you and me for the trail, and dog-goned tenderfeet can look after themselves, critter. We're going to hit the trail and leave 'em to it."

The Kid went into the timber hotel for his saddle.

But he went slowly.

The tenderfoot had told him plainly enough that he did not want him to ride herd—that he wanted to go his way alone. That surely was enough for the Rio Kid, who did not yearn to ride herd over a benighted tenderfoot, and especially a greaser. The morning was fresh and fair, and called the Kid to the trail, and the thought of the wide, green grasslands of his own country called to him.

But when he came out of the hotel again the Kid was not carrying his saddle. Somehow, he could not make up his mind to it.

He loafed out into the sunny street.

Hard Tack was at work. Pick and shovel rang from the alluvial claims along the creek. The Kid caught sight of Long Bill coming into the camp, and hailed him.

"Hallo! Seen that pesky young greaser around?"

Long Bill grinned.

"I reckon I seed him beating it for the canyon. Say, feller, you came into camp with him yesterday. You savvy whether he's young Escobedo or not?"

"I guess I never saw him before yesterday," answered the Kid. "I picked him up on the trail, where his cayuse dropped him."

"He's sure young Escobedo, and he's after the old man's mine." said Long Bill. "I reckon he won't get away with it. I seed Euchre and Denver Dave quit camp soon arter him, and I reckon they'll be talking turkey to him."

"Oh, sho!" said the Kid.

He stood with a thoughtful frown on his face.

Euchre and Denver Dave, he had no doubt, were the two men who had been with the marshal the previous night.

The tenderfoot had gone out of camp—whether to locate the Escobedo mine or not. He had, as the Kid had warned him, walked directly into deadly danger. It was no business of the Kid's. He had offered to see the boy through, and had been refused.

"The greaser was hoofing it?" he called out, as Long Bill went into the timber hotel.

"Yep!" answered the miner over his shoulder.

The Kid pursed his lips.

"Escobedo or not, he's gone to locate that pesky mine," he muttered, "and them fire-bugs will sure rope him in, like a sheep. And you sure can't mind your own business, Kid Carfax, can you, you gink?"

Apparently the Kid could not, for after a few moments of thought, he went out of the street into the open canyon, and followed the way the young Mexican had gone.

THE MIDNIGHT INTRUDER! As the man stepped over the low window sill the Rio Kid acted. The barrel of his revolver swung through the air and came down with a crash on the back of the intruder's head. *(See Chapter 1.)*

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Roped In!

"PUT 'em up!"

"Madre de Dios!" exclaimed the Mexican.

The boy was not a half-mile from Hard Tack, but the rugged, winding canyon hid the camp from sight. He was on the open trail, over which passed all the traffic to and from the camp. Well as he knew that danger dogged his steps in the Colorado sierra, he had not looked for open attack there, but it had come.

A sound of running feet made him turn his head, and as he turned, Euchre and Denver Dave came up, each with a six-gun in his hand. Two revolvers covered the unarmed Mexican.

"Put 'em up!" repeated Euchre, with a grin. "I reckon we've got you dead to rights this time, young Escobedo!"

"We sure have," grinned Denver Dave.

Alvaro slowly raised his hands above his head, a look of hunted despair on his olive face. Under the shade of his wide sombrero he was pale as chalk.

The two ruffians closed in on him, with grinning faces. As they saw that he was not armed they thrust their revolvers away. Six-guns were not needed in dealing with the tenderfoot.

"I guess you can put your paws down, greaser," said Euchre. "Search me! You've come up here into the sierra to locate the Escobedo Mine, and you don't pack a gun! I guess you are a locoed gink."

"Senor, I——"

"Can it!" interrupted Denver Dave. "Git him along, Euchre. We don't want any galoots horning into this game. The boss was sure mad the way we slipped up on it last night; but that ornery fire-bug from Texas ain't here to chip in now. Git a move on!"

"This-a-way, greaser," said Euchre.

"Where are you taking me?" exclaimed Alvaro in alarm.

"Jest a leetle piece into the hills," grinned Dave. "You'll sure see the boss afore you're much older, and you'll fix us up for locating the Escobedo Mine. Say, you was plumb loco, walking out of camp that-a-way, and leaving your pardner behind?"

"I have no partner," said the Mexican. "The caballero you speak of is a stranger to me."

"I guess that's a plumb lie," said Euchre. "But quit chewing the rag. You've got to hustle."

"Senor, I——"

"Quit it, I tell you!"

The young Mexican was marched out of the open, wide canyon, into a rocky gulch that split the canyon wall to the west.

His eyes wandered round him wildly as he went, like those of an animal seeking a way of escape.

But there was no escape for him.

Either of the two powerful ruffians could have crushed him in a grip he could not have resisted. And they were armed, and he was weaponless.

"Oh, I was mad to come here!" he exclaimed bitterly.

There was a chuckle from his captors.

"I guess you've hit it plumb centre, greaser," said Euchre. "You're sure the softest tenderfoot that ever struck these parts. That pardner of yourn is some fire-bug; but you—you're jest putty, I calculate. Hoof it!"

They tramped through the narrow gulch, farther and farther from the Hard Tack Canyon. Great rocks and cliffs, crowned by pine-trees, and rugged, loose boulders, surrounded them. At

some distance from the canyon trail Denver Dave halted.

"I reckon you can git that greenhorn greaser to the cave, Euchre, and I'll mosey back to camp and put the boss wise. I reckon he wants to see young Escobedo pronto."

"Sure!"

Denver Dave tramped back the way they had come.

Alvaro glanced after him, and then at Euchre. Some thought of making a desperate attempt to escape seemed to be in his mind now that only one of his captors remained with him.

Euchre read the thought in his face and laughed hoarsely.

"Forget it," he jeered. "Git on—hoof it!" His hard, heavy hand gave the Mexican a shove that nearly knocked him over.

Carlos Alvaro tramped on again wearily.

Higher and higher they tramped into the hills. The distance was not great, but the way was winding and rocky and rugged. The little Mexican panted as he went, the burly ruffian swinging along at his side without a sign of effort.

Euchre stopped at last, where a high, deep cave opened in the rugged side of the gulch.

"Get in!"

The boy tramped into the cave, and the ruffian followed him in. Euchre pointed to a heap of blankets on the floor.

"I reckon you can take a rest, if you want," he said. "You got to wait here till the boss comes."

"The boss?" repeated the boy. "Who——"

"You'll know when he comes," grinned Euchre. "I reckon we had this fixed up for you last night, feller, only we slipped up on it getting at you in camp. That pardner of yourn chipped in, durn his pesky hide. But I reckon he won't chip in hyer, any."

The boy sighed deeply. He had refused the help of the Rio Kid for the sake of his secret. But what was his secret worth to him now? He had come to Hard Tack like a lamb among wolves, and already he had fallen into the snare. And even the Rio Kid could not help him now.

He threw himself wearily on the pile of blankets.

Euchre sat in the mouth of the cave, leaning against the rock, and filled his pipe and lighted it. He gave no further attention to the Mexican. The boy could not attempt to leave the cave without passing him, and that was impossible.

The hours of the sunny morning passed, and as the sun approached the zenith, streaming down in a blaze into the narrow, rocky gulch, Euchre knocked out his pipe, rose to his feet, and stood staring down the gulch towards the canyon. He returned to his seat at last, and smoked again, with a knitted brow.

The Mexican, watching him, could guess his thoughts. Denver Dave had gone back to camp to inform the boss that the tenderfoot was a prisoner, and Euchre evidently expected his boss to lose no time in reaching the cave. Ample time had elapsed, but there had been no sound of a footstep in the lonely, rocky waste.

"Durn my boots!" ejaculated Euchre at last. "Goldarn him! Why in thunder ain't the marshal hyer?"

Alvaro had guessed, from what the Rio Kid had told him, that the marshal of Hard Tack was the boss of whom his captors had spoken. Euchre rose again at last, and sorted out bully beef and a can of water and hard biscuit from a cleft in the cave, and sat down to eat. He signed to the prisoner to join him.

"I reckon it's durned queer, the boss not horning in afore this," growled Euchre. "He knows you're here for sure. Durn my boots! I ain't stopping here a hull day to watch a dog-goned greaser."

He sat at the mouth of the cave again, smoking and grumbling, watching and listening for footsteps in the gulch. But no sound broke the silence of the lonely hills.

Hours since, Denver Dave should have reached the marshal's cabin at Hard Tack, with the news that the son of Escobedo was a prisoner at the cave. Yet the marshal had not come. The face of the ruffian grew more and more puzzled and sullen, as the hours lengthened, and still the marshal of Hard Tack did not come.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Shot for Shot!

"OH, shucks!" grunted the Rio Kid.

The sun was hot in the canyon, and the Kid was annoyed. He stopped in the shade of a towering boulder, and fanned his face with his Stetson. He had left Hard Tack to look for the tenderfoot; but he had known that he was not likely to find him, and now he knew it was certain.

The wilderness of rock gave no sign. Even to the Kid's keen eyes, there was nothing to tell where the Mexican had gone.

He might be in the vast canyon, hidden from sight by the great rocks or clumps of pines or the irregularities of the ground; or he might have turned into one of a hundred gulches or arroyos or draws. He might be ten feet away or he might be ten miles. Likely enough he had left the canyon, if, as the Kid suspected, he was there to attempt to locate the lost mine of Escobedo. Likelier still, Euchre and Denver Dave had roped him in. The Kid could have picked up any trail that would have been visible to the eyes of an Apache or a Comanche; but the rugged rock told him nothing.

"Oh, shucks!" he repeated, in disgust.

He was wasting his time, and he knew it. He had no use for tenderfeet, and he had never liked greasers. The galoot had as good as told him to mind his own business, and not to horn in. Why couldn't he leave it at that, the Kid asked himself impatiently. It was only the thought of the boy's utter helplessness in his wild surroundings, that kept the Kid from returning to the camp, saddling up his mustang, and riding. Somehow, he couldn't leave the boy to his fate.

A Stetson hat bobbing among the rocks caught the Kid's eye, and he watched it idly. Someone was coming down the canyon side, from one of the gulches that split the great wall of cliff. The man was winding his way among the rocks down to the trail that ran along the canyon bottom; and he emerged into the trail at last, and into full view of the Rio Kid. The Kid's eyes, fixing on him, discerned something familiar about the roughly-clad, stubbly-faced pilgrim. He had seen him once, and it was in the dark, but he was sure—almost sure—that this was one of the men who had backed up the marshal the night before—the man who had entered his window, and whom he had clubbed with his revolver.

The Kid's eyes glinted. If this was Dave, one of the marshal's men, whom Long Bill had seen leaving the camp after the tenderfoot, it was more than likely that he knew where the boy was. For the Kid knew that the chances were a hundred to one that the boy had already fallen into the hands of his enemies.

The man came tramping along the trail towards the camp, not for the moment perceiving the puncher leaning against the rock, shaded from the sun. But as he drew nearer, he sighted the Kid; and the look on his face was one of instant and hostile recognition. It was the look that the Kid expected to see there, and he was ready for what followed. Denver Dave's hand flew to his belt; but before he could draw a gun, the Kid's hand came up with a revolver in it, and he smiled over the levelled barrel.

"Drop it, feller."

Slowly, with savage rage in his face, the ruffian relinquished the gun. The Kid had been too quick for him.

"Step this way, feller," called out the Kid cheerily. "I guess I want to chew the rag with you for a piece."

Denver Dave came a few strides towards him, and the Kid motioned him to halt at a dozen paces. He lowered his gun; but it was ready to rise again, and the marshal's man did not dare to touch a weapon. But his eyes glinted fiercely as he waited and watched for a chance.

"I reckon I'm wise to you, feller," smiled the Kid. "You're the dog-goned galoot that horned in at my window last night."

"Ain't never seed you afore," answered Dave. "I guess I don't know you from Adam, puncher."

"You didn't horn in last night into my room at the camp yonder, and corral a clip on the cabeza from my gun?" asked the Kid.

"Nope."

"You're sure a prize liar," said the Kid. "What were you pulling a gun on me for at sight, then?"

"I reckon I took you for a road-agent, standing there watching the trail," answered Denver Dave "I reckoned I'd

(Continued on page 28.)

NEXT WEEK:

"THE SURPRISE OF HIS LIFE!"

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THIS WEEK'S LIST OF BIRTHDAY DATES AND SPECIAL CLAIMS FORM, APPEAR ON PAGE 22 OF THIS ISSUE!

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DON'T DELAY—JOIN TO-DAY!

"THE RIO KID!"

(Continued from page 12.)

be first if there was going to be gunning. I've been held up on this trail afore."

The Kid scrutinized him. He was almost sure that this man was the man he had clubbed the night before, and if he was the man, he could tell where his tenderfoot was the Kid figured.

"You ain't the man I clubbed, then?" asked the Kid.

"I sure ain't.

"You seen a Mexican on the trail this morning?"

Dave shook his head.

"I ain't seen any Mexican," he answered. "There ain't many greasers in this country, puncher."

"You didn't trail the greaser out of camp, you and your pard Euchre?" asked the Kid.

"Ain't got any pard, and never heard of a galoot named Euchre," said Dave. "I figure you're taking me for another galoot, stranger."

"I reckon I want to know!" drawled the Kid. "You allow you ain't the man I clubbed with this same gun last night, at the hotel in Hard Tack?"

"I sure I ain't."

"Take off that Stetson," said the Kid. "And let's see your cabeza! If there ain't a lump on it the size of a big nugget, I'll allow I've made a mistake, feller."

Denver Dave breathed hard, and did not remove his hat. The great bruise on his head, made by the butt of the Kid's gun was throbbing still; and it was more than large enough to be seen if he took off his Stetson.

"You hear me toot?" asked the Kid pleasantly, and he made a motion with his gun hand. "I let you off last night, feller; but if you don't toe the line now, your goose is cooked, and I'm telling you so. Chuck that Stetson into the trail, or I'll sure shoot it off your head."

The man eyed him desperately, and did not stir; and the Kid's gun suddenly cracked. The bullet bored a hole through the crown of the hat, grazing the head of the ruffian. Denver Dave gave a startled yell, and sprang back. The smoking revolver looked him in the face.

"You want your ticket for soup?" asked the Kid menacingly. "Drop that Stetson, if you don't want me to drop you, pronto."

With a curse the ruffian hurled the hat to the ground. The Kid stepped forward a pace or two, and smiled as he sighted the great bruise that had been made by his revolver-butt.

"You're sure the goods," he said, with a nod. "Now, then, galoot, I want that greaser? Savvy? You're going to take a leetle pasear with me, and show me jest where you've left him corralled."

"You're after the Escobado mine, puncher?" muttered Denver Dave.

"Not any!" smiled the Kid. "I'm after the greaser, jest because I'm an orbery cuss that can't mind his own business, and I'm riding herd over him. I want you to put me wise where he is."

Denver Dave eyed him, his teeth gritting. The Kid had lowered his gun again, but the ruffian knew how quick he was to handle it. The Kid stepped closer to him.

"I guess I'll borrow your gun, feller," he said. "And then I reckon you'll hit the trail for the spot where that greaser is corralled."

He stretched out his left hand to disarm the ruffian. With a sudden movement, so sudden that even the wary Kid was almost taken off his guard, Denver Dave snatched the gun from his belt even as the Kid's fingers almost touched it.

Bang!

The shot was swift and sudden, so swift that the aim was too hasty, and it missed the Kid by inches. The Kid's answering shot was blended into the same report. Denver Dave essayed to pull the trigger a second time, but he was swaying as he pulled, and when the shot flew, it flew wild, as the marshal's man crumpled down to the earth.

The Rio Kid drew a deep, deep breath. Denver Dave had almost beaten him at it—but not quite; but the Kid had had one of the narrowest escapes of his life.

"I guess it was you or me, feller, and it was you for the long trail," drawled the Kid. "I reckon I'm going to find that tenderfoot, if all the bulldozers in Hard Tack stand in the way. I sure am!"

And the Rio Kid left the trail, and plunged into the rocky wilderness from which Denver Dave had emerged; seeking sign, and finding none; but keeping on with indomitable resolution while the long hours wore away.

THE END

Will the Rio Kid find his new friend, the little Tenderfoot? See the next roaring Western tale included in next Tuesday's programme.)

"A Chalet in the Woods!"

(Continued from page 22.)

Jimmy grinned cheerily.

"I've heard that you've got a baronet in this study," he said. "Can't a fellow have a look at him?"

"Cheeky young ass!" said Talboys.

Hansom laughed. He was a good-natured fellow, though he had rather a lofty way of dealing with the Lower School.

"Well, here he is," he said, with a nod towards the fellow with the aquiline nose.

Jimmy Silver drew a deep, deep breath. He was so startled that he could scarcely help showing it. Master Philip's eyes were fixed on him rather grimly.

"Who may you happen to be?" he asked.

"I happen to be Silver, of the Fourth Form," said Jimmy, recovering himself. "All serene—we don't have giddy baronets dropping in every day of the term, you know. Are you Sir Harry Rutland?"

"Hasn't Hansom just told you so?" grunted the Fifth-Former.

"Shut the door after you, Silver," said Hansom.

Jimmy Silver left the study.

His brain was almost in a whirl.

What did it mean?

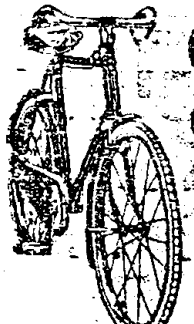
But for that odd adventure at Rutland Park in the vacation, Jimmy Silver would not, of course, have taken any interest in Rutland of the Fifth; he would have had no suspicion regarding him. Now he had something more than suspicion.

Outside the Fistical Four, nobody at Rookwood, apparently, knew anything about Master Philip Packington. He was accepted there as Sir Harry Rutland, of Rutland Park—a rich heir and a baronet. And he was nothing of the sort! Jimmy Silver knew that! What was Philip Packington doing at Rookwood in a false name—in the name of a fellow who was expected at the school, but evidently had not come to Rookwood?

What did it mean?

THE END

(You will find next Tuesday's long complete tale of Jimmy Silver & Co., of Rookwood, full of thrills. Don't miss: "THE FIFTH FORM BARONET!")



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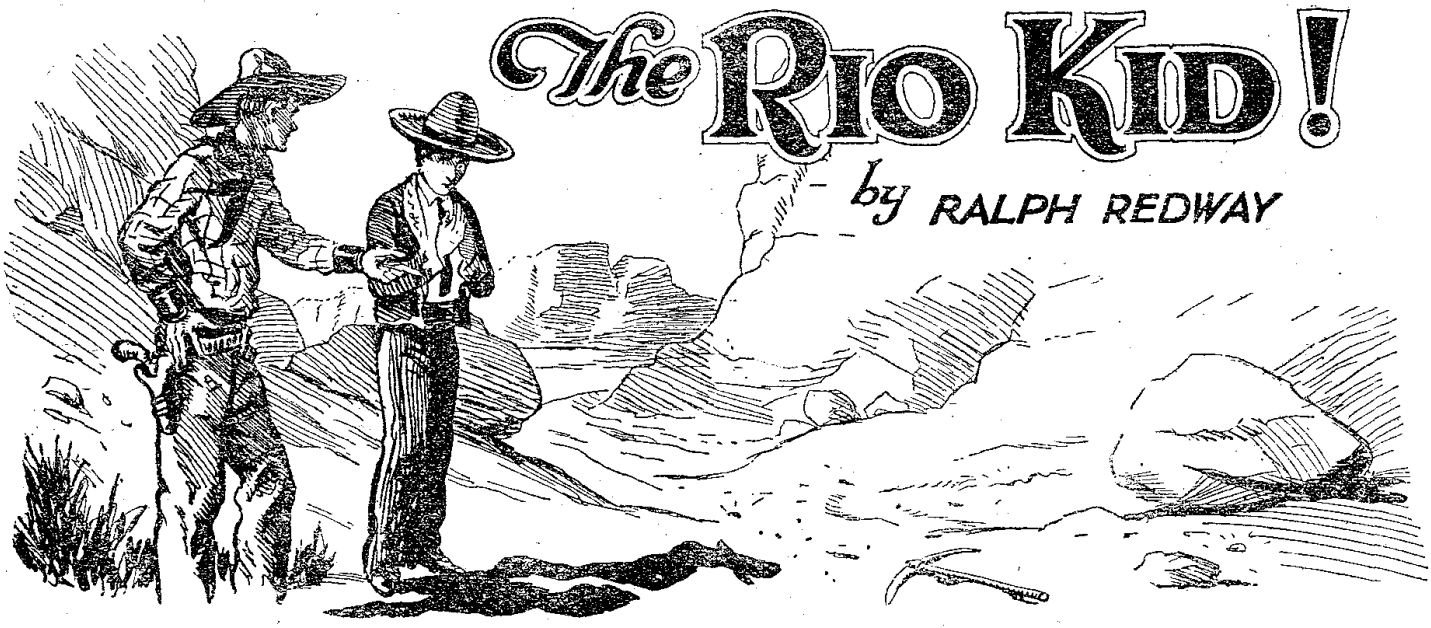
SAVED BY AN OUTLAW!

But for the friendly intrusion of the Rio Kid, little Carlos Alvaro, the tenderfoot, would have found his life in wild Colorado not worth a red cent. But with the Kid behind him, matters are very different!

The Rio Kid!

by RALPH REDWAY



ANOTHER ROARING WESTERN YARN FEATURING A VERY POPULAR CHARACTER—THE RIO KID!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Kid on the Trail!

"SHUCKS!" grunted the Rio Kid in disgust.

He had to give it up.

The Kid hated quitting, but he knew when he was beaten.

In his own country of Texas the Kid could have followed a trail with the skill and unerring certainty of an Apache, over boundless llano and through the thickest chaparral. But here, high up in the rocky sierra of Colorado, it was a different proposition. The hard, sun-baked rocks left no sign, and the vastness of the rocky wilderness was baffling. Mile on mile, on all sides, stretched canyon and gulch, deep arroyo and stony draw, towering hillside and yawning barranca, and searching for sign was a hopeless task.

Here and there, on the hard trail that ran along the canyon bottom, the Kid picked up sign of hoof-prints. But the tenderfoot, he knew, had gone afoot, and there was no trace of him.

The Kid grunted discontentedly.

Somewhere in that wilderness of rock the tenderfoot had vanished, and that he had fallen into the hands of his enemies the Rio Kid had no doubt.

"The dog-goned geck!" growled the Kid. "I guess he's asked for it, and he's sure got it! If you had as much hoss-sense as a gopher, Kid Carfax, you'd mount and ride, and leave him to it—you sure would!"

The Kid was feeling sore and angry as he turned his footsteps at last in the direction of the camp of Hard Tack.

Fatigue did not come easily to the hardy Kid; but he was a cowpuncher born and bred, used to the saddle, and for hours he had been hoofing it. He hated going afoot; still more, he hated failure. His handsome sunburnt face was dark as he tramped back towards the mining-camp high up in the Colorado sierra. He called himself a locoed gink for bothering about the tenderfoot at all, but he knew that he would never mount and ride and leave him to his fate. The boy's timid helplessness got the Kid's goat; but, at the same time, it appealed to him. The galoot had horned into the hardest camp in Colorado, and did not even pack a gun. He had fallen among foes like a lost calf among wolves, and if the Kid did not help him out there was no help for him.

This week:

The Surprise of his Life.

Hard Tack was almost deserted when the Kid lounged in under the afternoon sun. The miners were out on the claims along the mountain creek. The ringing of picks and the creaking of cradles echoed on the air. Two or three men loafed outside the Hard Tack hotel, and from within came the sound of One-Eye washing glasses.

The Kid dropped on a bench outside the shack hotel and pondered, with his eyes fixed on a cabin at a little distance—the cabin that belonged to Jeff Oakes, the Marshal of Hard Tack. Once or twice the burly marshal came out of the cabin and looked away up the street into the sunlit canyon, as if in expectation, and the Kid smiled quietly as he noted it.

Oakes was not working his claim that day, and the Kid guessed that he had other matters on his mind. He was waiting for word from Euchre and Denver Dave, who had followed the tenderfoot out of the camp that morning, as the Kid easily guessed. The Rio Kid had lost the trail in the hills, but he had hopes of picking it up again in the camp.

The Kid was patient. When he ate a late lunch, he ate it sitting on the bench outside One-Eye's shack, his eyes on the cabin farther along the straggling street. As the Kid figured it out, Euchre and Denver Dave had roped in the tenderfoot and corralled him somewhere in the trackless hills.

Denver Dave had been on his way back to the camp when the Kid had met him, and the ruffian had drawn on him and had been beaten to it. Euchre, he reckoned, was watching the prisoner till the marshal came; but from Dave, assuredly, the marshal would never get any news. If he wanted to know how his confederates had fared, he would have to go and seek them; and when he went, the Kid would not lose sight of him.

Oakes left his cabin again and came along to the saloon. He glanced at the Kid, sitting on the bench, as he entered with a keen, suspicious glance. The Kid, leaning back against the wall, with his Stetson tilted a little over his face, seemed to be half-dozing.

The marshal went into the shack, and the Kid heard One-Eye serving him with a drink. In a few minutes Oakes came out again. He came over to the boy puncher and spoke abruptly.

"You staying on in Hard Tack, puncher?"

The Kid started as if from a doze.

"Yep," he assented; "just a piece."

"You ain't fossicking here?"

"Nope. I reckon fossicking ain't in my line," smiled the Kid. "I did a piece once down in the gold country of Arizona, but I sure ain't come up here to Colorado to prospect for dust."

"You ain't here to punch cows, I reckon?"

The Kid grinned.

"Right in once!" he agreed.

"You came into camp with that young greaser who calls himself Carlos Alvaro, and that all the camp reckons to be the son of old Escobedo," said the marshal. "I reckon he's your pardner."

"Never saw hide or hair of the critter before I picked him up on the trail," answered the Kid cheerfully. "And I reckon I only picked him up because his cayuse had dropped him."

"Then you ain't here after the Escobedo Mine?"

"I guess I'm the only pilgrim in this camp who ain't after it!" said the Kid, laughing. "I never heard of it before I struck Hard Tack. But if that tenderfoot is the son of old Escobedo, and has come up here after the old man's mine, he's sure up against a tough proposition. I allow there's a heap galoots in this burg who won't stand for letting him get away with it."

"That's a cinch!" said the marshal.

"Why, only last night," said the Kid, with an air of easy frankness, "some fire-bugs tried to butt into his window in this very shack, and I scared them off with a pop from my gun."

The marshal eyed him fixedly.

"You saw them?" he asked.

"I ain't a cat to see in the dark," answered the Kid amiably. "But I sure saw the galoot who butted into my room, and I cinched him with the butt of my Colt. I reckon that's why he pulled a gun on me a piece ago down in the canyon."

The marshal started.

"He pulled a gun on you—to-day?"

"He sure did."

"Then I reckon you beat him to it, as you're here and he ain't."

"You've got it."

The Marshal of Hard Tack drew a deep breath. He could guess now why Denver Dave had not come in with news.

For a second the marshal's hand went towards the gun that was in the holster at his thigh.

But he did not draw it.

Idle and careless as the boy puncher looked, his hand was close to a gun, and the marshal had seen how quick he was on the draw. The Kid was watching him with a smiling face, but with a glint of steel in his eyes.

"Not a friend of yours, marshal?" he asked. "I sure reckon that a durned fire-bug like that wouldn't be in cahoots with a town marshal."

"Nope," said the marshal. "I don't even savvy what galoot you're speaking of."

"I guess he called himself Denver Dave."

Again the marshal drew a hard, deep breath.

"And you made it last sickness for him?"

"I sure had to, marshal, or I reckon I shouldn't be here now chewing the rag with you," answered the Kid amiably. "It was a fair break, and he came out at the little end of the horn. I reckon he was mad because of that tap I hit him on the cabeeza at my window last night. But we learn to handle a gun mighty quick down in Texas."

Again the marshal was tempted to draw, and again he realised that the puncher was watching him like a cat, and was ready to beat him to it.

He turned away and walked down to his cabin.

The Kid smiled after him.

The marshal knew now that Denver Dave would never bring him news. The Kid had been glad of the chance to tell him. The marshal stood at his cabin door, his back to the Kid, staring up the street into the canyon, where the dusk of evening was falling. The Kid could follow his thoughts with ease.

All day Oakes had been expecting one of his men to come in with the news that the tenderfoot had been corralled and that the other was guarding him in the secret place in the hills. Now he knew why the messenger had not come. The Rio Kid was not surprised to see Jeff Oakes stride away at last in the falling dusk. And then the Kid, who had been inactive so long, woke to sudden activity.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
The Secret of the Mine!

"MADRE DE DIOS!" murmured the little Mexican wearily, as the deep dusk thickened in the cave high up in the rocky gulch.

At the entrance of the cave Euchre sat with his back to a rock and smoked, and stared into the thickening shadows and muttered curses. Long since Denver Dave should have carried the news to the Marshal of Hard Tack that the tenderfoot had been corralled—that the supposed son of Escobedo was at his mercy. Yet the marshal had not come, and Euchre grew more puzzled and angry with every passing hour.

To the prisoner in the cave the hours passed still more wearily.

The Rio Kid had warned him that the Hard Tack country was no place for him, and he had not heeded the warning. Now he was in the hands of his enemies, and there was no escape for him—no escape and no help. Weary as the long hours were, he dreaded the coming of the Marshal of Hard Tack.

But in the deepening gloom there came a sound at last in the rocky gulch, and Euchre started up and grasped his revolver.

Someone unseen was coming up the gulch from the great canyon.

Euchre's revolver rose to a level as a dim figure loomed from the gloom in front of the cave in the hillside.

"Put 'em up!" he snapped. "I've got you covered."

"Quit that, Euchre!"

It was the marshal's voice.

Euchre lowered the revolver.

"You, marshal! Why in thunder ain't you horned in afore this? I guess I've been waiting hours!" he growled. "Didn't you get word from Dave?"

Oakes muttered a curse.

"Dave pulled on that fire-bug from Texas and got his!" he growled. "I've jest heard it from the puncher himself. You got the tenderfoot?"

"Sure."

"He's here?"

"Yep! Is Dave gone up?" asked Euchre.

"He sure is. And I reckon that durned puncher will never pull out of Hard Tack alive!" growled the marshal. "He allows he ain't here after the Escobedo Mine, but I reckon he's lying."

The Marshal of Hard Tack strode into the cave.

In the dimness he could only faintly make out the little figure of the Mexican, crouching away from him in fear against the rugged, rocky wall. His eyes gleamed with triumph as he looked at him.

"I reckon you're cinched now," he said. "You've got the lantern here, Euchre?"

"Sure."

"Put on the light."

Euchre lighted a large kerosene-lamp that hung on a projection of rock on the cave wall.

The light streamed down on the white, troubled face of the little Mexican.

The marshal's triumphant glance searched his features.

"You durned young gink!" he said. "You allow you ain't the son of old Escobedo, who located the richest mine ever struck in Colorado, and you're as like him as a young gopher is like an old gopher! You want to give me the straight goods now. You're the son of Escobedo?"

The tenderfoot shook his head.

"No, senor."

Darker and more threatening grew the brow of the Marshal of Hard Tack. His eyes glinted at the boy under his bettling brows.

"Look here," he said in a low, menacing voice, "ever since that old greaser Escobedo was here, ten years ago, nothing's been known of his mine. Nobody ever located it, and since Escobedo was shot up it's been a lost mine—and a fortune lost with it. Every man in Hard Tack has hunted for it one time or another, and I sure reckon I've hunted as hard as any. Every galoot in this section allowed that Escobedo's son would come after it some day, and I guess any greaser coming nigh the camp was enough to set all Hard Tack in a fluster. We all knew that old Escobedo had a family back in Mexico; we knew he used to send them dust from White Pine down the mountains. You're his son!"

"I am not his son, senor."

The marshal gritted his teeth.

"There ain't many Mexicans come up here," he said. "If you ain't the son of Escobedo, that dog-goned old fossicker, what are you doing here at all up in Colorado?"

The little Mexican flinched before his savage stare.

"We are poor, senor," he faltered. "We have lost all we had in the revolutions in Mexico. I have a mother who is in want, and a brother who is sick. I came to hunt for gold." His voice trembled. "I was mad to come, as the gringo warned me. But I have some knowledge of mining, and I hoped to make some strike. I did not know that I should fall among enemies in this country."

"You swear that you are not old Escobedo's son?" exclaimed Oakes, scowling at the boy.

"Senor, I swear it by all the saints! Por todos los santos!" said the boy earnestly.

The marshal seemed nonplussed.

There was an accent of truth in the boy's voice. The Marshal of Hard Tack seemed to be in doubt. Euchre broke in.

"I guess he's lying, marshal. What would a Mexican be doing here in Colorado prospecting for gold? What would he know about this country if he's jest a kid from old Mexico? Old Escobedo was an old fossicker, and had been half over the States in his time, but this young galoot is fresh from home. Why did he strike for Hard Tack when he left Mexico? There ain't many galoots in his country ever heard of it."

The marshal nodded.

"That's a cinch," he said. "The ornery galoot knew something before he started. What did you know about Hard Tack, boy, when you was back in Mexico to make you strike for this section?"

"I will tell you the truth, senor. I had heard of Escobedo. I had heard that he had made a strike here; it was told through the aldea where I lived. It was known in the aldea that the Senora Escobedo had received gold from the Senor Escobedo who was here—till at last there came no more gold and no word from him."

"I reckon that was when he was shot up!" grinned Euchre.

Oakes knitted his brows again.

"And you hit the trail for Hard Tack all the way from Mexico because you'd heard that another Mexican had struck it rich here?" he asked.

"Si, senor."

"And you ain't Escobedo's son?"

"No, senor."

"You're a relation, at least, on your looks!" growled the marshal.

"Si, senor—a relative."

There was a pause.

The marshal leaned on the rock wall, scanning the boy's face in the glare of the kerosene lamp.

"I guess, boss, it's easy to make him squeal if he knows anything," sug-suggested Euchre. "A rope twisted round his thumbs——"

The boy shivered.

"I swear that I am not the son of Escobedo!" he said huskily. "If you

torture me, you cannot make me tell more than the truth."

"Old Escobedo used to talk when he was full," said the marshal slowly. "He chewed the rag a lot when he had had too much fire-water. We knew he sent dust to his folks in Mexico, and that he had sent a map of his mine. He used to say that if any galoot who was after his mine should get him, the secret would die with him, but his son would get the mine some day. Well, at the finish a galoot got him, and the mine's been lost. You allow you ain't the old greaser's son, and you may be telling the truth. But you're some connection, and you've come to Hard Tack looking for his mine. I reckon you've got the map that he sent back to Mexico. If you've got it, that is what we want, and I reckon we'll begin by searching you for it, feller; and if it ain't on you, we'll find a way to make you talk. You go through him, Euchre, and see if he's got any papers in his rags."

The boy started back, the crimson coming into his pale face.

"Oh, senor! I——"

The marshal gave a scoffing laugh.

"That hits you, does it?" he jeered. "You've got the map! I reckon you may as well hand it over. We'll sure get it."

"Madre de Dios!" murmured the boy hopelessly.

Euchre, grinning, made a step towards him, his hands outstretched. The Mexican, with a sudden passionate gesture, threw his sombrero at the feet of the ruffian.

"It is there!" he panted. "It is hidden in the lining of the hat! Take it—thieves that you are!"

He covered his face with his hands and burst into a torrent of weeping. Neither the marshal nor Euchre heeded him, save for a scornful glance. Oakes grasped the hat, and tore the hidden paper from under the lining.

His face was ablaze with greed.

"The secret at last!" he muttered hoarsely.

He held up the old, crinkled paper, scratched with strange lines and marks and dots in the light of the lamp. Euchre glared at it over his arm, equally excited. The tenderfoot, unheeded, wept, with covered face, in despair, while the two ruffians examined the prize.

Euchre gave a whoop of triumph.

"It's sure the goods, marshal! Look! There's the Hard Tack canyon, and that's the camp marked, and there's a line leading up towards the pinewood where old Escobedo used to disappear and where he was found at last shot up. It runs on up the hill, and that word——"

"Oro!" said the marshal. "Gold! That marks the mine!" His voice vibrated with triumph. "Why, a day's ride from the camp, and the lost mine's in our hands!"

"Gee!" ejaculated Euchre.

The marshal turned to the weeping Mexican.

"This here is the map of the mine—hay?" he grinned. "This is the map that old Escobedo sent to his son in Mexico years back?"

"Si, si, ladrone!"

"I guess that mine won't be lost much longer!" said the marshal. "I guess that mine is going to be located, and I reckon there ain't any stake in it for you, greaser. I'll sure leave you tied up here till I've located the mine—which I reckon will be by noon to-morrow——"

"I guess not, marshal!" said a soft voice at the opening of the cave. "You ain't locating that mine worth a red cent, you ain't!"

The marshal swung round, with a furious oath. In the opening of the cave stood the Rio Kid, with a gun in either hand, aimed at the two ruffians standing under the kerosene-lamp.

"Put 'em up!" said the Kid.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Sharp Shot!

THE Rio Kid smiled over the levelled guns. Jeff Oakes and Euchre glared at him like cornered cougars, but they hesitated to reach for their weapons. There was a joyful cry from the little Mexican.

"Senor el Tejano!" he exclaimed. "Oh, you have come to save me!"

"Jest that!" smiled the Kid.

"They have taken the map—the map of the Escobedo Mine!"

"I guess they'll be handing it back like good little men!" grinned the Kid. "I'm sure going to ask them nicely to do it!"

The marshal grated his teeth.

"You want to keep clear of this, puncher!" he said hoarsely. "Don't you horn in here, you durned galoot!"

"I guess I'm horning it jest a few!" said the Kid cheerily. "Why, ain't I trailed you all the way from Hard Tack, marshal, jest to horn in and spoil your little game? Ain't I been walking behind you all the way up the gulch like a lynx after a deer? And I sure ain't taken all that trouble for nothing. I was jest hoping to horn in and spoil your game, feller."

"You durned puncher!" said the marshal, his voice shaking with rage. "You followed me from the camp——"

"You've said it," agreed the Kid. "That galoot Euchre never left a trail that an Injun could have followed, so I figured I'd get you to guide me, marshal, and you sure did, like a good little man!"

The marshal clenched his hands with passion. Not a sound had warned him that he was being trailed when he had left Hard Tack and struck into the pathless hills. Not a sign or a shadow had he seen of his pursuer. Yet the Rio Kid had followed him to the cave, and he could guess now that that had been the Kid's game when he had sat so idly on the bench outside the shack hotel in the camp. And now the puncher held the drop, and his guns looked unwaveringly at the marshal and his confederate. The Marshal of Hard Tack had gained the map of the lost mine—only to lose it again.

A desperate light was in his eyes.

"You want to ride clear of this, puncher," he said. "You ain't getting this map! I reckon I'm freezing on to it. There'll be gun-play here if you don't beat it lively!"

The Kid laughed.

"There sure will be gun-play if you don't put up your paws, pronto!" he answered. "I ain't waiting long, marshal! You put up your hands, you two ornery galoots, and drop that paper, or Hard Tack will want a new town marshal before sun-up!"

The marshal and Euchre exchanged a glance. The clue to the Escobedo Mine was in their hands, and they were two to one, and they were desperate. But the Kid's eyes gleamed with menace.

"Drop that paper!" he rapped.

The marshal obeyed. As the paper fluttered to the floor the little Mexican snatched it up.

For a second the Kid's eyes followed the paper, and it seemed like a chance to the two desperate men cornered in the cave. Simultaneously they reached for their guns.

A second more, and the cave was reeking with smoke, thundering with the echoes of exploding firearms.

The tenderfoot, crying out with alarm, crouched back against the rocks, peering wildly through the curling smoke. He saw Euchre pitch back against the cavern wall and crumple up to the ground, never to stir again. He saw the Marshal of Hard Tack reeling, but firing furiously as he reeled, and then there was the crash of a heavy body.

Darkness covered the vision of the little Mexican, but he came to himself as a hand grasped his shoulder.

"Search me!" He heard the Rio Kid's voice. "Dog-gone my boots, if the pesky little cuss ain't fainted! Oh, shucks!"

"Senor——"

"Oh, you've come to!" grinned the Kid. "You're sure the tenderest tenderfoot ever! Get a move on! You ain't stopping here any longer, boy!"

"But—but those hombres——"

"They ain't worrying you any!" said the Kid grimly.

All was dark in the cave; a bullet had smashed the lamp. Darkness, and a reek of oil, and the acrid smell of smoke. The tenderfoot shuddered, and as he moved under the Kid's guiding hand he stumbled over something that lay on the earth, and gave a cry.

But the Kid drew him out of the cave. In the starlight he looked with scared eyes at his rescuer.

"You are wounded, senor!" he exclaimed, as the Kid dashed a streak of crimson from his sunburnt cheek.

"I reckon a ball went close," said the Kid coolly. "But they was sure loco to pull on me when I had the drop. I reckon they got theirs so sudden that they never knew where they was hit. You got the map safe?"

"Si, si, senor."

"They found it where I had put you wise to hide it—in your hat?" asked the Kid.

"No, senor," faltered the boy. "I—I gave it up, for they would have searched me, and—and——" He broke off. "Oh, senor, you have saved me, and saved for me the mine of Escobedo! Senor, you shall take half the gold——"

"Forget it," grinned the Kid.

"But, senor——"

"Oh, cut it out!" said the Kid. "Step out lively! You've got a long trail back to the camp. Beat it!"

And the tenderfoot, weary but patient, trudged by the side of the boy puncher, bewildered by the darkness and the shadows of rocks and pines, amid which the Kid never paused or hesitated for a moment.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The Senorita!

THE Rio Kid was early astir the next morning.

In the shack hotel there was discussion of the absence of the Marshal of Hard Tack—a topic on which the Kid said no word.

He made purchases at the camp store and packed his slicker pack for a trail in the hills, and the hour was still early when he mounted the black-muzzled mustang and rode out of Hard Tack with the Mexican.

Many eyes followed them; but if any of the Hard Tack pilgrims had a hunch to follow the supposed son of Escobedo, the presence of the Rio Kid caused them to give up the idea. While the Kid was riding herd, the tenderfoot had nothing to fear.

In the canyon, out of sight of the

camp, the Kid pulled rein and gave his companion a whimsical glance.

"I guess you want to hit the trail for the Escobedo Mine, feller?" he said. "You figure that you can trust me so far as to see you through with it? Or do you want me to quit?"

The boy coloured.

"Oh, senor, I will trust you with my mine and with my life!" he exclaimed. "I know now that without your help I can do nothing—though I do not know why you should help me, a stranger to you."

"Same here," said the Kid coolly. "It's jest my way of horning in, that's all; never was a galoot for minding my own business. You reckon that map will take you to the old man's mine?"

"Si, senor! Look!" said the Mexican.

He held the map under the Kid's eyes.

The Kid studied it carefully.

"I reckon that's plain sailing," he said. "The old galoot put it down easy to follow." He laughed. "You dog-goned gink, you come up here with old Escobedo's map to the mine, and you allow that you ain't the son of the old fossicker!"

"I am not Escobedo's son, senor," said the boy, his flush deepening. "I have told only the truth. Escobedo's son lies sick in his home in Old Mexico, and Escobedo's widow is in want. It is for that reason that I made this journey to locate the mine if I could."

The Kid eyed him curiously.

"You're an Escobedo, then?" he asked.

"Si, senor. I am an Escobedo." The boy smiled faintly. "The task was too great for me without your help. I shall never be able to thank you for your generosity to me!"

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid.

He studied the map again carefully. Whether the Mexican boy could have traced out the lost mine or not, it was not a difficult task to the Kid with the map under his eyes. He turned his mustang from the canyon, and the boy followed him. Once or twice the Kid cast a keen glance behind, but there was no sign of pursuit from Hard Tack.

In the noontide they camped in a deep pine wood long miles from the camp. There the Kid lighted a fire and cooked bacon and beans. The boy, weary with the ride, slept in his blanket, while the Kid studied the map again and pondered. When they resumed the trail in the afternoon the Kid was very thoughtful.

A lingering doubt troubled the Rio Kid.

If the boy was not the son of Escobedo, as he declared, he was not the rightful owner of the old Mexican's claim. The Kid could not know how the map had come into his possession. The secret of Escobedo belonged to the son or the widow of the old fossicker, or to both, and the Kid was a little troubled.

But he'd said nothing on the subject so far, and devoted his attention to the task of locating the mine.

With the carefully-drawn map in hand, that old Escobedo had sent to his son in Mexico long years before, the task was not a difficult one to the Kid. The wilderness of rock and pine that bewildered the tenderfoot did not baffle the boy puncher.

At sundown they rode into the deep valley high up in the lonely mountains, A foaming torrent brawled along the rocks—a mountain stream that was marked on the chart. They camped that night by the stream, the Kid building a jacal of branches for the weary tenderfoot before he rolled up in his blanket in the open air under the side of a towering rock.

IN MERCILESS HANDS! "The secret of the mine at last!" cried the marshal. He held up the old paper, scratched with strange lines and marks, in the light of the lamp. Euchre glared at it over his arm, equally excited. The tenderfoot, unheeded, wept, with covered face, in despair, while the two ruffians examined their prize.
(*See Chapter* 2.)

After breakfast the next morning the Kid took the map and searched through the valley, while the little Mexican rested in the camp.

It was three hours later that the Kid rejoined his companion, with a smile on his face.

He tossed the map back to the tenderfoot.

"I reckon that won't be wanted any more," he said.

The Mexican gave him a quick look.

"Senor, you have found it?"

The Kid grinned, and held out his hand. In the palm lay a nugget of solid gold.

"El oro!" the boy ejaculated.

"Sure! And there's lots more where that came from," said the Kid. "I guess old Escobedo was wise to keep it dark—it's sure a rich strike. You could pick up a fortune in a few days!"

"Oh, senor!" exclaimed the boy breathlessly.

"Come and see!" said the Kid.

The Mexican, almost trembling with eagerness, followed the puncher. They stopped in a deep hollow that had once been the bed of the stream, which had followed a different course in ancient days.

In the old river-bed lay a rusted pick, and there were signs of primitive workings still to be seen.

The Kid pointed to the dried, sandy bed where the pick lay.

"I reckon that's the spot that's marked 'Oro' on your map, feller," he said. "There's oro there a-plenty, that's a cinch. I guess this old river-bed is thick with it."

The boy nodded. His eyes were on the rusted pick, not on the glistening particles that showed in the sand in the bright sunrays.

"And that pick——" he said in a low voice.

"I guess old Escobedo left it there before his last trip down to Hard Tack ten years and more ago," said the Kid. "He was shot up by a galoot who was after his claim, and never came back for it. I reckon no pilgrim ever nosed into this hyer valley—it's right off the track. That old pick's lain there ever since Escobedo dropped it ten years ago."

The boy trembled.

"Padre mio!" he murmured.

The Kid made no comment. The boy had said, again and again, that he was not the son of Escobedo, yet he murmured "My father!" as he looked, with tears in his dark eyes, at the pick that had been left by the old fossicker—all that remained of Joaquin Escobedo.

For some moments the tenderfoot stood still, as if buried in painful thought. He stirred himself at last.

"And this is the Escobedo Mine, senor?" he said.

"Sure! It's all allusial," said the Kid. "The gold there was washed down when the stream ran this way—I guess a long time before Christopher Columbus hit America. It can be taken out by hand. I reckon a few weeks' work would clean up most of it, and there would be twenty thousand dollars' worth or more to carry away. But——"

He paused.

"Old Escobedo never staked out a claim and registered the mine," he said. "I reckon he knew that in a lonely section like this there were heap galoots wouldn't take much notice of pre-emption rights; he'd have had his claim jumped as soon as it was known. The pilgrims hereabouts wouldn't have worried any about knocking a greaser on the head to keep him quiet. He kept it dark, and worked the claim, and took the gold away little by little. I reckon he was wise, though he got shot up at last."

"And we, senor——"

"I guess I ain't in a hurry to hit the trail," said the Kid. "I'm ready to stand by you and clean up what Escobedo left—clean it up and vamoose. You'd never hold it if it was known; the law don't go much up here at the top of the sierra. I guess you can take out twenty thousand dollars and more in a few weeks."

"I should be more than satisfied, senor," said the little Mexican, with a smile. "But you must share, for I owe it all to you."

The Kid shook his head.

"Nary a red cent," he answered. "I guess when I started in to ride herd over you, feller, it wasn't for a share in the Escobedo Mine. But——"

He paused and looked at the tenderfoot squarely.

"I reckon you got to put me wise," he said. "This hyer claim was never registered, so it belongs, fur as the law goes, to the first galoot to locate it——"

"Yourself, senor," said the tenderfoot in a tremulous voice.

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid. "I ain't meaning that. I reckon the law and me ain't on speaking terms, come to that, and ain't been for a long time. What I'm aiming at is this—it's a derelict claim so far as law goes, but right is right, and in justice it belongs to the widow and the son of old Escobedo, and that's what's bitin' me. You got to tell me the truth, feller. If you're Escobedo's son, the claim's yours, and I'm standing by you to get out what's left of the gold and to get away with it. But if you're butting in to jump a claim that belongs to some other hombre, I don't stand for it."

The boy stood silent.

"Put it plain," said the Kid. "I've a hunch that you're straight, but I ain't got it clear. Down in my own country, Texas, they call me an outlaw; but I reckon the Rio Kid don't stand for robbing the widow and the orphan. I ain't gone on greasers, come to that; but right's right, and you can't travel around it. What's your title to this hyer bonanza, if you ain't the son of Escobedo?"

The colour crept into the tenderfoot's soft cheeks.

"Justo!" he said. "You have a right to ask that, senor!"

"Sure!" said the Kid. "Spill it!"

"I am not the son of Escobedo, as I have said, but——"

"But what?"

"But I am his daughter, senor!"

The Rio Kid almost fell down.

"Search me!" he gasped. "You—you——! Great gophers! You—his daughter!"

"Si, senor!"

The Rio Kid gazed at the tenderfoot. He had never dreamed of guessing it. Even when he had found the little Mexican weeping on the Hard Tack trail, he had never guessed.

"Great snakes!" he gasped at last.

It was the surprise of his life to the Rio Kid.

* * * * *

In spite of his surprise, the Kid kept his word, and the rich spoil of old Escobedo's mine found its way safely into the hands of the Mexican's family down on the plains. The Kid would take no reward, and no one in the Hard Tack district even guessed the tenderfoot's secret!

THE END.

(There's another rousing Western tale of the Rio Kid next Tuesday, entitled "THE MYSTERIOUS TRAIL!" Don't miss this thrilling adventure, whatever you do, chums!)

THE BOY FROM JAPAN!

(Continued from page 12.)

The Japs were arrested, and Okito taken care of by the inspector.

A few days later Dr. Locke called Harry Wharton into his room and had a long talk with him. Wharton's chums waited eagerly to know what the news was. The little Jap boy, although he had come to Greyfriars under false pretences, had been well liked by the juniors, and they did not rank him with the other members of the gang, for it had been made quite clear to them that Okito had been forced to play the part of traitor, that he had not been a willing accomplice to his countrymen's crimes.

"It's all serene, chaps!" grinned Harry Wharton, when they were back in Study No. 1. "The Head says that the authorities are taking no action against Okito. They are going to give him another chance."

"Oh, good!" said Bob Cherry in great relief.

"It was Okito whom Smithy saw last night," said Wharton. "He was at work on the wall."

"Oh!"

"Still, we don't bear any grudge against Okito," said Wharton. "He was a funny little chap, and I'm glad he's come to no harm. The authorities have sent him back to Japan in safe keeping. So we shan't see him any more."

Greyfriars heard the news with satisfaction. Only fellows like Skinner & Co. wished the little Jap boy any harm. But those fellows did not matter. On the whole, the school was sorry to have seen the last of the boy from the Land of the Rising Sun.

THE END.

(Next week's POPULAR will contain another rattling fine yarn of Harry Wharton & Co. Make a note of the title, chums: "ALONZO, THE ATHLETE!" You'll enjoy every line of it.)

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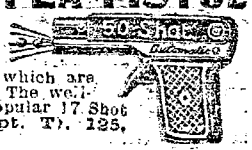

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