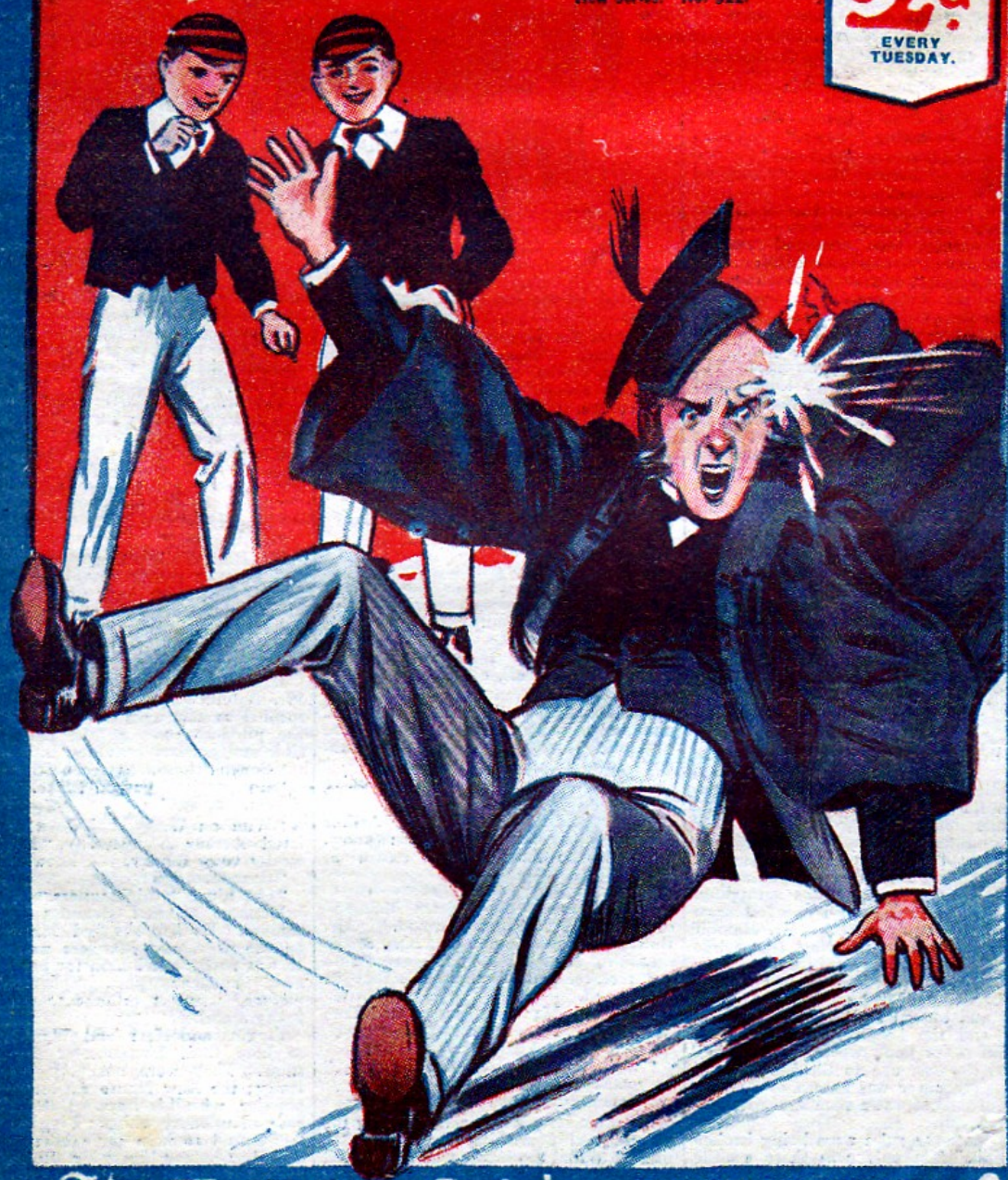


X STOOD THE TEST AND STILL THE BEST! X

The POPULAR

Week Ending
January 26th, 1929.
New Series, No. 522.

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EVERY
TUESDAY.



The **FALL** of the **TYRANT!**
See the Special School Tale inside

FIT FOR FAT!

Free from the clutches of Captain Shawk, of the schooner Pond Lily, the Rio Kid proceeds to punish his late captor in a very fitting manner!

The RIO KID'S—



THE FIRST CHAPTER. Shooting Up the Town!

HOOPS rang on the grassy trail that ran down the bank of the creek, from the Sampson Ranch to the little coast town of San Pedro. Old Man Sampson, with his tanned, grizzled face grim under his Stetson hat, rode his tall, bony pinto at the head of fifteen brawny punchers. Every man in the bunch packed two guns in his belt, and carried a rifle in the leader's scabbard at his saddle. Some of the punchers looked as grim as the Old Man himself; some of them were grinning, as if in anticipation of a jamboree. As they drew near the coast town, they cracked their quirts like pistol-shots, and yelled in chorus. Seafaring men on a lugger and a brig anchored out in the inlet stared at them in surprised interest. But in the sprawling hamlet of San Pedro, as by the yellow flag of old, was tumult and alflight.

It was the third visit that Old Man Sampson and his bunch had made to San Pedro in as many days.

For three nights and two days the Rio Kid had been missing. Kid Cayfax, the Old Man's partner in the ranch, had disappeared at San Pedro. Santa Fe Sam had led his riderless mustang back to the ranch, unable to say what had

become of the Old Man's partner. Whether the Kid had been "knifed" by some greaser, or shot up by some cow-thief, robbed and murdered by some of the San Pedro toughs, or kidnapped on board one of the coasting vessels that put in at the inlet, nobody knew, any more than they knew whether he was still alive or dead. The town marshal either could or would tell nothing; but the town marshal was well-known to be no better than the rest of the place—a nest of smugglers, cow-thieves, shanghai men, and boot-leggers. Such law as was available was useless to the Old Man, and he had taken his own methods—methods which accorded with his fiery temper, and were fully endorsed by the bunch. "Shooting up" the town was the Old Man's method. He had announced in San Pedro that until the missing puncher turned up San Pedro was going to be put through a course of sprouts, and he was keeping his word. This was the third visit of the Sampson bunch, and when the San Pedro citizens saw their coming there was a general exodus on the other side of the town.

Only one man remained to meet the bunch as they avorted into the unpaved, weedy street. That was Seth Smith, the town marshal. The bunch came to a halt, surrounding the marshal.

"Eyer, you Smith!" hooted the Old Man. "You found my pardner yet?"

"Dog-gone your pardner," roared the town marshal. "I don't know nothin' about your gold-darned pardner, and don't want to. I want you to keep your bunch out of this hyer burg, or I'll sure get the sheriff down from Nuce with his posse to handle you."

"My pardner's been cinched in Olds hyer den of thieves," said the Old Man, bending his grizzled brows fiercely on the marshal. "There ain't a galoot in this burg that ain't a cow-thief or a boot-legger, or at best a muvverter's hunter! You're wuss'n the rest! You got to hand out my pardner, Kid Cayfax, or there won't be much left of this town—no, sir, not a grace-spot to mark where it stood! You hear me shout?"

"You darned old bull-headed cuss—!" snorted the marshal.

"That's enough from you! Git!"

The marshal of San Pedro was a tough man, and he packed two guns. But he did not venture to touch them, with the range riders cavorting round him. As for the sheriff's posse from Nuce, Seth was quite unwilling to bring them on the scene at any time, lest they should have found his shetang stacked with boot-leg liquor. And the citizens of San Pedro were not the men to back him up in a free fight with a bunch of reckless punchers.

"Git!" roared the Old Man. And as the marshal did not "git," Jeff

OUR ROARING WESTERN TARN, STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

—REVENGE!

By Ralph Redway



Barstow, the foreman of the ranch, jerked out a gun.

Bang, bang!

Two shots struck the ground close by the marshal's boots.

"Dance, you galoot, dance!" shouted Jeff.

"Oh, gee-whiz!" gasped the marshal. Bang, bang, bang!

There was a roar of six-guns as two or three of the punchers joined in the game of "fauning."

Fanned by bullets, the hapless marshal danced. He hopped and skipped and jumped leaping wild to save his feet from the crashing lead. Bullets spattered on the ground round him, most of them missing his feet by an inch or less.

Bang, bang, bang!

"Let up!" yelled the marshal wildly. "Let up, you galoots!"

Bang, bang!

"Git!" ordered Old Man Sampson.

He signed to his bunch to cease fire, and the marshal was only too glad to get. He raced away out of San Pedro gasping and panting, and did not stop till he was a hundred yards past the last shack.

"Now ride!" growled the Old Man. "Shoot up the town! I guess if they don't hand out the Kid we'll make them tired of this bunch!"

With a yell, the bunch galloped down the street firing right and left with their six-guns.

"Shooting up" the town, as a cowboy frolic was no new thing in the cow country; but now it was no frolic. The Old Man was in deadly earnest, and his bunch entered into the spirit of the thing.

Not a window remained intact in San Pedro since the previous visits of the bunch. Not a door stood without bullet-holes in it.

Bang, bang, bang!

The bunch held possession of the town.

Riding up and down the single street, and round the plaza, firing into every window, spattering bullets on every door, chasing, with wild yells, every lingering citizen who was sighted, and fanning him with bullets till he fled for the prairie.

For an hour the bunch galloped up and down, to and fro, holding the town, with no man to say them nay. Out on the prairie—and glad to get there—the San Pedro pilgrims waited for them to go, so that they could creep back and see what damage was done. There was a good deal of damage for them to find when they got back. The bunch gathered finally before the marshal's frame house—the only frame house in the place. They yelled at the front of the house, sending lead searching through every room. Whatever had happened to the Old Man's partner it was as likely as not that Seth had a hand in it, or at least had connived at it, as he connived at most of the rascalities by which San Pedro lived and had its being.

"That'll do, boys," said the Old Man at last. "I guess San Pedro will be learning to let cowmen alone. If the Kid ain't turned up by to-morrow, we'll be in again and pull the marshal's house down in a heap. Ride!"

And the bunch with smoking guns, rode out of the town again by way of the trail along the creek. Then Santa Fe Sam gave a sudden yell which brought the punchers to a halt. He stood up in his stirrups, pointing at a schooner that had dropped anchor in the inlet.

"That's the outfit that sailed the night the Kid went," he shouted. "That's come back."

Old Man Sampson stared at the schooner. He more than suspected that the Kid had been shanghaied on board some coasting vessel short of hands.

"I guess we'll look into that outfit," he said. "You're sure that's the same shanghaing Sam?"

"I should smile," answered Santa Fe Sam.

"Hallo! There's the Kid!" roared Jeff Barstow.

"Gee-whiz!"

A boat had put off from the schooner. In the bottom of it lay a man, and a lithe figure in dirty dungarees was rowing shoreward.

"It's the Kid!" exclaimed the Old Man, staring. "It's sure Kid Carfax! They've had him on the ship! He's got on ship's rags! Hi-yi!" The Old Man put his hands to his mouth and gave the cowboy yell. "Hi-yi!"

The Rio Kid stared across at the bank.

At the sight of the bunch of riders his face lighted up. He waved his hand and grinned.

"Hi-yi!" he yelled back.

The boat bumped on the bank, and the Kid jumped out. He picked up the man who lay in the bottom of the boat and tossed him ashore like a sack of alfalfa. The next moment he was surrounded by the eager punchers of the Sampson Ranch.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Shanghaied Skipper!

OLD MAN SAMPSON wrung the Kid's hand. There was emotion in his tanned, grizzled face.

The fiery Old Man had a strong regard for the young puncher who had taken a partnership in his ranch. But he was not alone in that. There was not a man in the bunch who did not like the cheery Kid—and would have liked him none the less had they learned that he was the Rio Kid, the outlaw of the cow-country.

"You've got back, Kid!" exclaimed the Old Man.

"Sure!" grinned the Kid. "And mighty pleased to see you agin, sir—and all the bunch!"

"You been to sea?" exclaimed Santa Fe Sam.

"Yep."

"Shanghaied?" asked Jeff.

"That's what they call it," said the Kid. "I guess I was knocked out the head from behind and toted into that durned outfit they call a schooner and toted away to sea. I guess I had a thunder of a time till I got hold of a gun; after that they was like lambs."

There was a roar of laughter among the punchers. They could picture the feelings of the schooner's outfit when the Kid got loose with a gun in his

hand. Men had been shanghaied at San Pedro before many a time; but it was the Kid the kidnapers had roped in a back-lumper.

"And why did they bring you back here?" asked the Old Man.

"I kinder persuaded them," explained the Kid. "The foreman of the outfit—they call him the mate—is sure lying up for repairs, with cold lead in his inside; and the other galoots didn't seem to want to argue. I've brought the boss ashore with me."

"The captain?" yelled Santa Fe Sam.

The Kid stooped and grasped Captain Shack by the collar and jerked him to his feet. The sea captain's face was red with rage, his fat body quivering with fury. The punchers stared at him curiously.

"What you want with the damned noble, Kid?" asked the Old Man. "You here on getting him?"

The Kid shook his head.

"I've been near three days on that shbang yander," he said. "They was going to make a seaman of me; and I sure got the no-o-hand—afere I got hold of a gun. That noble shanghaied

me, as he calls it. Well, now I've shanghaied him."

"What?" gasped the Old Man.

"He had me for near three days trying to make a sailorman of me," explained the Kid. "I'm going to have him for three weeks and try to make a companioner of him."

"Gee!"

"They tied me up and quized me when I wouldn't play up," said the Kid. "I guess I can quize some myself if the galoot doesn't play up. He's got three weeks of it coming. You ain't objection, Mr. Sampson?"

THE BUNTER BROTHERS! *Mist Makers*



Sammy and Billy were feeling rather peckish. Smatter of fact, they hadn't scoffed anything for at least half an hour, and coming upon a field of nice, juicy turnips, they waded in and hunked out a few prize specimens.



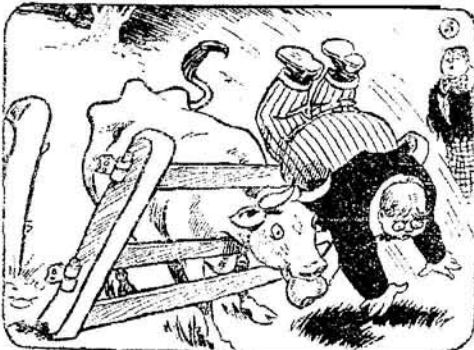
But hovering in the background was a feisty old bull. And at the sight of these two youths squatting on the gate he gave a hundred horsepower roar and started for that gate like one o'clock. But Billy saw him and gave the alarm.



"Mind your eye!" wuffed Billy, his face full of anxiety and turnip. But, alas, before Sammy could skip off the gate the bull was upon him! Not quite, though, but nearby, for the bull's rush had fixed his head between the bars.



"Help, help!" howled Sammy horribly. "He'll toss me sky-high!" But he needn't have worried, for the bull was after that choice turnip that Sammy had dropped. The next moment the gate was clean off its hinges, as per above.



The bull made a dive for the turnip, with the unavoidable result that Sammy took a grand swallow-dive to earth. "Bravo, Sammy!" wuffed Billy from his safe place. "You'll be a bull-fighter one of these days!"



But Billy changed his tune as the next moment Farmer Haysced appeared on the horizon howling as loudly as the bull. Major and minor did not stop to explain matters. "Run for it!" gasped Billy. And they did!

The Old Man was ducking.

"Objection?"

he said. "I guess it's a ditch. I guess that galoot will turn out to steal men from the cow country again. Kid, it's the big idea!"

The punchers roared.

"We've been shooting up the town every day since you was roped, Kid," said Jeff Barstow. "I reckon San Pedro is lookin' pretty sick. They'll sure be glad that you've trailed home."

The Kid laughed.

"You're sure some baneb, and I'm proud to belong to you," he said.

"Any galoot going to rustle me a hoss? I'm sure hoping to sit in a saddle agin."

Santa Fe Sam slipped from his broncho.

"Here you are, Kid!"

"You got my mustang safe?" asked the Kid anxiously. "I sure been worrying a whole heap about that."

"Safe as shootin' at the ranch," answered Sam. "I took him home arter I couldn't find you. Hop on my earree, feller; I guess I can hold it."

"You're a white man, Sam," said the Kid gratefully. "I sure am hoping to sit a cayuse agin."

Captain Shack made a movement to sidle through the punchers. His face was a study in mingled rage and fear.

Jack Barstow headed him back with a shove of a heavy boot.

"You ain't beating it yet, feller!" he said. "The Kid ain't done with you, by long chalks!"

"Don't you dare to sit a cayuse agin!" roared Captain

Shack. "I'm going back to my ship—"

"Forget it, feller," drawled the Kid. "You ain't going back to your ship for quite a piece!"

The captain raved.

"I got to go back! I guess I'll compensate you; I'll pay you fair and square for damages. Them hands on my schooner will lose the ship and desert, with me gone, and Star-boy lying in his bunk with a bullet in him."

"That 'em!" said the Kid scold.

"I'm talking you—"

"Aw—forgot it!" said the Kid. "You spill too much, feller. You belong to the navy, same as you said I belonged to you when you had me on that outfit of yours!"

"I guess—"

"Get a cinch on that bully-beef trop of yours! One of you boys lend me a rope," said the Kid.

"Hyer you are, Kid!" chuckled Jeff.

The Kid looped the lasso round Captain Shack, taking the other end in his hand, and mounting Santa Fe Sam's horse.

"I guess I'm ready to hit the trail now," he said. "Hop it, you man-stealing thief!"

"This is agin the law!" roared the captain.

"I reckon it was a piece outside the law to knock a cowpuncher on the cazeza and take him into your outfit yonder," grinned the Kid. "You ain't got no kick coming on that score, Shack."

"You durned—"

"Hop it!" ordered the Kid.

"I won't!" roared the captain. "I tell you—"

"I guess you will, just a few."

The Kid set the broncho in motion, and the rope tightened. Captain Shack was plucked off his feet and sprawled headlong in the trail.

The Kid checked his horse and looked round.

"You coun't that-a-way?" he asked.

"I guess I ain't any objections, if you like it that-a-way. But you can sure love it if you like!"

The skipper scrambled wildly up.

A torrent of curses poured from his lips, drowned by the loud laughter of the punchers. The Kid started again, and this time the skipper of the Pond Lily took care not to be dragged over. He ran after the broncho.

With a yell, the bunch started for the ranch—and glad enough were the lurking citizens of San Pedro to see them go.

The Kid rode at a moderate pace to give his prisoner a chance; but Captain Shack had to run, and he ran, gasping for breath, streaming with perspiration. The Kid grinned back at him encouragingly.

"Heef it, feller!" he said cheerily. "When we get to the ranch I'll sure teach you how to ride a bronco!"

"You pasky land-lubber!" panted the skipper. "I ain't never got on a durned four-legged critter in my life!"

"Oh, she!" said the Kid. "I guess it's time you learned, then! You're getting it easy, you galoot; I was knocked on the head afore I was toted on to your outfit, and I sure ain't knocked you on the head—yet. I always was an easy-going galoot. Hop it!"



BREAKING IN THE PRISONER! At the first jump of the pony, Captain Shack let the reins go flying, and grasped the saddle with both hands, holding on for dear life. "Ride him!" shrieked the cowpunchers in great glee. (See Chapter 1.)

The skipper hopped it desperately, to keep pace with the trotting broncho, the laughing punchers riding round him. The wretched skipper howled an appeal to Old Man Sampson, who grinned at him.

"You're the captain of this crew, ain't you?" he howled.

"I'm sure the boss of this outfit, if that's what you mean, you covey man-stealer!" snorted the Old Man.

"Give them orders to let me slip my cable, then!" howled Shack.

"I guess you're shanghaied!" chuckled the old man. "You know what that means, I reckon. You shanghaied the Kid, didn't you? Now he's sure shanghaied you—you ain't got no kick coming. If you can shanghai a cowman on to a ship, I guess the Kid can shanghai a seaman on to a ranch. We'll make a puncher of you!"

"Hop it!" grinned Jeff Barstow.

And all the way to the Sampson ranch the skipper hopped it, breathless, raging, gasping with fatigue and fury. He could scarcely believe that this was not some rough cowboy joke, but he had a misgiving that the Kid meant to do exactly as he had threatened. Many a man had the captain shanghaied in his time, and taught to obey orders with a rope's end or a capstan bar. It was the first time he had been shanghaied himself, and the justice of it did not appeal to him in the least. As he hopped and jumped and bounded after the Kid's horse, dragged by the rope, he nourished a hope of escaping by the time the ranch was reached. But by that time, the fat skipper was aching with weariness, and when he was cast loose, he had scarcely strength enough to stand on his feet, let alone to make any attempt to escape.

The Kid jerked the rope away, and surveyed him with amused contempt.

"You're sure a soft rube!" he said.

"I guess it will do you good to work on a ranch, and keep away from the hooch. I'll show you your bunk in the bunkhouse, feller, and you can take a spell of rest—I'll call you when I'm ready to put you wise about punching cows. You was sure hard on me—but

I guess I'll go as easy with you as I can."

The skipper staggered into the bunkhouse, and collapsed into a bunk. There he lay, gasping with exhaustion.

Heading him no further, the Kid went to the corral to see his horse. The black-tauzled mustang whinnied with delight at the sight of his master, and the Kid fondled him and caressed his glossy neck. He forgot the shanghaied skipper for the time, but there was little danger that Esau Shack would escape. He lay like a log in the bunkhouse, and it was hours before he could stir a limb.

THE THIRD CHAPTER. A New Man in the Outfit!

"**B**URNING daylight!" roared the Rio Kid.

Captain Esau Shack, seafaring man no longer, but landman and cowpuncher, sat up in his bunk in the camp-on-a-bunkhouse.

It was morning.

The cook was busy in the chuckhouse, turning out breakfast for the bunch. The sun had looked up over the grassy plains of the ranch, and all the outfit were up. Men who had been on night rides were trailing home, to turn into bunks newly vacated. But one man in the Sampson outfit was not ready to turn out, and that was the new recruit, Esau Shack. The Kid—hinder to his prisoner than Shack had been to him on board the Pond Lily—had allowed him to rest the first day, the fat skipper being worn out with tramping a few miles across rough prairie at the tail of the Kid's horse. The Kid, roughly as he had been handled on board the schooner, could be good-natured. But his intention was fixed, and his resolution was like adamant. As Esau Shack had done, so he was to be done unto, and, no doubt, it would be—as the Kid cheerily hoped—a lesson to him.

In the night Shack had awakened and contemplated for a few minutes the idea of escape. Only for a few minutes, for he was still fatigued, and the seaman who could have found his way anywhere about the Gulf of Mexico or the Caribbean Sea, had no idea of how to find his way about the untracked prairie. And the skipper really could not believe that the joke was to be kept up, that he really was to be kept at the ranch for three weeks as a forced recruit. To shanghai others was one thing; to be shanghaied himself was quite another—a really almost incredible thing. And who ever heard of a seafaring man being shanghaied on to a ranch?

Esau hoped that by the morning the punchers would be tired of their joke and would let him, as he expressed it, slip his cable, by which he meant hitting the trail. But when morning dawned he was still sleeping and snoring in his bunk, and he did not waken till he was shaken roughly by the shoulder, and the Kid's cheery voice shouted in his ear:

"Dawning daylight! Burning daylight, you galoot!"

Skipper Shack sat up and rubbed his eyes. The Kid, already dressed, stood grinning by the bunk. On board the schooner the Kid had been forced into
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dungarees, and had had to throw his cowboy outfit into the sea. But since he had become a partner in the Sampson ranch, the Kid had bought clothes, and had always been very particular in these matters—very natty and very neat, a model cowpuncher to look at. Now he was dressed in cowboy garb again, with a silken neck-scarf of gay colour, and goatskin chaps with the hair on, and high-heeled boots with clinking spurs, and a Stetson hat. Shack hardly knew him for a moment. But he knew the handsome, sunburnt face, with its cheery, mocking smile.

"Hop it lively, feller," said the Kid. "You reckon you're here to snore in your bunk while the other hands turn to?"

"Hauds!" snorted Shack. "I ain't no hand, you durned lubber! I'm a pesky sea-captain, and I'm going back to my ship!"

"Forget it!" grinned the Kid. "You're under orders here, Shack. Hop out of that bunk!"

"I won't!" booted Shack.

"Sam, you galoot, throw over my quilt!" said the Kid.

Santa Fe, with a grin, threw the quilt across, and the Kid caught it by the butt as it whirled in the air.

He cracked the lash, like a pistol-shoot.

"You turning out?" he demanded.

"Nope!" yelled the skipper furiously.

"I don't turn out at the orders of any pesky puncher in Texas!"

Crack! rang the whip again, and this time across the shoulders of Esau Shack. There was a roar from the skipper, and he turned out of the bunk so fast that he lost his footing and rolled to the floor.

"I should smile!" said the Kid, tucking the quilt under his arm. "Get into your rags, feller. Pronto!"

Captain Shack staggered up, boiling with rage. He dressed himself in hot haste. The Kid pointed to the door.

"Beat it!"

Instead of bearing it, Shack clenched his fists, and made a spring like a tiger at the Kid.

On board a ship; Shack, fat as he was, was a hefty man with his fists, and had knocked many a man into the scupperns for a saucy word or look. But on board a ship he was master, with a gun in his hip-pocket to back up his authority, and a bucko mate to stand by him. Matters were quite different in the bunkhouse on the Sampson ranch.

The Kid let out his left as Shack came at him, and the fist, like a lump of iron, caught the skipper on the jaw.

Shack went backwards as if he had been shot.

He sat up nursing his jaw with both hands, gasping with anguish, and glaring at the Kid, while the punchers roared.

Esau Shack had knocked down many a man in his time. Knocking down was, however, a new experience for him personally. It was borne in upon his mind that it was a most unpleasant operation.

"You got yours, or do you want some more?" asked the Kid.

Shack caressed his jaw, and growled "Get up, you hobo!"

Shack staggered up.

"Now get out of the bunkhouse!" The skipper did not make another attack. He yearned to plant his fists full in the handsome, sunburnt face, but he did not think of attempting to do so. That one sock-dagger on the jaw had been enough for him. He almost jumped out of the bunkhouse at the Kid's order.

The Rio Kid, smiling, followed him

out. Most of the punchers were at breakfast on the benches outside in the morning sunshine, and they looked at the Kid and his recruit with interest and entertainment. Shack stood with clenched fists and gritting teeth, eyeing the Kid.

"You can shift your bacon and beans," said the Kid. "You've got ten minutes for feed. Make the most of it!"

"I'm going out of here!" shouted the skipper.

"Forget it!"

"You durned, dog-gone puncher—"

The Kid sat down to the trestle table, where the cook piled bacon and flapjacks. He began his breakfast with a hearty appetite.

"You better feed," he said warningly. "When I'm through, I guess I'm putting you through it. If you want your fodder, now's your time."

Esau glanced round him wildly. In the distance was a gate that gave on the trail. With a sudden bound, he started for the gate. Esau was fat, and not very active, but now he put on a very good speed. He had a wild hope of escaping from the clutches of that merry bunch.

Whizz!

A lasso whirled through the air—a fifty-foot rope in the hands of the Rio Kid.

The loop settled over the shoulders of the running man, and he was jerked backwards with the force of his own rush.

His feet left the ground suddenly, and he came down on his back with a mighty thump.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the punchers.

"Ho, ho, ho!" roared Old Man Sampson, looking on from a window in the ranch-house, and holding his sides as he roared.

The Rio Kid stood up and pulled in the rope. He dragged it in with steady, resistless grip, and Captain Shack came rolling and bouncing along the rough ground towards him. In a breathless, spluttering heap the skipper of the Pond Lily reached the bench, where he lay gasping. The Kid sat down again to his breakfast, smiling at the enraged seaman.

"I guess you ain't hitting the horizon yet yet, feller!" he drawled. "Say, you want to feed? You ain't much more time."

"If I had a gun—" growled the skipper, as he picked himself up in a breathless and dizzy state.

"You had the gun on that shebang of yours, and I had to dance to your tune," said the Kid grimly. "Now I've got the gun, feller, and you're sure lucky that I don't let daylight right through your carcass. Sit on that bench and feed, afore I take the quilt to you agin."

The captain collapsed on the bench and fed obediently. He was learning obedience.

The Kid left him feeding, and walked away to the corral.

Shack cast a glance round, but half a dozen punchers were in sight, and he had had enough of being roped in by a riata. He stayed where he was.

The Kid came back, leading a horse, already saddled and bridled. Kindly, he had picked out the quietest animal the horse-wrangler could find for him. But no cow-pony was remarkable for quietness, especially to a man that couldn't ride.

"You ready, feller?" asked the Kid.

"I ain't getting on that beast," said Captain Shack huskily.

"I guess you are."

"I tell you I can't ride!" shrieked the skipper.

"Well, I couldn't do any of the durned things you wanted me to do on your outfit," said the Kid, "and what did I get? I guess you remember—and you're going to get the same if you don't back that pony."

"I—I can't—"

Crack! rang the Kid's quirt, and the skipper gave a yell of agony. But as he hopped away from the quirt he hopped also away from the horse. Went the cross-trees of the schooner had been to the Kid, the saddle of a cow-pony was to the seafaring man. He dared not make the attempt, especially as he caught a wicked gleam in the cow-pony's eyes, and saw the ears turned back.

"Sam, feller, hold that cayuse," said the Kid. "Jeez, you goun' to lend a hand helpin' that mosshead on the critter?"

"You bet!" grinned Darstow. And he grasped the fat skipper in his powerful hands.

"Let up!" shrieked Shack. "I ain't going aboard, I tell you."

But he went aboard, plumped into the saddle by the grinning foreman. Then he contrived to get his feet into the stirrups and to get hold of the reins. His face streamed with perspiration, white with terror. Round him the punchers gathered, looking on and roaring with laughter. This was the best joke the bunch had ever known.

"Stick on that cayuse, feller," said the Kid. "You are will get hurt if you fall off! Ride, cowboy, ride!"

He cracked his quirt, and the cow-pony started into action.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Breaking in!

"RIDE him!" roared the punchers. "Ride, cowboy, ride!" yelled Old Man Sampson from his window, his cheeks streaming with tears of merriment.

Captain Shack knew as much about riding, as Rio Kid knew about boxing the compass or steering a course by the binnacle card. At the first jump of the cow-pony, he let the reins go flying and grasped the saddle with both hands, digging his knees into the pony's flanks, and holding on for dear life.

"Ride him!" shrieked the outfit, in great glee.

A less good-natured galoot than the Kid would have picked out a buck-jumper for the skipper. In which case Shack certainly would not have escaped without broken bones, and possibly not without a broken neck.

But that cow-pony, though the quietest animal in charge of the Sampson wrangler, seemed the wildest of buck-jumpers to the unhappy skipper.

Captain Shack could have kept his feet on a deck slanting at an angle of forty-five, in a fierce gale in the Gulf. But keeping his seat on that jumping cow-pony was a different matter.

The cow-pony excited by the shouts of laughter and the jeers of the punchers, and realising that he had a man on his back who could not handle him, started and capered.

A buck-jumper would have thrown the skipper in a few seconds, and probably fallen on him or trampled him. As it was, he contrived to hold on to the back of the chosen animal.

But how he held on he never knew,

At one moment the cow-pony reared on hind legs; at another moment his nose touched the ground as his heels dug into the air.

Gripping the saddle firmly, digging his knees into the flanks, the skipper hung on wildly.

After exerting for a time, the cow-pony made a sudden rush for the gate, as if to leap it and gallop down the trail.

At the gate he came to a sudden stop, standing motionless, his forefeet planted firmly on the earth, his head down. That sudden stop was quite unexpected on the part of the skipper. He shot over the horse's head like a bullet from a gun.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came in a roar as he flew over the gate and dropped with a splash into the trail outside.

The horse lifted his head, blinked at him, and trotted back to the corral. The Kid raised no hand to stop him. He was doubled up with merriment, like the rest of the bunch.

Captain Shack sat up dizzily in the trail. For some moments it seemed to him that it was the end of the world, and that the universe was falling in fragments about him.

"I guess this hyer circus is wasting time," said Jeff Barstow at last; and the chuckling bunch dispersed to their various duties. The Kid went down to the gate and opened it, and called the skipper in. The crack of his quirt was enough to make Shack hurry.

"Beans, old hoss," called out the Kid, to the cook, who was grinning from the door of the chuck-house. "I guess I got to hit the trail, and that new man of mine ain't learned to ride yet, darn his boots, and he ain't no ornery use on the range. I guess I'll lend him to you for the day, if you'll see that he don't vamoose the ranch."

Beans snickered gleefully. "Now you're talking," he said. "I can do with a man to help in the chuck-house, as I've told the Old Man more'n once. I guess if he tries to light out of this shebang I'll take a saucepan to him. Hyer, feller, come in and make yourself useful."

"You—you—you—you swabs!" yelled the wretched skipper. "Do you reckon I'm going to work in the cook's galley?"

"I don't rightly know what a galley is, feller," said the cook, staring at him. "This hyer is a chuck-house, if you don't know. Where in thunder was you brought up if you don't know a chuck-house when you see one?"

"I guess he'll learn, Beans," said the Kid. "I'll sure leave him with you, and don't let him laze."

"I should sumble!" said the cook.

The Kid walked away for his Mustang. He was to ride range that day, and though he had intended to take Esau riding range with him, the skipper's exploits with the cow-pony showed that that was impracticable so far. But the ranch cook was glad of help in the chuck-house. There was an immense stack of crockery to be washed, a task at which Beans, like all ranch cooks, grumbled. Now he had a washer-up at his orders, and he was highly pleased. While the Rio Kid rode away from the ranch with the punchers Beans pointed out to the skipper what he was to do, receiving in response a glare that it looks could have killed, would have laid the cook dead on the floor of the chuck-house. Beans being quite impervious to looks, however, only grinned.

"You want to get going, feller," he said. "I sure reckon I ain't carrying any passengers in this chuck-house. Go to it."

Captain Shack drew a deep, gasping breath and got going. All through the morning he washed dishes and plates and pots, and then he was set to scouring pots and pans. Once, when he turned a desperate eye on a cook's knife on the table, Beans caught up a saucepan and dealt him a terrific crash on the side of the head, simply as a warning. It was all the warning that the skipper of the Pond Lily needed. After that he was ready to feed from the cook's hand.

"I guess," said the ranch cook, "that you're going to learn to jump on this ranch, feller! You sure are going to learn to jump! Now get down to that stove, and don't you forget that if you leave a spot of grease on it I'll take the saucepan to you!"

Beans sat and smoked a cigar while the skipper worked. Beans' idea was to cut the alfalfa while it was dry; in other words, to make hay while the sun

shone. He had a "help" for only one day, and he made the most of him. That day the chuck-house and everything it contained had such a cleaning and a scouring as it had never known before since the Sampson Ranch had had a local habitation and a name.

When the Rio Kid rode in at sundown he looked round for the skipper of the Pond Lily.

"You ain't let that scallywag beat in, Beans?" he exclaimed.

Beans chuckled. "I sure ain't," he answered. "I reckon that that scallywag couldn't beat in none, if there was a cougar a-biting him behind. Look! See?"

"Oh, gophers!" said the Kid, as the cook pointed out the new recruit.

Esau Shack, worn out with toil, was lying in the grass beside the bunkhouse, half-asleep, and wholly exhausted. He was still thick with grease and dirt, too tired even to think of washing. He stared up at the Kid with lack-lustre eyes as the young puncher came over and stood looking down at him.

"Hyer, hombre, I got time now to put you wise about riding a brone," said the Kid.

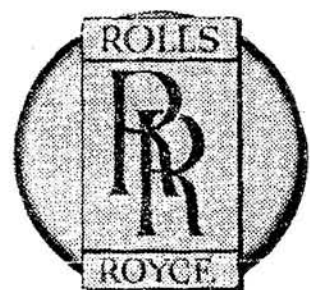
The skipper only groaned. Esau Shack was in no state for a lesson in riding. The Kid considerably put it off till the morrow, and let him lie. Shack, acting in every limb, lay in the grass and groaned. He was scheduled for three weeks on the ranch, and of twenty-one days only one day had passed so far. There were twenty more to come, and the skipper shuddered at the prospect. If ever a ruffianly skipper repented of having shanghaied a man Esau Shack repented now, now that he was shanghaied in his turn. He lay and listened to the buzz from the bunkhouse, and to the Kid's cheery voice singing a cowboy song, and groaned—and groaned.

THE END.

(But Captain Shack is determined to get away from his captor at all costs. How will he accomplish that difficult task? See next Tuesday's thrilling long Western yarn, entitled: "THE NEW RECRUIT OF THE SAMPSON'S RANCH!")

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The New Recruit of SAMPSON'S RANCH!

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THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Sharp Shooting!

SETH SMITH, town marshal of San Pedro, rode up the trail to the Sampson Ranch in the sunny morning.

Two or three punchers eyed him as he reached the gate, and Jeff Barstow, the foreman of the ranch, called out gruffly:

"You, Smith! What you doin' here?"

The Rio Kid, who was talking to Old Man Sampson in the porch of the ranch-house, glanced round.

He smiled at sight of the marshal of San Pedro.

"I guess that galoot has come huntin' for trouble," he remarked, and the Kid hitched his holster a little nearer to his hand.

The Old Man gave Seth a glare under his grizzled brows. San Pedro, a few miles from the ranch, on the shore of the Mexican Gulf, was populated chiefly by cow-thieves, maverick hunters, and boot-leg smugglers, and no galoot from San Pedro was "persona grata" at the ranch. So the Old Man scowled blackly at Seth, as he appeared in the distance.

"If that pesky scallywag is honin' for trouble," said the Old Man, "he will sure get all he wants at this ranch, and some more!"

"He sure will!" agreed the Kid.

Seth stooped to open the gate, and pushed through, before he replied to Jeff Barstow's question. "Seth pushed

two guns, and he was said to be the toughest man in the tough gang at San Pedro. But his manner was civil on the Sampson Ranch. A bolder man than Seth Smith would have been needed to come to the Sampson Ranch "a-shooting."

"I guess I want to see Mr. Sampson. Barstow," he said. "I've sure got business with him."

"You ain't come to tell us you've found them cows that are missin' from our range?" asked the foreman sarcastically.

"I guess I don't know nothin' about your missin' cows," said Seth, shaking his head.

"Sure!" agreed Jeff, still sarcastic. "You sure wouldn't know a thing. But I reckon you've eatin' beef while they're missin'."

The marshal of San Pedro made no reply to that. He rode on towards the house, and slipped from his horse in front of the porch, where the Old Man sat in his rocker and the Kid leaned against a post.

"Mornin'!" said Seth.

Grunt! from the Old Man.

"I ain't come here rootin' up trouble," said Seth. "Your outfit have sure been making things lively down in the town; but—"

"Oh, can it!" interrupted the Old Man. "We've sure been shootin' up the town because my partner, Kid Carfax here, was kidnaped and shanghaied on board a dumped dog-raced ship. And if you hadn't a hand in it, Seth Smith,

you order stopped it, you being town marshal. And if the Kid hadn't come back safe and sound, like he did, I reckon we wouldn't have left one board stickin' to another in that burg, and you can bank on that!"

"Well, he's come back, all O.K.," said the marshal, with a glance at the Kid.

"I sure have," assented the Kid. "Them jaspers that got me on their schooner was mighty glad to see the last of me, too?"

"That's what I come about," said Seth. "It seems you got hold of a gun, and made the skipper turn back to San Pedro, and the schooner's anchored in the inlet this minute."

The Kid nodded and smiled. Now that his enforced voyage on the salt water was over, the recollection of it rather amused the Kid. He had had a rough time as a shanghaied "hand" on board Captain Shack's schooner; but there was no doubt that the men who had shanghaied him; had had a rougher time.

"I've seen the mate of that packet," went on the marshal. "Galoot named Starbey. You shot him up, Carfax."

"That's a cinch," agreed the Kid. "He pulled a gun on me, and I let him have his pronto."

"Well, he's absquatulated now," said Seth. "He figured that what he wanted most was a doc, and he's got on a bigger to run down to Galveston to get patched up."

"He sure wanted some patchin'."

agreed the Kid, and the Old Man chuckled.

"And the crew have all deserted," went on Seth. "There ain't a galoot left on the schooner now."

The Kid laughed. "Now, it 'pears," said the marshal, "that when you got ashore, young Carfax, you took the captain with you—Captain Shack. Sort of joke, I reckon. You got him here?"

"Hyer, or byersabouts, assented the Kid.

"Well, a joke's a joke," said Seth. "But you want to hand over that sailor-man, Carfax. That schooner sure has got to be looked after. I guess she'll be looted from end to end if she stays empty at her anchor. She'll likely be roped in by some gang of thieves, and took away in the night."

"Likely enough," said the Kid. "Plenty of thieves at San Pedro—though the biggest of 'em ain't to home at present."

The marshal flushed.

"Meanin'?" he snorted.

"You!" said the Kid cheerfully.

The Marshal of San Pedro drew a deep breath. He had shot men for much less than that in his time. But he did not reach for a gun now. He was in the enemy's country. But that was not all. The Sampson bunch would not have interfered in a fair break, man to man. But the Kid, boy as he looked, was not a man the marshal wanted to pull a gun on.

Kidnapped, and carried on board the schooner Pond Lily, the Kid had handled the crew of that vessel, and forced the skipper to run back to Texas and land him there. The galoot who had done that was a galoot whom the San Pedro marshal could respect, and

"Your mistake," said the Kid coolly. "That darned skipper as you call him, kidnapped me on his ship, and I was sure handled rough to make a scoundrel of me. I've got him in his turn, and I'm going to make a cow-puncher of him. I ain't through with him yet."

"Oh, shucks!" said the marshal, grinning for a moment. "A joke's a joke; but I stand for the law. You got to let that man go."

The Kid snapped his fingers.

"That for the law you stand for, Seth Smith," he answered. "You want to stand for the law, you better get busy stoppin' that shanghai game at San Pedro, not to mention cow-stealin' and smugglin' hooch. There's a darned lot to keep you busy without worryin' any over Captain Shack."

"You won't hand him over?"

"Nope!"

"Not on your life!" said Old Man Sampson emphatically. "That pesky rube kidnapped my pardner; and now my pardner's got him by the short hairs. Ain't that fair play?"

The marshal hesitated. In the pause that followed a man darted out of the bunkhouse, and ran towards the spot.

"Geel! There's Shack!" exclaimed the Old Man.

The skipper, who had shanghai'd the Rio Kid, and had been shanghai'd in his turn, paused breathlessly up.

"You got to get me out of this, Seth Smith!" he gasped. "I reckon you've come hyer for me. You got to get me back to San Pedro."

A gun leaped into the Kid's hand.

"You, Seth Smith, beat it!" he said tersely. "You've said your piece, and now it's you for the trail. Beat it!"

Seth Smith hesitated. He hated to take orders from any man, and he was strongly tempted to pull a gun and take his chance with the Kid.

"Forget it, feller," drawled the Kid.

"I should sure hate to spill your juice, but you got to beat it. If you pull that

gun, hombre, they'll want a new

marshal down at San Pedro!"

Seth, gritting his teeth, put his foot

in the stirrup.

"You ain't going without me?"

roared Sean Shack.

The marshal made no reply.

"He sure is, feller," said the Kid

pleasantly. "And you get back to the

bunkhouse, pronto. You're a puncher

now, and under orders, and you want to

remember it."

The skipper raved.

"Seth, you darned white-livered

skunk, are you going to let a boy bull

doze you?" he yelled.

"He sure is," said the Kid. "He's a

wise man, and knows what's good for

his health."

Seth's foot dropped from the stirrup.

He spun round like lightning, pulling a

gun as he spun. Almost in the same

movement he fired.

But quick as he was the Rio Kid was

quicker. The report of his six-gun was

a second before Seth's. The marshal of

San Pedro staggered against his horse,

his bullet flying away over the ranch-

house.

"Drop that gun!"

The Rio Kid's voice was sharp with

vengeance.

The marshal's gun clanged to the

ground. A crimson stream ran over his

hand, and he stared stupidly at his

wrist, where the Kid's bullet had struck.

"You darned moshead!" snapped the

Kid. "I reckon I've a hunch to put

the next through your cabeza. Beat it

fore I make it last sickness for you!"

The marshal without a word, clambered

on his horse and rode away. He

had been tempted to try his luck at

sharp-shooting with the Kid, and he

repented it. He disappeared at a gallop

down the trail, followed by a derisive

yell from the punchers.

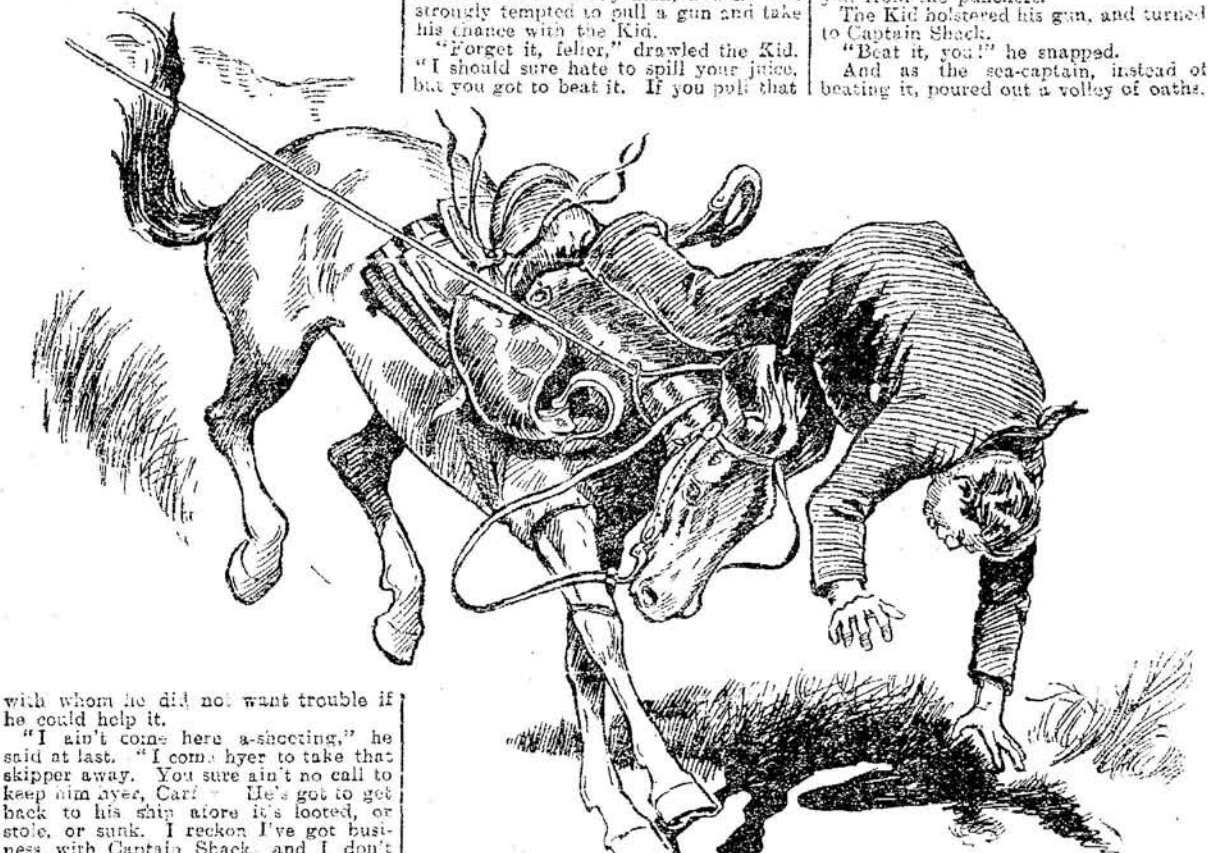
The Kid holstered his gun, and turned

to Captain Shack.

"Beat it, you!" he snapped.

And as the sea-captain, instead of

beating it, poured out a volley of oaths,



with whom he did not want trouble if he could help it.

"I ain't come here a-shooting," he said at last. "I come hyer to take that skipper away. You sure ain't no call to keep him hyer, Carl. He's got to get back to his ship afore it's looted, or stole, or sunk. I reckon I've got business with Captain Shack, and I don't stand for seeing him roped in this-a-way. You don't want the feller hyer."

the Kid grasped him by the collar, swung him round, and planted a cowboy boot on his trousers. There was a roar of laughter from the punchers as the skipper flew.

He rolled on the ground, and then, picking himself up, ran for the bunkhouse like a rabbit for its burrow.

The Kid grinned, and turned back to Old Man Sampson.

"I guess we're through with Seth Smith," he remarked. "He won't use that gun-hand of his'n again for a month of Sundays."

"You're sure lightning on the shoot, Kid," said the Old Man. "Whar you learn to handle a six-gun that-a-way?"

"Oh, I reckon I was born with a six-gun in my hand," said the Kid, laughing; and he turned the talk to cows.

Old Man Sampson did not know that Kid Carfax, his partner in the ranch, had once been known as the Rio Kid, the outlaw of Texas, and the Kid certainly did not intend to tell him.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Lost—and Found!

NIGHT on the ranch-lands.

Out on the prairie, night-riders watched the sleeping herds. Lights were out in the ranch-house and in the bunkhouse. In the chuckhouse, Beans, the cook, slept and dreamed of the hotel he was going to open some day at San Antonio. In the bunkhouse the punchers probably did not dream at all. Tired with the day's hard riding on the range, they slept soundly, the Rio Kid as soundly as any. There was one who did not sleep, and that was the Rio Kid's recruit, the sea-captain, who, on the principle that sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander, was being forcibly turned into a cow-puncher.

Captain Shack was growing desperate. For three weeks, the Kid had announced, he was going to keep the kid-napping skipper on the ranch. Two days had passed—days of torment to the skipper of the Pond Lily. He had hoped that his friends in San Pedro would do something for him, but the visit of Seth—and his departure—showed that that was a broken reed to lean upon. Possibly the skipper was getting some insight now into the feelings of a shafted man, undergoing the process of breaking-in on his scowmer. But if the lesson was a valuable one to Esau Shack, it was not agreeable. On the morning the Kid was going to take him on the range, to get instruction in the business of punching cows, and the mere prospect of being forced to mount a horse was horrifying to the skipper. Long he lay in his bunk listening to the steady breathing round him, and at last he was sure that all were sleeping.

He crept from his bunk at last.

He was dressed, and ready to go, if the way was open. In the darkness he picked his way cautiously towards the door. He lurched on a bench, and stepped, and a deep voice came from Santa Fe Sam's bunk, inquiring who was up. The skipper stood quite still for a long time, trembling.

But at last he groped on to the door again. It was not fastened, and he opened it softly and stepped out of the bunkhouse.

He closed the door after

him, and stood blinking round him in the darkness.

It was only a few miles to San Pedro, and on the sea the blackest night would not have beaten him. But on land it was a different matter. On the schooner the Kid had been unhandy, but he assuredly had not been so unhandy as the sea-captain on the ranch. The corral was at hand; if he had thought of escaping on a horse; but Esau Shack was thinking of anything but that. The further he kept away from horses the better he liked it. In a glimmer of stars he made his way to the gate, clambered over it, and dropped into the trail outside.

The trail from the gate was well marked, and any puncher on the ranch could have followed it with his eyes shut. But Captain Shack could not follow it with his eyes open.

If he followed that well-tramped trail he knew that it would lead him to the bank of the creek, which he had only to follow to reach San Pedro and his schooner there. But in less than five minutes Captain Shack had wandered from the trail, and was tramping blindly on the unmarked prairie.

The prairie, which at a distant view looked like level grassland, was rough and bumpy on closer acquaintance. The skipper stumbled into hollows, and tripped over ridges, muttered imprecations accompanying every stumble and fall. He tramped and tripped, hoping that he was hitting the direction of San Pedro, but quite aware that he was hopelessly lost, and that only chance could set him right.

Suddenly from the darkness came the glaze of eyes fixed on him, and Shack stopped, his heart palpitating. Thoughts of cougars, of panthers, of wolves and coyotes, flitted through his scared mind as he gazed at those eyes that glistened in the faint starlight. He began to back away, stumbled over a gopher-hole, and fell on his back, gasping.

A gigantic shadow loomed before him; the eyes came closer. A yell of terror broke from the captain.

It startled the fearsome bear that had terrified him. He heard a moaning sound and a sound of retreating hoofs. It was borne in upon his mind that it was a cow he had encountered.



THE RUNAWAY! The captain tramped on over the unmarked, dark prairie, stumbling into hollows and tripping over ridges. He did not know where he was going—but anywhere was better than the Sampson Ranch, and the Kid!

(See Chapter 2.)

The stars were paling now. Dawn was not far away. He had to get off the Sampson ranch before daylight. With weary limbs he tramped on, desperate. A murmuring, lowing sound came to his ears; it seemed to come from all round him. He knew now that it was cows, and realised that he had run into a herd. Huge figures rose from the grass around him; a soft rattle bumped into his back, and he staggered forward. Another cow bumped into him, and he rolled in the grass, sprawling against a sleeping cow that started up in surprise.

He scrambled wildly to his feet. Cows and cows and cows, innumerable cows, loomed in the darkness, stirring uneasily. He stumbled and grooped this way and that, desperately seeking to escape, but the cows seemed numberless. How long it was before he scrambled outside that herd the wretched skipper never knew. When at last he was clear of the cows there was a glimmer of dawn in the eastern sky, and as the light cleared he stared round him with haggard eyes. How many miles he had covered, in that long, black night, he could not guess; but he was assured that he was a long way from the ranch now, in whatever direction he might have gone. And when, in the dawning sunrise, he caught sight of a group of buildings in the distance, he could have whooped for joy.

It was a ranch of some sort. Any place where men habitually was welcome to the man who was lost on the prairie. Whatever place it was, he would get succour there—some kind of a vehicle to take him to San Pedro; he had plenty of money in his pockets. He saw a tramped trail that led to a gate, and he followed it hopefully. He opened the gate, and tramped on up the path to the ranch-house before him, sinking with fatigue, but hopeful of help. The ranch-house door was open. Captain Shack limped through the porch and entered. He sank down on the first seat he saw and gasped.

"Say, you!"

A sharp voice hailed him.

It was a voice he had heard before.

Captain Shack started up. Old Man Sampson stood before him, staring at him in surprise.

The skipper gazed at him, speechless.

He was, he felt certain, at least ten miles from the Sampson ranch. Yet it was the grizzled Old Man who stood there staring at him. It did not occur to him then that he had wandered in a circle, as a man lost on the prairie invariably does, and reached, at last, the point he had started from.

"Say, you!" snapped Old Man Sampson. "What you don't hyer? You've sure t'arned out airy!"

The skipper gasped. "What—what—what place is this?"

"Loco—plumb loco! You been two days on this hyer ranch, and you don't know where you are! Search me!"

The Old Man stepped to the door.

"Hi y!" he roared. "Kid, you better watch out over this hyer man of yours! He's loco!"

"This—this—this is the Sampson ranch!" groaned the skipper.

"What in thunder did you think it was?" started the Old Man.

The skipper only groaned.

Old Man Sampson stared at him, and then, as he understood, he burst into a roar.

"Haw, haw, haw! You blamed tenderfoot! You been beatin' is, and lost your way, and wandered back! Haw, haw, haw!"

Doubled up with merriment, the Old Man staggered out of the porch. The Rio Kid came over from the bunk-house.

"Seen that man o' mine?" he asked. "I guess he's lovin'ed in the dark, though I reckon he ain't got far on foot. I'll sure run him down."

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared the Old Man. "He's here. He's too fond of this byer ranch to go. Haw, haw, haw! He jest wandered back in his own tracks the dog-goned tenderfoot! Haw, haw, haw!"

"Oh, sho!" ejaculated the Kid, and he joined in the Old Man's roar of laughter.

Captain Shack staggered back to the bunk-house, with a touch of the Kid's quirt to help him along. He stumbled to his bunk and collapsed there. He lay gasping, indifferent to the roars of laughter from the punchers. The Kid looked down on him with a grin.

"You sure are some tenderfoot," he said. "I reckon if I'd been a mosshead like you, feller, I'd never have got quit of that schooner of yours."

"Let up!" groaned the skipper.

"Dog-gone you, let up, and let a man get back to his ship!"

The Kid grinned, and shook his head.

"You didn't let up any when you had me on your ship," he answered. "It's you for cow punching, Shack!"

And the Kid went cheerily to breakfast, leaving the weary skipper to groan.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Riding Range!

THE next few days were dismal days for the shanghaied skipper on the Sampson ranch.

How he got through them he hardly knew.

Men who had been shanghaied on board his schooner had had to get through the dismal days somehow. And so did the skipper of the Pond Lily.

He had learned to sit a horse by this time. His education in riding had been rather painful, consisting chiefly of falls from the back of the steed, tumbling over its head, or sliding over its tail. But at last, in sheer desperation, the sea captain had learned to keep on the back of a cayuse, and even to steer it to port and starboard, as he expressed it. The Kid cheerfully commended him.

"We'll make a puncher of you yet," he said encouragingly. "You've got a whole piece to learn; but you're sure learning."

"You wait till I get hold of a gun, you durned landshark!" said Shack



THE "WORM" TURNS! Captain Shack approached nearer to the Rio Kid. The gun in his hand was levelled steadily, and the Kid held up his hands, as ordered. The captain's eyes gloated at him. "My turn now, you pesky landshark!" he growled. (See Chapter 4.)

savegely. "I'll show you I don't need to learn handling a gun."

The Kid laughed.

"I guess I'm handling the gun, jest at present, feller," he said. "And I reckon you'd better watch out for it, if you figure on trying to get away on a cayuse, now you can sit one. You're coming on the range to-day to punch cows. I reckon it's time you began carrying your fodder."

"And what's happening to my schooner all this time?" hissed the skipper of the Pond Lily.

"I guess that ain't worrying me any. You wasn't worrying a whole lot about my ranch when you had me on that pesky schooner."

After breakfast that day the Kid and Santa Fe Sam saddled up to ride, and the skipper was ordered to ride with them. He clambered on the back of the broncho assigned to him; a good deal as if he were climbing a fence, amid loud chuckles from the punchers. "You've sure got some rider there, Kid," chuckled Jeff Barstow. "He would sure make the folks sit up and howl in a rucio."

"He surely would," grinned the Kid. "But he's learning. Every time he falls off he sure learns something. Hold on to the reins, you galoot, and let the hoss' neck alone. Hit the trail."

The two punchers rode away with the skipper, a grinning crowd staring after them till they were out of sight. The skipper rode like a sack of alfalfa; but, at least, he was keeping on the broncho's back. The punchers struck westward, and miles of grass ran under the horses' feet. A bunch of cows that had wandered into the chaparral had to be rounded up, and on the edge of the chaparral the Kid and Santa Fe Sam separated.

Santa Fe Sam was lost to sight in a few minutes behind a fold of the plain, and the skipper remained alone with the Kid. The Kid struck into the chaparral by a winding path, signing to Shack to follow him.

The skipper hesitated. Away to the east beyond the rolling plains shone the blue of the Gulf of Mexico. Now that he could stick on a horse the skipper was tempted to ride for his freedom.

The Kid, apparently nothing doubting that his "man" was obediently following, went at a canter into the path, and disappeared in the chaparral.

Shack's heart beat fast. It was his chance at last!

Whether he could stick on a horse when it galloped he was not sure; but he took the chance. He swung the broncho round, headed for the distant sea, and spurred. The horse broke into a gallop, and the skipper held on for dear life as it raced across the prairie.

Thud, thud, thud! There was a beat of horse's hoofs behind him.

Shack did not venture to glance back. He knew that he would fall off if he did. But he knew that the Rio Kid had discovered his flight, and was riding behind in pursuit.

The thought of the lasso came into his mind. He had been roped in once before by the Kid. He bent as low as he could to elude the circling rope if it came.

Whiz!

The riata flew; but it was over the broncho's head that the loop dropped and tightened.

The broncho knew the rope. He stopped dead in his tracks to avoid being dragged over. Captain Shack shot over his head like an arrow from a bow.

The Rio Kid rode up, smiling cheerily. He pulled in his mustang, and sat smiling down at the dizzy, gasping skipper.

"I guess I'm holding your hoss while you climb on, feller," drawled the Kid. "I don't want you to keep me waiting."

Shack staggered to his feet. The Kid's quirt cracked like a pistol-shot. "Pronto!" he snapped.

Shack climbed wearily on the broncho again. The Kid jerked away his rope and coiled it.

"I ain't roping you any more, feller," he remarked. "Next time you hit the horizon you'll hear my gun talk. Chew on that!"

Captain Shack rode into the chaparral with the Kid. He was not thinking of hitting the horizon any more.

All through the morning the Kid and his man hunted through the chaparral for the lost cows, but they were not found, and soon after noon the Kid camped for feeding. Under his instructions his recruit tethered the horses with the trail ropes, gathered wood in the thickets, and built a fire.

But it was the Kid who cooked the flap-jacks, fried the bacon, and boiled the coffee, the skipper watching him silently. As he sat down to the meal, the Kid hung his gun-belt on a pecan, and the skipper's eyes gleamed as he noted it. Once he had a gun in his hand—! On board the schooner, the Kid had turned the tables on the kid-nappers, since he had got hold of a gun, and if Shack succeeded in getting a gun, it was not in his thoughts to "hold up" the Kid merely, it was in his mind to shoot the boy puncher dead in his tracks. The Kid's vengeance on the skipper who had shanghaied him was playful, but Shack was thinking of a more deadly vengeance, if only once he gained the upper hand.

And the Kid, who had always seemed so wary, seemed now quite off his guard.

He leaned back against a tree, apparently forgetful of the gun-belt that hung on the pecan three or four yards away.

Shack ate his meal, his heart thumping. If he could get between the Kid and his guns—!

The two walnut-butted guns, so deadly in the Kid's hands were in the holsters attached to the belt. The Kid, unarmed sat finishing his flap-jacks by the camp-fire. Shack rose to his feet, making his manner as casual as he could, and strolled a few paces. The Kid did not seem to guess the purport of his movement.

The skipper, almost trembling with eagerness backed further from the fire, as if to lean on a tree. The Kid did not glance at him. Shack's hand, groping behind him, felt the gun-belt hanging on the pecan. His fingers closed almost convulsively on the notched butt of a gun, and he jerked it from the holster.

The next instant, his finger was on the trigger, and the revolver was levelled at the Rio Kid.

"Hands up, you!" roared Shack. His eyes blazed over the levelled six-gun.

"Oh, gee whiz!" ejaculated the Kid. And he put his hands up.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Kid Loses His Man!

CAPTAIN SHACK approached nearer to the Rio Kid.

His eyes were gleaming with triumph now.

The gun in his hand was levelled steadily, bearing full upon the Kid's cool, handsome face.

The Kid, without having risen from the log on which he was seated, held his hands above his head, as ordered.

Shack's eyes gleamed at him, over the revolver.

"My turn now!" he snarled. "You sure got the drop, feller," assented the Kid, easily.

"You dog-goned cow-puncher," said Shack, between his teeth. "You pesky lano-shark. I've got you now. Move a finger, and I'll drive a bullet through your brain."

"I ain't moving any finger," protested the Kid. "Ain't I putting up my hands like a good little man, just like you told me?"

The skipper came closer. Six feet from the Kid he halted, to be safe from any sudden, desperate spring. He had learned to know the Kid by this time!

"You shanghaied me, you dog-goned puncher," he hissed. "You figured it was fun roping in a skipper, and making a puncher of him, say?"

"You sure shanghaied me first, THE POPULAR—No. 525.

feller," said the Kid, mildly. "Don't you good turn deserve another?"

"If we was at San Pedro now," snarled Shack. "I'd sure drive you on board my schooner at the muzzle of this gun, and I'd haze you and break you in, god-damn your hide. But I guess I'd never get you to San Pedro from here."

"I guess not," agreed the Kid. "I'd sure bet a heap of dollars that you never would, feller."

"You got any prayers to say?" demanded Shack, his eyes gleaming. "You're for it, you damned puncher! I guess you ain't coming after me again when I start a course for the coast. I guess you're getting yours."

"Oh, shack," drawled the Kid. "You ain't shooting down a galoot without a gun in his hand. You sure ain't so pizen as that, feller!"

Shack laughed savagely.

"Forget it," he jeered. "You're goin' to get yours, and you're goin' to get it now!"

And taking steady aim at the cool face before him, of the man whose hands were held up, the skipper pulled the trigger.

Click!

The skipper spat out an astonished oath.

The Rio Kid still sat there, on the log, his hands held up, his face calm and smiling. The skipper pulled the trigger again.

Click!

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Rio Kid. "You damned loosed tenderfoot, do you figure I'd have let you get a grip on that gun, if I hadn't taken out the cartridges, you mookhead?"

The skipper uttered a yell of rage. The apparent carelessness of the puncher was explained now. The revolver was unloaded.

The Kid dropped his hands, and leaped to his feet. In desperate rage the skipper sprang at him, ofbbing the gun. The Kid's quirt whipped up, and struck it from his hand, with a blow on the wrist that made him reel with pain.

The next moment, the heavy butt of the quirt stretched Esau Shack in the grass.

The Rio Kid stood over him, still smiling, but his smile was grim now.

"You damned polcat!" said the Kid. "I took out them cartridges while you was buildin' the fire, you loosed boob. I reckoned I'd string you along, and see how you shaped. Now you're goin' to get yours."

He gripped the handle of the quirt, and the thong sang in the air. It descended on Esau Shack, lash on lash. All the skipper, writhing under the lashes, yelled for mercy.

"I guess that's yours, you pesky hobo," said the Kid, putting the quirt under his arm. "Now loose them critters, and get ready to hit the trail. Pronto, you sneakin' coyote."

The Kid reloaded the guns, and bucked on his broncho. Shack clambered on his broncho, and followed the Kid without a word.

It was near sundown when an echoing "Hi-yi" announced Santa Fe Sam. Sam was on the track of the lost cows, and before dark, the long-horns were driven out of the chaparral, and the punchers headed them for home. Esau Shack, clinging to the back of his broncho, rode with them. He heard the Kid relate the episode in the chaparral to his comrades, and Santa Fe Sam chuckled, but he turned a grim look on the shanghaied skipper.

"I guess that galoot's pizen, Kid!" he said. "If I was you, I'd sure string

him up to a cottonwood on the end of a riara!"

"He's sure pizen!" said the Kid, with a nod. "I reckon I'm through with him. He's too pizen to keep on the ranch, and I'm sure going to take him out on the prairie and lose him!"

Esau started, and listened intently. "What you reckon happens to a tenderfoot, Sam, s'posin' he's lost in the middle of the prairie?" asked the Kid. "Left without a carcase."

"I reckon he peters out," answered Sam. "I'd sure rather string him up, Kid, or let daylight thrash his cabeza. A dog-goned tenderfoot like that would sure die of hunger and thirst if he was lost on the plains."

"I guess that's his funeral, not mine!" said the Kid.

"It's your say-so," agreed Sam.

And the punchers rode on towards the ranch. Little as Captain Shack loved the ranch, he was anxious to arrive there now. The boss, the other punchers, surely never would allow the Kid to carry out that fearful scheme of vengeance that he had threatened.

The skipper's face was white, and the cold sweat dotted his brow. His one experience of wandering lost on the prairie told him what would happen if he was deliberately led out into the great plains and abandoned there. Even a cow-man, without his horse, would face grim death in such a situation.

In the last gleam of the sun the Sampson ranch came in sight in the distance. The Kid halted and threw his rope over the neck of Captain Shack's broncho.

"Beat it, Sam," he said. "I reckon I'm going back. I'd sure be home this side midnight."

"And that galoot?" asked Sam.

"I reckon he won't," said the Kid coolly. "I'll bring in the loss; but I'm through with this pesky polcat! I'm sure goin' to lose him!"

Santa Fe Sam rode on with the cows; and the Kid turned back, leading Shack's broncho after him with the rope.

The skipper was white with terror.

Darkness fell on the plains, and still the Kid rode on, mile after mile, leading the skipper's horse. Shack pushed closer to him at last, and spoke in a strained, husky voice:

"You ain't meaning it, puncher? You ain't going to maroon me on the plains, without even a horse?"

"I guess I am," answered the Kid.

"It's sure death!" said the skipper.

"That's your funeral!"

The skipper, with a desperate oath, leaped from the broncho's back, and dashed away in the darkness. He had not covered a score of paces when a rope settled round him, and he was dragged back. The noose gripped him, pinning his arms to his sides.

The Kid, with a crack of his quirt, drove the broncho off at a gallop towards the ranch. The horse disappeared with a clatter of hoofs.

"Beat it, you!" said the Kid tersely, and the dragging rope forced the skipper to follow the Kid's mustang.

How many weary miles he covered and in what direction in the darkness, Esau Shack could not guess. Many, many miles, though not so many as it seemed to Esau. Whether the Kid was riding in a line or circle he could not guess, as he stumbled and limped in the track of the mustang. Hour followed hour, and, under the pale glimmer of the stars, the Kid rode remorselessly on, and the wretched skipper stumbled after him.

(Continued on page 27.)

heartiness. "How d'ye do, cap'n? The last time I saw you was at Plymouth, when you were master of the old Collindale."

"Yes, that was a good while back," said Captain Nixon. "I'm still skipper of the same boat, Grell—she's not a bad old tub. Fast and reliable, although she ain't much to look at. I'll back the Collindale to beat many a liner when it comes to speed. Let's have a drink, old mate."

Nixon had plenty of money, it seemed, for he insisted upon paying for the drinks; and Mr. Starkey, for one, had not the slightest objection.

"It's not often we meet, Grell, so we might as well celebrate a bit" went on the skipper jovially. "Why not come aboard the old craft an' have a look round?"

And very shortly afterwards, led by the persuasive tongue of Captain Nixon, Grell accompanied his acquaintance to the wharf. Mr. Starkey hovered in the rear, hoping fervently that he would be allowed aboard.

He was. The trio, after a short delay, climbed the ladder of the steamship Collindale, and descended to the captain's cabin. The boat was not particularly large, and it was certainly not clean. But she looked speedy and businesslike.

The cabin was in a similar condition to the deck—dirty. The atmosphere down there, on that warm evening, was extremely stuffy, and it stank of foul tobacco fumes and whisky.

"Try some o' this, Grell," said the captain genially. "You, too, Starkey. You're Grell's pal, so I reckon you're mine. I never was a man to have a heap of false pride.

"Things ain't goin' so well with you, are they?" asked Nixon, after a while. "You don't seem so prosperous as you used to be, Grell."

"Oh, I'm gettin' on all right," said Grell, gulping down some whisky. "An' I'm all the better for meetin' you, cap'n. An' if I like I dare say I could lay my hands on more wealth than you'll have if you live to be five hundred!"

"You will have your joke," said Nixon, laughing.

"It ain't a joke!" put in Starkey. "It's dead true, cap'n!"

"True?"

"Well, I suppose it is, in a way of speakin'," said Grell. "Y'see, Nixon, I happen to know all about a trip that's just startin'—a trip to Africa. An old gent o' the name of Sir Crawford Grey means to find a treasure what's buried out in the desert. It's worth millions!"

Starkey looked at his friend rather curiously. He hadn't partaken of the whisky so freely as Grell, and he guessed that the influence of the spirit was responsible for this change in Grell's attitude.

"You're pullin' my leg!" said Captain Nixon.

"If you don't choose to believe me, you needn't. I ain't askin' you to," went on Grell, rather thickly. "But that yacht's sailin' either to-morrow mornin' or the day arter. An' when they get out to Africa a party is goin' out into the desert. I know there's a treasure there, because some months ago I was mixed up in the whole business. It's true, Nixon—as true as I'm sittin' here!"

The captain became more attentive.

"You reely mean it?" he asked.

"I do!"

"It sounds a bit tall—"

"I ain't denying it," put in Grell.

"But Sir Crawford's yacht, the Wanderer, is due to sail in a day or two for the port of Agabat, in Africa—"

"By thunder!" interrupted the skipper. "Agabat! Why, that's where this old hooker's bound for, Grell! She's loaded up, an' we're sailin' with the tide to-morrow evenin'!"

"Well, that's a rum coincidence," said Grell. "So you're bound for the same port? When do you reckon to get there?"

"I'll bet fifty dollars we drop anchor days before that steam yacht, anyway," declared Nixon.

"Why don't you tell the cap'n about that locket, Simon?" suggested Starkey.

"Wot locket?"

"Don't you remember? That locket with the Arabic writin'?"

"Oh, yes, o' course!" said Grell. "That's how I got to know, ain't it? You see, Nixon, it was like this 'ere. Some months ago—"

And Grell proceeded to relate the whole episode in Jack Grey's life concerning the gold locket and its secret. His story was something of a rigmarole—owing to his condition—but he managed to make himself clear.

Captain Nixon listened with great interest, and with growing excitement. And when Grell had finished the skipper was looking eager and keen.

"I've heard o' that oasis—El Safra," he said. "It's right out in the desert, an' the niggers out there shun it like pizen. There ain't any water, you see—not wot you could drink, anyway—an' so the place is left deserted. I don't see why we couldn't work the trip, Grell."

"Wot trip?"

"If we get out there first we can get a lot of natives an' bribe 'em. It won't cost much to buy skunks like them," said Nixon. "Then, when Sir Crawford's party goes into the desert, we can ambush the whole bunch."

"Arter they've got the treasure?"

"No; before they get to the oasis."

"But what's the good o' that?"

"Every good," said the skipper.

"We can force them to give us the secret of the treasure—threaten to take their water away, or something. It'll be easy—dead simple. An' it won't cost us hardly a cent."

"It seems good, anyhow," remarked Grell. "But wot about me an' Starkey? Where do we come in?"

The captain rubbed his chin.

"Well, I can't take no passengers—that's against the owners' rules," he said. "But we needn't be afraid of a detail like that. You can sign on as purser if you like—not that we usually carry a purser. An' your pal 'ere can be chief steward for the trip—a soft job, too. It'll be the best way for you, because you'll be paid for goin'."

"I reckon it's a great idea," said Starkey heartily.

"You wouldn't be gettin' a billet like that if it wasn't for this treasure idea," said Captain Nixon grimly. "Wot do you say, Grell?"

"I'm with you, old man—with you right along," said Simon Grell heartily.

And the three shook hands on the bargain.

And then, at one sitting, the complete plan for the trapping of Sir Crawford Grey's party was discussed. The full details could be arranged during the voyage out to Africa.

The compact was sealed.

It looked as if there was trouble ahead of the St. Frank's Adventurers.

THE END.

(There are plenty of thrills in next week's rousing long tale of the St. Frank's Boys' journey to Africa, entitled: "HANDFORTH'S RECORD RIDE!")

The New Recruit of Sampson's Ranch!

(Continued from page 6.)

It was near midnight when the Kid halted and loosed the skipper from the rope.

"I guess it's adios now," he remarked. "I'm through with you, you durned skunk!"

Shack, aching in every limb from fatigue, fell on his knees.

"Don't leave me here!" he yelled. "Don't!"

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid.

He put his mustang to the gallop and vanished into the darkness. The beat of the horse's hoofs died away into silence.

Shack threw himself into the grass and groaned in despair.

Lost—abandoned—on foot in the midst of the trackless prairie. It was death even to a plainsman; and he knew there was no hope for him. He lay in the grass, overwhelmed with terror and despair. It was useless to attempt to find his way anywhere in the waste of darkness and trackless grass; even in the daylight he knew it would be in vain.

He was doomed—doomed to hunger and thirst, to slow but certain death in the vast prairie. He lay through hours of darkness; and when the golden dawn flushed over the prairie he hardly raised his head. Daylight could not save him; he was doomed beyond hope. Hunger and thirst—already, in his scared imagination, he felt the pangs of hunger, the torture of thirst.

He raised his head at last, and struggled to his feet. He cast a despairing glance round him, expecting to see wide, rolling, trackless plains. He started convulsively, and rubbed his eyes. What he saw was not the boundless prairie; it was a collection of shacks and doby houses, scarce a hundred yards away; an inlet of blue water beyond, with a schooner riding at anchor there.

He rubbed his eyes, wondering if his senses were leaving him. He was not on the open prairie at all; he was in an alfalfa field at San Pedro, almost within call of the houses.

Slowly he understood.

"Durn him!" he gasped.

He understood the Kid's joke at last. He had lain all those long hours within a few minutes' walk of the inlet where his own schooner rode.

The Rio Kid was through with him; and he had taken him home. He had spent the night in an alfalfa field, believing it was the boundless prairie.

Captain Shack, gasping with relief, tottered into San Pedro; what time the punchers at the Sampson ranch were turning out of the bunkhouse for breakfast and roaring over the Kid's last jest on the shanghaied skipper.

Whether Captain Shack had learned a lesson or not, certainly he never shanghaied another man at San Pedro. Once he got his schooner out to sea he never touched San Pedro again. He had had more than enough of the Rio Kid and the Sampson bunch.

THE END.

(You will all enjoy reading: "THE MAN FROM FRIO!" next week's roaring long Western yarn, starring the Rio Kid.)

A SHADOW OF THE PAST!

Just when the Rio Kid is beginning to settle down happily to his new life on the Sampson Ranch, and to forge that he is an outlaw, a shadow from the past rolls up to darken his horizon in the shape of—

The MAN from FRIO!

by RALPH REDWAY

A ROUSING LONG COMPLETE WESTERN YARN, FEATURING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW FROM TEXAS!



THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Cow-Thief!

"BRAND-BLOTTIN'!" said Santa Fe Sam.

The Rio Kid nodded.

The two punchers, range-riding on the Sampson Ranch, had drawn rein on a high, grassy ridge.

Ahead of them the rolling prairie stretched, mile on mile, billow on billow of waving grass, backed in the far distance by a dark belt of chaparral, which barred the horizon to the west.

From a dry coulee between the halted riders and the distant chaparral, a thin column of smoke rose against the sky.

Deep in the hollow, hidden from sight, a fire was burning, only that wisp of smoke floating away to the blue sky betraying it. Only the keen eyes of the punchers, accustomed to vast distances, would have detected that thin wisp of smoke. But to the Rio Kid and Santa Fe Sam it told its own tale at a glance.

"The darned scallywag!" said Sam wrathfully. "He's got Sampson cows in that coulee, changin' the brand. Gettin' them ready to drive down to San Pedro I reckon."

"Jest that?" agreed the Kid.

"I reckon we've got the pesky cow-thief dead to rights!" said Santa Fe Sam. "Ride on, Kid!"

He gave his reins a shake.

"Hold in your hosses a piece, feller!" said the Kid, still watching the distant wisp of smoke. "I guess we want to make sure of roundin' up that cuss. We want the cows, and we want the galoot that's blottin' the Sampson brand. He's nearer the chaparral than he is to us, feller; and I guess if he sees us coming he will hit for cover like he was sent for, and we shall lose him."

Santa Fe Sam drew in his broncho again.

"We've got to get him, Kid!" he said. "Old Man Sampson has been lo-in' cows a while heap and I guess you're losin'

'em too, now that you're the Old Man's partner. We got to rope that galoot in."

"We sure have!" agreed the Kid. "But we shan't rope him in by showin' up and givin' him a chance to beat it for the cover of the chaparral. I'm goin' to ride round and cut him off from cover, while you wait here a piece, Sam. Once I'm between him and the timber he can't vamoose—not without walking over my gun."

Santa Fe Sam nodded.

"Beat it, then!" he said.

He dismounted, and sank into the grass with his broncho, lest a watchful eye should be on the look out in the distant coulee. The Rio Kid struck off at right angles from the trail the punchers had been following, and rode to the northward.

The black-muzzled mustang covered the ground at a rapid gallop. Two miles to the north the Kid rode at top speed, and then he swung to the west, and galloped towards the chaparral.

The grass flew under the racing hoofs. Within half a mile of the chaparral the Kid wheeled southward, and rode as rapidly as before.

He drew in his horse at last, between the coulee and the chaparral, cutting off the retreat of the brand-blotter hidden in the hollow.

From the coulee the thin streak of smoke was still rising, showing that the fire was still burning, and the man with the running-iron still at work there.

The Rio Kid had halted on a high knoll, and now he drew his rifle from its leather case, and hoisted his Stetson hat on the muzzle, lifting it high into the air, as a signal to Santa Fe Sam on the other side of the coulee.

That the signal was picked up was soon clear; for Santa Fe Sam remounted his horse and came riding down towards the coulee.

The Kid put his Stetson back on his handsome head, and grinned.

The man in the coulee was fairly caught now.

Santa Fe Sam was riding down on him from the east, and the Rio Kid sat his horse on the western side, cutting him off from retreat to the shadows and tangled paths of the chaparral.

North and south of the coulee stretched the open prairie, for countless miles, and in either direction, if the brand-blotter made a break, he would be in full sight, without a chance of cover; and his capture would only be a matter of hard riding. And anywhere on the open prairie he might ride into members of the Sampson bunch, out riding the ranges.

"I guess we got him!" murmured the Kid; and, with his rifle under his arm, he rode slowly towards the coulee.

Santa Fe Sam reached the hollow first, and disappeared into it, on its eastern side. But only a minute later the Kid was riding down on its western side. Between them rose a column of smoke from the bottom of the hollow, denser now that they were closer to it. Fringes of mesquite hid the unseen cow-thief and the cows till they drew nearer; but suddenly, through an opening of the mesquite, the Kid had a view of him and his work.

A small fire burned on the earth; and near it were three cows, tied up safely with riata. A man in a blue shirt and a Stetson hat was in the act of replacing an iron in the fire to re-heat. It was a running-iron, the usual iron used by a cow-thief to change the brand on a cow. Had the Kid been nearer he would have seen that already, on two of the cows, the big S which was the Sampson brand, had been changed by additional marks into an 8, preceded by a bar, so that the cows bore now the brand of Bar-8. Of the three cows roped in by the thief, two had already been re-branded—and he was heating the iron afresh for the third when the two punchers closed in on him from either end of the coulee.

The Kid smiled grimly.

The man drew the iron from the fire, and bent over the wriggling, numbing cow, and began to trace the false marking. So deeply occupied was he with his work that he did not even glance round him, or he must have seen the punchers, who were now in full sight and he looked up or down the coulee. But in that lonely hollow, fifteen miles from the Sampson ranch, on the borders

of the wild chaparral, no doubt the brand-blotted "Kidd" safe from discovery. Such he would have been, but for the keen eyes that had caught the wisp of smoke trailing skyward.

The Kid was near enough now to pick up the brand the thief was placing on the stolen cows. His smile grew grimace.

"Bar!" he murmured. "Easy work—but different enough to show a cattle-biter that your cows never come from the Sampson ranch. The darned thief! I guess this year is his last brand-blotted year in this ranch."

The Kid's eyes glittered.

In the Rio Grande country, and along the banks of the Pecos and the Rio Grande, the Kid was known as an outlaw; and upon his head was a reward of a thousand dollars. But in his wildest days the Kid had never dreamed of rustling a cow; and the sight of a brand-blotted at work got his goat. And it was a personal matter with the Kid, too; for Kid Cartax was now a partner of Old Man Sampson, with an interest in all the numerous herds of the Sampson ranch; and he was already beginning to forget those old wild days of outlawy in the Rio Grande, three hundred miles away. In this remote corner of Texas, no one knew the Rio Kid—few had heard of him; and the Kid had realized, at last, his old desire to ride with a ranch outfit and punch cows, and say a long farewell to the chaparral and the alarm.

"Gee-whizz!" ejaculated the Kid suddenly.

The brand blotter had taken the alarm; he had leaped away from the cow he was branding, and stood staring up the coulee, towards Santa Fe Sam. A puff of white smoke streamed from his hip, and Sam's broncho pitched forward, shot through the head, throwing the rider. The next instant the brand-blotted had dragged a horse from the mesquite, leaped upon its back, and was riding out of the coulee to the west—abandoning the stolen cows, seeking only escape to the chaparral. And but for the Kid's maneuver, the way would have been open for him.

But now the Kid was between him and safety; and as the man came dashing up the coulee the Kid's rifle leaped to his shoulder.

"Halt! Hands up!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

An Old Acquaintance!

"HANDS UP!" shouted the Kid. The brand blotter dragged in his racing horse.

The Kid sat his mustang directly before him, the rifle to his shoulder, his eyes gleaming along the barrel.

For an instant the cow-thief seemed about to lift the gun, still smoking in his hand, and take a chance.

But there was no chance, and the instant realization of it kept his hand at his side.

"Drop that gun, and put up your hands!"

The revolver crashed to the ground. The cow-thief's hands went up over his head, just in time.

The Rio Kid rode closer. His eyes were keenly on the man. There was something familiar to him in the tanned, savage cow-thief. That the Kid's face was familiar to the brand-blotted was shown at once by the look of astonishment that spread over his face.

"The Kid?" he ejaculated. His eyes fixed in amazement on the Rio Kid—No. 512.

handsome, sunburnt face of the boy puncher.

"The Rio Kid?"

The Kid's brow grew dark. He recalled that he had seen this galoot somewhere before, and now that he was a rancher, a partner of Old Man Sampson, the Kid was not anxious to see pugrins whom he had known in other parts of Texas. He did not want the Sampson bunch to learn that Kid Cartax was the outlaw of the Rio Grande, with a price on his head.

The cow-thief's look of astonishment changed to a grin.

"Dog-gone my boots!" he said, patting his horse a little nearer. "You boys, Kidd! What you liftin' a gun on me for? Dog-don't eat dog!"

"You gold-rimmed posky thief!" growled the Kid. "Keep them paws up, if you don't want daylight light through your catbars!"

The man grinned.

"I guess I remember how you do it, Kidd, and I ain't arguing any," he answered. "But what's this 'Bar' game? You arter cows here, since as me?"

The Kid's brow grew black.

"If you've had my pard yander, you dog-goned thief, you get yours!" he said.

"That puncher your pard?"

"Y-eh!"

"Oh, come off!" said the cow-thief incredulously. "He ain't hurt none. I just got his hoss, and he sure took a tumble. I guess he'll be along in a shake. But what you doin' here, Kidd? You ain't punching cows, I reckon. Far a galoot who. I ain't got any grouch agin you, Kidd. Dog-don't eat dog! You don't want to lift a gun on Cactus Pete. Forget it, Kidd."

"Cactus Pete?" repeated the Kid.

He recalled the man now. In the old days when the Kid had ridden with the Double-Bar bunch at Frio, he had seen Cactus Pete ridden out of town on a rail, on suspicion of horse-stealing. Cactus Pete had been lucky to escape being strung up to the branch of a cottonwood, for there was not much doubt that he was a horse-thief, as the Kid knew him to be a cow-thief. And he knew the Kid!

The Kid's eyes gleamed over the levelled rifle. The man knew him, knew that he was the Rio Kid, the outlaw of the Rio Grande. He came from the Kid's own country, and knew his history—the history that was not even suspected at the Sampson Ranch. The tempter assailed the Kid to drive a bullet through the grinning rascal, and the look on his face drove the grin from Cactus Pete's hard, stubbly features, and his eyes dilated with fear.

"Kid, you wouldn't shoot a man with his hands up!" he gasped.

The Kid gritted his teeth.

"If you've winged my pard, you get yours!" he said savagely; and he looked past the man, up the coulee.

But Santa Fe Sam, already recovered from his tumble, was on his feet, running down into the coulee revolver in hand, towards the fire.

The Kid hesitated.

He could not shoot down a man with his hands up—a man who had dropped his gun and surrendered. It was impossible to guard his secret by such a deed. But if he roped in the brand-blotted, and toted him off to the ranch he would talk and tell all he knew. The Sampson bunch would learn from him that Kid Cartax, the Old Man's partner, was the Rio Kid, the hunted outlaw of the Frio country.

The Rio Kid lowered his rifle at last. "Rise on," he muttered,

Cactus Pete gasped with relief.

"I reckon you wouldn't play it low down, Kidd," he panted. "We're two of a kind—"

"You dog-goned cow-thief!" snapped the Kid. "I'm giving you a chance to beat it out of this coulee. Hit the chaparral and ride your hardest. I guess the whole bunch will soon be looking for you. Beat it!"

"Kid—"

"If you ain't in cover in that chaparral, pronto, you got yours," said the Kid. "I'm giving you a chance, but I ain't waiting."

Cactus Pete wasted no more time in words. He dashed the spurs into his horse's flanks, and galloped out of the coulee to the west, heading for the shades of the chaparral. The Kid cast a dark glance after him, and rode down into the coulee to meet Santa Fe Sam.

Sam had reached the fire and the tied cows when the Kid arrived there. He was panting and breathless from his run, unaccustomed, like all cowboys, to going on foot.

"You got him, Kidd?" he panted.

"Nope."

"Jumpin' mules!" ejaculated Sam. "You let him vamoose, Kidd?" He stared in amazement at the Kid.

The Kid averted his eyes.

"I reckon he's lit out for the chaparral," he said. "We've got the cows and the brandin' irons, and I sure allow that galoot won't try to work the Sampson Ranch again in a hurry."

"Waal, carry me home to die," said the puncher. "I reckon I can't figure how he got past you. Why, you was right in his way!"

The Kid dismounted without replying. It was not easy to explain the escape of the brand-blotted without revealing the facts, which the Kid assuredly did not intend to do. He proceeded to make the roped cows.

"You didn't even draw a bead on him," said Santa Fe Sam. "You could have drilled that galoot as easy as easy, Kidd!"

The Kid could not explain that he had not drawn a bead on the brand-blotted, because the rascal had put up his hands and surrendered. For in that case Sam would have wanted to know why the man was not roped in, a prisoner.

"Well, this sure gets my goat," said the puncher discontentedly. "Arter you rode round the coulee, and kept me waiting, jest to fix him—to let him vamoose under your ornery nose! You sure must be loco, Kidd!"

"Sure," said the Kid. "Let it go at that, Sam. I guess this galoot won't mosy along this-a-way any more!"

"I guess if he does, he won't get away so easy," grumbled the puncher. "Did you see what he was like, Kidd? I never got a look at his face."

The Kid was glad to hear that. The less the Sampson bunch saw or knew of the man from Frio the better the Kid was pleased.

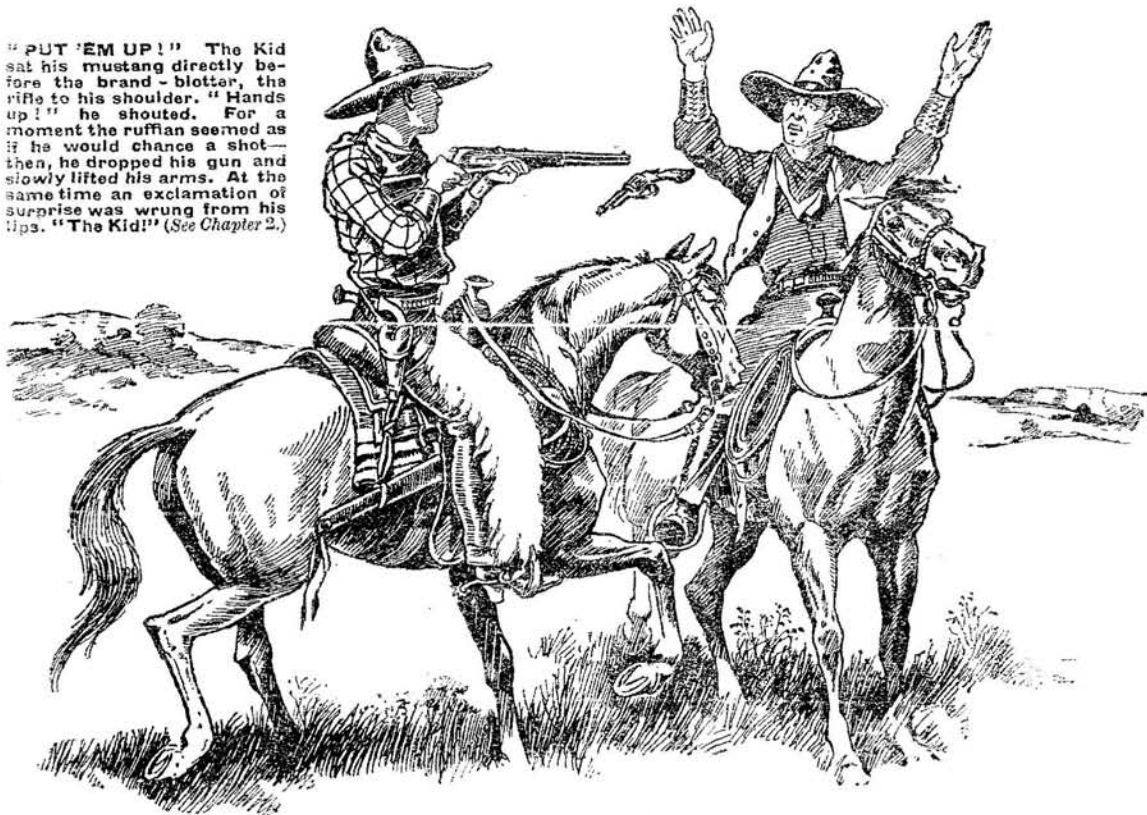
"Oh, jest like any other low-down, cow-thieving son of a gun!" answered the Kid carelessly.

"You'd know him agin?"

"I'd sure know him agin," agreed the Kid. "But I keep on telling you that the ornery cuss will ride clear of this ranch. I reckon we better get these hyer cows back to the ranch, Sam, seeing as they're branded with a false brand now."

"I guess so," agreed Sam. "Take the runnin' iron; it'll be evidence against that scallywag if he's roped in some time. Look hyer, Kidd, what's the matter with beating the chaparral for him? We might get him yet!"

"PUT 'EM UP!" The Kid sat his mustang directly before the brand-blotter, the rifle to his shoulder. "Hands up!" he shouted. For a moment the ruffian seemed as if he would chance a shot—then, he dropped his gun and slowly lifted his arms. At the same time an exclamation of surprise was wrung from his lips. "The Kid!" (See Chapter 2.)



"I guess he's clean loyanted by this time," said the Kid. "We might beat the chaparral for a month of Sundays and never start him."

Santa Fe Sam grunted. He could not understand the Kid's lack of keenness in such a matter as brand-blotting.

"Waal, hump it to the ranch with them cows," he said. "He's killed my cayuse, and I reckon we'll have to ride double."

"The hoss'll carry us, feller," said the Kid cheerfully. "He's good for that distance with a double load."

The punchers headed for the Sampson ranch-house, Santa Fe Sam grumbling most of the way over the inexplicable escape of the cow-thief.

The Rio Kid was silent.

He was thinking; and his thoughts were dark. Cactus Pete, he had no doubt, was riding at great speed out of the San Pedro country, and would never be seen there again. But the incident had shown the Kid upon how frail a reed he was leaning. Three hundred miles from the Frio country, he had felt himself safe from recognition, safe from his past. The man from Frio had known him; but he was a brand-blotter, now riding hard for liberty and life. But there might be others—the Kid realized it.

Life was sunny to him, riding with the Sampson bunch, partner of the Old Man. But he had a hunch now that he had been living in a fool's paradise; and that trouble, which had so long dogged his trail, was only holding off for a time. His face was thoughtful and gloomy.

Near the ranch-house, Santa Fe Sam slipped from the mustang's back. He glanced up at the Kid's clouded face, and grinned.

"Say, Kid, you ain't mad, are you?" he asked. "I sure blew off my mouth a piece about that darned scallywag gettin' away. Forget it."

The Kid forced a smile.

"I ain't mad about that feller!" he answered. "I guess I ought to have stopped him—and I sure do wish that he'd pulled a gun on me, and I'd have let him have his, pronto. I guess I'll take them cows in to the Old Man."

And the Kid rode on to the ranch.

His face was still clouded, though he tried to smile his usual cheery smile when he came into the bunkhouse that evening. His hunch was strong that trouble, which had let him alone for so long, was at hand; as if that evil-faced cow-thief from Frio had brought him bad luck. That evening all the bunch could see that Kid Carfax had a frown, though they were far from guessing the cause of it.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Cactus Pete Horns In!

"BEAT it!"

It was Old Man Sampson's voice.

The Rio Kid, coming down his mustang at the gate of the corral, heard it, and smiled.

It was a week since the episode of the brand-blotter, and the Kid had almost recovered from his frown and to all eyes he seemed his old cheery self again.

The Old Man's voice, that morning, made him smile. Old Man Sampson was not a measurer of words, when he said a thing, he said it emphatically. Now he was talking to a man who had ridden in at the gate and he was talking with his usual emphasis.

"Put you on my pay-roll!" continued the Old Man. "I reckon, not! I do surely reckon not! You got the face of a coyote, hombre, and I guess there's cow-thief writ all over you. Beat it!"

The Kid glanced round, rather curious to see the man whom Mr. Sampson, at a glance, decided was a cow-thief on his looks.

He started.

The man was standing at a distance, and his face was turned away from the Kid. But the Kid knew him.

It was Cactus Pete.

For a second or two the Kid's head swam. He had taken it for granted that the brand-blotter had ridden fast and far. He had had a hunch that trouble was going to hit him again; but he had not figured on the return of the man who had been caught blotting brands. The Kid had only to denounce him, and he would be seized at once, and taken to Nuce for trial and prison. But it flashed into the Kid's mind that that was a game at which two could play. He could denounce the brand-blotter; and Cactus Pete could denounce the outlaw of the Rio Grande.

The Kid shut his teeth hard.

"Beat it!" went on the Old Man. "I tell you, a galoot of your looks ain't wanted on this hyer ranch. Hit the trail, pronto."

"I guess your pardner'll put in a word for me!" said the newcomer.

Old Man Sampson laughed scornfully.

"I guess not!" he said. "Kid Carfax's more likely to boot you off the ranch, on your looks. I'll sure ask him; and if he puts in a word for you, I guess I'll take you on."

The Old Man glanced round.

"Hyer you, Carfax!" he shouted. "You hump it this way a piece. Hyer's a cernery galoot sars you'll speak a word for him."

The Rio Kid turned his mustang into the corral, and came slowly towards the ranch-house. Under its tan, his face was white. There was a glint of fire in his eyes.

Cactus Pete eyed him as he came up. There was a sly grin of insouciance on his stubbly face.

But his manner was civil as he addressed the Kid.

"Mr. Carfax," he said, "you'll put in a word for me, I reckon. I've sure been in San Pedro, where I heard about you, and they let on you was Mr. Sampson's partner in this here ranch. So I nipped this way to ask you for a job. You remember me in the Frio country?"

"I guess I remember you," said the Kid.

"Jumping coppers!" shouted the Old Man. "Carfax, you ain't letting on that that puffed gink is any friend of yours?"

"He sure ain't!" said the Kid. "I reckoned he wasn't! Now, you vamoose the ranch, you geeck, afore you get a boot to help you go!" said the rancher.

Cactus Pete set his teeth. "If Mr. Carfax ain't putting in a word for me, I reckon I'm ready to beat it," he said. "You'll mebbe put me right on the way to Nuce? I got some business with the sheriff there."

The hidden meaning of his words was lost on the Old Man, though not on the Rio Kid.

"I guess more like the sheriff will have business with you!" snapped the Old Man contemptuously. "I guess there's a good many sheeps in Texas that would like to see you, you ornery galoot!"

The Rio Kid breathed hard. Cactus Pete was already turning to his horse. If he rode on to Nuce it would be to inform the sheriff that the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande was at the Sampson Ranch, partner of Old Man Sampson. The Nuce sheriff might not—very likely would not—believe such a startling story; but assuredly he would investigate, and investigation could only prove the truth of it. Not that the Kid had any fear for himself.

A dozen Texas sheriffs had hunted him; but the reward of a thousand dollars for him had never been earned. The Kid had no fear that any man in Texas would ever rope in that reward.

But he shrank from letting the Sampson bunch, and Old Man Sampson, learn the truth. What would they say if they knew?

The white-browed old rancher, with his fiery temper and his forceful flow of language, was straight as a die; the bunch were the whitest bunch the Kid had ever struck since the old days on the Double-Bar. And they would know that he had been an outlaw; worse than that, for common report laid to the Kid's charge many a desperate deed of which he had scarcely heard—cow-kills and hold-ups and reckless shootings were all ascribed to the Kid—and who was to disentangle the false from the true?

"Hold on!"

The Kid spoke quietly. Cactus Pete, with a foot in his stirrup, turned his head. There was a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"You say so, Mr. Carfax?" he said. The Kid turned to the staring rancher.

"I guess I knew this galoot, once, a long piece from here," he said. "I guess he can bed down for the night, if you ain't any objection, Mr. Sampson."

Mr. Sampson was a good judge of faces; but it hardly needed a good judge to read Cactus Pete's character in his face. The reckless rascality of the cow-thief showed in every feature, in every line. Thief and gun-man were 'writ large' on the man from Frio.

"You're sure a soft Jasper, Cactus!" said the Old Man discomfitedly. "But what you say goes! Let him bed down in he likes!"

And Old Man Sampson stamped back into the ranch-house, evidently surprised and displeased by his partner letting in a word for the stranger.

Cactus Pete looked at the Kid, with a glimmer in his eyes.

"I'm sure powerful obliged to you, Mr. Carfax," he said.

There was an intonation of mockery in his voice.

The Kid breathed hard. But there were several ears within hearing, and he merely nodded, and turned away, without speaking in words.

Cactus Pete grinned, and walked his horse away to the corral, and turned it in. Then he slouched over to the chookhouse, where Beans, the cook, eyes him with suspicious hostility, but provided him with a meal. After that Cactus stretched himself on a bench outside the bunkhouse and smoked. A little later Jeff Barstow, the foreman of the ranch, rode in from the range, and stared, as his eyes lighted on the stranger. He handed his horse to the wrangler, came over to the bunkhouse, and stropped in front of Cactus, eyeing him grimly.

"What's brought you along?" he asked.

"I guess I'm fixing this hyer outfit."

"Guess agin!" snapped Barstow. "This hyer outfit ain't roping in your sort."

"You can ask Mr. Carfax."

"Mean to say Kid Carfax has took you on?" demanded the foreman.

"Sure."

Jeff strode away in search of the Kid.

"Kid, there's an ornery ass settin' by the bunkhouse allows you've took him into the bunch," he said. "If he ain't a badman from Bad'own, I'll sure eat my Stetson. The ornierest galoot I ever set eyes on!"

"I guess I've told him he can bed down for the night, Jeff."

"Like enough, there'll be a loss missing in the morning if he goes!" grunted the foreman. "But it's your say-so; you're the Old Man's partner, I guess."

Cactus Pete bedded down that night in the bunkhouse; but in the morning Jeff had to acknowledge that his suspicions were unfounded. He was not missing in the morning; neither was a horse missing. If the man was not a horse-thief, a cow-thief, a gunman, and a badman, Jeff did not know that kind of galoot when he saw one. But whatever he was, he was there to stay—if he could.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. Quitted Off!

"NOW I reckon we'll talk turkey!" The Kid's voice was low and clear.

Cactus Pete, lounging on the bench outside the bunkhouse in the morning sunlight, with a Mexican cheroot between his blackened teeth, grinned. The bunch were out on the ranges; only the horse-wrangler visible in the corral, and Beans, the cook, tinkling pots and pans in the chookhouse. But the Kid, for once, was not in the saddle with the bunch. He had been glad to see the punchers clear off and leave him a chance of speaking with the man who had drifted down from Frio.

He stood before the lounging ruffian, his handsome, sunburnt face set and

grim, a glint in his eyes that warned Cactus to ride herd over his insolence. He had the whip hand of the Kid, knowing what he knew; but he was playing a desperate game, and he knew it. The Kid was not the man to draw trigger on a galoot without good cause given; but Cactus could guess that he longed for a pretext to pull a gun.

Cactus was a gunman, and the butt of his Colt bore seven notches, each commemorating the death of a man; but he knew that he was of no use with the Rio Kid, and he did not want any gunplay. Gunplay would suit the Kid, as matters stood; but it would not suit the man from Frio.

"I let you off, after that dirty trick of blotting brands," went on the Kid quietly. "Now you've horned in hyer and claimed acquaintance. I guess I want to know, Cactus."

The quietness of his tone did not tempt Cactus to open insolence. He knew the Kid was most dangerous when he was quiet.

"I guess it's plain enough, Kid," he answered. "I've heered all about you in San Pedro. I reckon I got wise after we met on the prairie; I was sure honing to know what you was up to hyer. I guess there ain't a galoot in this country knows you're the Rio Kid, with a thousand dollars on your head."

"Correct!" said the Kid quietly. "And you aim to put them wise, feller?"

"Nix! I ain't let on a word, have I?" said the cow-thief. "Seems as you're going in for ranching hyer, and giving up the trails. I reckon I've made the Frio country too hot for me, same as you have, Kid; and I'm lying low, same as you are. I ain't here to steal your cows."

"What are you here for, then?"

"Punching cows," said Cactus, "same as you, feller. Brand-blottin' ain't a payin' game these days; I want a chance to throw it down and work with a bunch on a ranch. I'm as good a puncher as any galoot in this hyer bunch; and I'll sure be worth my pay. What's the matter with that?"

The Rio Kid stood silent, eyeing the man.

"You mean that?" he asked at last.

"Sure!"

"You figure that I'll keep it dark about your brand blotting on this ranch?"

"I guess one good turn deserves another," said Cactus. "I ain't saying a word about the Rio Kid."

There was another pause.

"You've horned in hyer," said the Kid at last. "You can get the nearest sheriff down on me, and I guess I don't care about that. You can give me no way to the bunch here and that's what I don't want. I'm sure powerful tempted to drive a bullet through your ornery carcass."

"I guess you won't do that," said Cactus Pete. "I ain't pulling a gun on you, Kid; and I reckon the bunch wouldn't stand for shooting a man down in cold blood. Forget it."

"I guess I'd like you to pull a gun, Cactus!" said the Kid. "I'd sure be mighty glad if you'd do it!"

Cactus Pete laughed.

"I ain't pulling any gun, Kid," he said. "I've come here peaceful, looking for a job punching cows. Give a galoot a chance. If you allow you've given up the trails, you can believe I've thrown down that game, too."

"No need to pick this ranch," granted the Kid.

Cactus grinned.

"I guess no other ranch would take

me on, on my looks and my record," he answered. "I got a friend to speak for me here."

The Rio Kid stood silent, thinking. If the claim was true, he was not the man to refuse him a chance; though he hated to see him on the Sampson ranch. But the evil, cunning face did not look as if Cactus was turning over a new leaf.

"I guess," said the Kid at last, "that if you're square, Cactus, I'll put it to the Old Man, and get him to give you a trial hyer. I'd sure rather see the last of you; but I allow you ain't got a dog's chance of larning into any honest bunch. But if you spill a word about the Rio Kid—"

"I ain't spilling nothing, so long as you don't."

"That's a cinch," said the Kid. "If you mean straight, you've got a chance. But if you join this bunch you get to work and ride like any other galoot, and earn your pay. And if you begin any shenanigan game, look out for

afore I'll stand for it! Get off that bench!"

Cactus breathed hard and deep. The Kid's hand went to the gun in his belt, and his eyes blazed. Slowly the man from Eric rose from the bench.

But his eyes burned at the Kid.

"You want to keep your horns in, Kid," he muttered. "You know what's yours if the sheriff of Nuce gets news of you. And jest chew on this—you won't make all safe by gunplay; I guess I writ it down, and left it with the town marshal down at San Pedro. And if I got shot up, darn you, the marshal will open that letter, and he'll be arter that thousand dollars reward so quick you won't see his heels for dust! You got that?"

"I got it," assented the Kid. "Now you get me. You'll have a chance to punch cows on this ranch, so long as you keep square, and mind your step. First time you throw off your mouth at me, after this, I give you a writing that will take the skin off'n you, and boot you off the ranch, to go and do

The Kid pointed to it.

"Saddle up!" he said briefly.

"I reckon—"

"You want to do as you're told on this ranch, Cactus, though you ain't here long," said the Kid. "I got a quirt here that says so."

"Gold-darn your hide!" hissed the ruffian. "You darned outlaw—"

He broke off with a yell, as the Kid's quirt sang in the air, and came down across his shoulders with a crash.

"Pronto!" snapped the Kid.

Cactus Pete's hand flew to his gun. But he checked the movement in time. The Kid wanted to see him draw; he knew how much the Kid wanted that. For his life he dared not.

Trembling with rage, he saddled and bridled the horse. Under the Kid's gleaming eye he mounted.

"Now hit the trail," said the Kid. "You reckoned you could crowd me, you cow-thief; you reckoned you'd get me scared, and I'd shut my mouth and let you loaf around, and draw the Old Man's pay for nothin', and steal cows

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bad trouble. If there's any brand blottin' on his hyer ranch or any cow hittin', I guess I shall know where to look for the nigger in the woodpile!"

Cactus Pete's eyes gleamed for a moment. But he nodded.

He lighted another cheroot.

The Kid gave him a grim look.

"If you're in this bunch, Cactus, you ain't sitting there loafing," he said. "You got to earn your keep. Git your cayuse."

Cactus Pete did not stir. In spite of his lurking fear of the Rio Kid, and his swiftness with a gun, there was resistance in the sullen face.

"I guess you can make things kinder easy for me, if you like," he answered.

The Kid smiled grimly.

"Now I reckon we're getting down to it," he said. "You're showing your hand, are you, you ornery cuss! You reckon you're going to loaf around this ranch, and I'm going to see you through, for fear that you spill what you know of me in the Eric country. You've sure roped in the wrong cayuse if that's your game, Cactus. Why, you darned pesky gink, you can shout out all you know for all Texas to hear

what you darned well like. Chew on that, and don't give me any back-talk! Now go and get your cayuse an' ride!"

"I guess—"

"You're a puncher in this bunch, and I'm your boss' pardner," said the Kid.

"You reckon you've hit this bunch to loaf around and look for a chance of stealing cows, and you figure that I ain't spilling anything, and letting you do it, because you can spill the beans for me hyer!" The Kid breathed hard, and his eyes glittered. "You darned, low-down, cow-thief! You sure have got hold of the wrong cayuse!"

The ruffian set his teeth.

"If you don't stand for that, Kid, you'll stand for being roped in by the sheriff of Nuce, and toted back to Eric!" he said savagely.

The Rio Kid laughed.

"We got it plain now," he said. "Now I reckon I'll let on how much you scare me!"

He turned his head and shouted to the wrangler:

"Here, you Mesquite, you turn out this hobo's cayuse, pronto!"

"Sure!" called back the wrangler. Cactus Pete's horse trotted out.

and blot brands when there wasn't an eye on you. I guess I'm wise to your game; and I guess that'll show you just how much I'm scared of you, you low-down hobo!"

Crack!

Full across the lowering, scowling face of the ruffian came the Kid's quirt. He yelled wildly as the horse plunged.

"Now hit the trail!" shouted the Kid fiercely. "By the great horned toad, if you ain't out of range, pronto. I'll fan you with bullets to put a move in you!"

A gun was in the Kid's hand now. Cactus Pete rode for the gate, leaped it on his horse, and dashed away down the trail in a cloud of dust. It was not till he was out of effective range that he turned in the saddle to shake his fist back at the ranch. Then he galloped on again, and disappeared in whirling dust in the direction of San Pedro.

THE END.

("ROPED IN!" is the title of next week's roaring Western yarn, featuring the Rio Kid, boy outlaw of Texas.)

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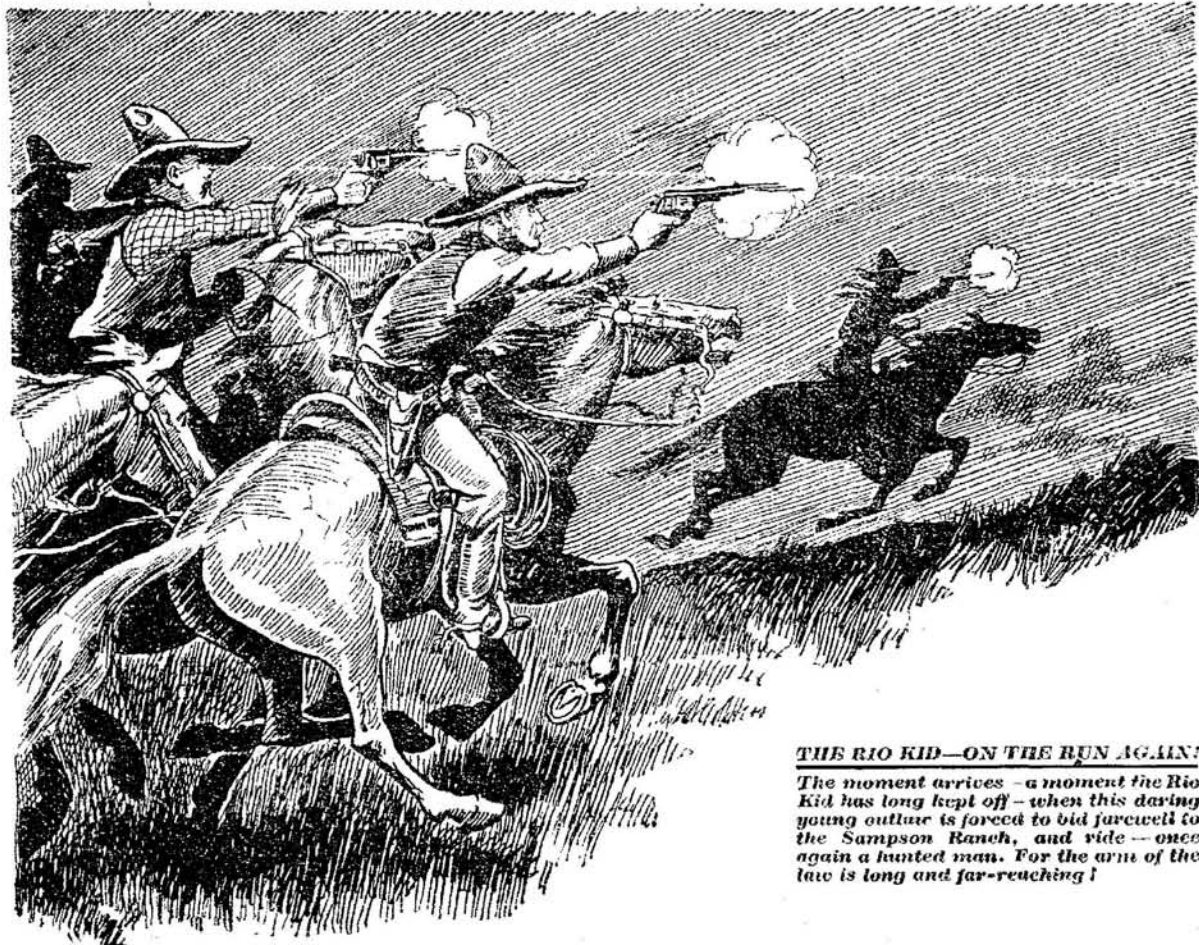
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THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Kid Has a Grouch!

"THE Kid's got a grouch!" Santa Fe Sam made that remark in the bunkhouse of the Sampson ranch.

Five or six heads were nodded in assent.

Every man in the Sampson outfit had noticed, for some time past, that the Kid had a "grouch."

"Old Man" Sampson had noticed it, and asked the Kid what the matter was; but the Kid had not explained. All the bunch wondered.

Kid Carfax had always been one of the cheeriest members of the Sampson bunch. Although he had become a partner of Old Man Sampson, he still bunked with the punchers, rode range with them, and punched cows with them. Every man in the outfit liked him; and there was no man in the outfit whom the Kid did not like. From the day he had joined the bunch the Kid had been cheery and light-hearted; it was utterly unlike him to have a "grouch."

But he had it now.

From the open doorway of the bunkhouse that sunny morning the Kid could be seen coming away from the

corral, where he had turned in his horse after a ride.

A handsome figure he made, lithe and active, with sunburnt, good-looking face, shaded by a Stetson hat. But the handsome face was clouded now; he walked with his eyes on the ground, and seemed immersed in deep and troublesome thought.

"The Kid's got a grouch, for sure!" said Jeff Barstow, the foreman of the ranch. "What's up with him, you-uns?"

"You can search me!" said Santa Fe Sam.

"I guess I've asked the feller," said Long Bill. "But he sure ain't let on. Somethin's worryin' the Kid."

"He's been like that," said Santa Fe Sam, "ever since that galoot Cactus Pete moseyed in, and the Kid quitted him off the ranch. And that's two days ago."

The Kid was passing the bunkhouse at a distance when Jeff Barstow hailed him.

"Say, Kid!"

The Kid started and looked round. His cheeks coloured a little as he saw many eyes upon him. Deep in his reflections, whatever they were, he had been unconscious of his surroundings.

"Hallo, you!" he answered, coming towards the bunkhouse.

"Give it a name, Kid!" said the foreman, with a grin.

"Meaning—" asked the Kid.

"For two days now," said Jeff, "you've been looking like you was going to your own funer'l, Kid. We're all friends hyer. The whole bunch is sure wondering where you picked up that big hump."

The Kid smiled faintly.

"I guess it ain't nothing—nothing I can tell you boys," he said. "I reckon you'll know soon, too."

"Well, that ain't putting us wise," said Jeff. "Look hyer, you got a rookus on with that gol-darned pizen cuss, Cactus Pete, the hombre you quitted off'n the ranch. You ain't lettin' that worry you any, sare?"

The Kid laughed.

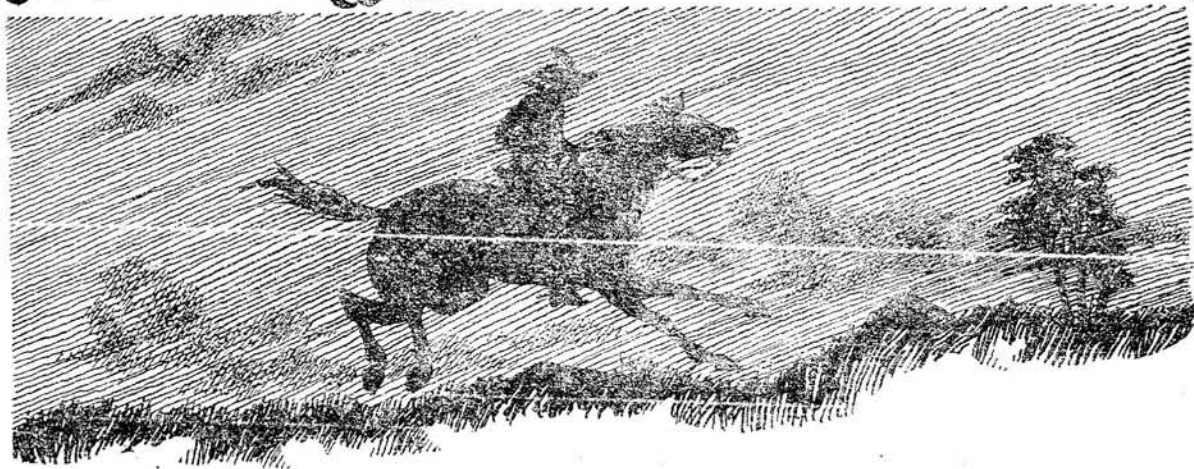
"Not any," he answered. "I guess nothing would please me better than to meet up with Cactus Pete, and see him pull a gun on me. I'd sure make it last sickness for that pizen coyote!"

"Then what's the grouch?" demanded Jeff.

The Kid was silent. He had not meant his looks to betray him; but in these days the Rio Kid's heart was heavy. He had been happy on the Sampson ranch; happy as a member of the cheery, contented bunch; happy as

Our Roaring Western Yarn

By
Ralph Redway



a partner of the Old Man; and the place had become like home to the boy outlaw who had, for so long, ridden lonely trails, and camped in the solitary chaparral, and trusted to his aim with his six-gun, and the speed of his mustang, for life and liberty.

Sorely against the grain had the Kid been driven into outlawry; and in that remote corner of Texas, three hundred miles from the Frio country, he had hoped to throw it all behind him. Yet at the back of his mind had always been the thought that the past was not so easily thrown behind; that sooner or later it would rise up against him, and then he would have to mount and ride. And now it had happened—since he had seen the evil face of Cactus Pete, the man from Frio, the Kid had known that he must ride. He knew it—and knew that there was little time to lose; and yet, so far, he had not been able to make up his mind.

Yet every day, every hour, that he lingered, was fraught with peril. Cactus Pete, sore from the Kid's quirt, had fled to San Pedro; and already he must have told his tale—the startling tale that Kid Carfax, partner of Old Man Sampson, was the Rio Kid, the outlaw for whom a reward of a thousand dollars was offered. Ere long armed men would be riding to the ranch, to seize the boy outlaw—the Kid knew that it would come, that it must come. And yet he had not gone.

It was in his heart to regret that he had not put a bullet through the head of the man from Frio, and thus silenced his tongue.

"You ain't letting on, Kid?" asked Jeff, as the boy puncher stood silent. "Can't you trust this bunch?"

"Sure!" said the Kid at once. "But—I reckon, you-uns, I've got to quit, and I hate quitting. I reckon it's me for the trail, and I got to say good-bye to you hombres."

"You quittin' the ranch?" exclaimed Jeff.

The Kid nodded.

"You ain't got any grouch agin the Old Man?" asked Jeff anxiously. "He's sure got a powerful sharp tongue, Kid; but he's a white man down to the boot soles, and he likes you a lot."

"It ain't that," said the Kid. "I like the Old Man, and I guess I like the

bunch; but I got to ride—I can't remain here any longer."

"Aw, forget it!" said Santa Fe Sam. "You ain't hitting the trail from this hyer ranch, Kid, you sure ain't! I'll take my riata to you, and rope you in, sure as shootin', if you quit."

Some of the punchers laughed, and the Kid smiled faintly. Jeff Barstow eyed him very keenly.

"You got to go, Kid?" he asked.

"Yep."

"You ain't saying why."

"I guess you'll know mighty soon," said the Kid wearily. "I guess you-uns'll p'raps be glad I've beat it, and figure that you're well shut of me."

"If that ain't ornery, god-darned fool-talk, I've never heard any!" said Santa Fe Sam. "What are they goin' to tell us about you, Kid, arter you've hit the trail?"

The Kid opened his lips, but he closed them again. Not a man on the ranch suspected his secret; and he would not tell them—till it could be hidden no longer. They would know soon enough, when the sheriff came from Nuce, with armed men, seeking him.

"I guess the sheriff of Nuce will put you wise, afore you're much older, fellers!" was all the Kid said.

And with that he walked away to the ranch-house leaving the punchers staring. Santa Fe Sam whistled.

"Now, what did the Kid mean by that, you-uns?" he asked.

Jeff Barstow contracted his rugged brows.

"The Kid's in trouble," he said. "But I reckon he's as white a man as ever saddled a bronc; and if the sheriff moseys along from Nuce, wantin' the Kid, he'll sure go home quicker'n he came. I've got a gun hyer that will back up the Kid agin all the sheriffs in Texas!"

And there was a murmur of approval from the punchers. The Kid would not lack friends, if it came to a fight for his liberty. But it was that very thought that was in the Kid's mind, and that made him realize that he must ride, and ride without delay. And the Kid was going to the ranch-house now, to see Old Man Sampson, and tell him that he had made up his mind to quit.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Outlaw!

OLD MAN SAMPSON, in his rocker on the porch of the ranch-house, glared at the Kid under his beating grey brows and grunted.

The Old Man was reputed to have the fiercest temper, and the most lurid flow of language, of any rancher in Texas. But all the bunch knew that he had a heart of gold, and the Kid knew it; and he had grown to have a deep affection for the gruff old cattleman.

In many ways, half-unconsciously, the grim old rancher had shown his liking for the Kid, and the boy puncher hated to break the news to him that he must go. It was concern for him, not anger, that made the Old Man scowl at him as he came up to the porch. The Kid's deeply-clouded face worried him.

"You sure look like you've got a grouch, Kid," said the Old Man gruffly. "You got tired of this hyer ranch?"

"I guess not," said the Kid, with a sigh. "But it's two days since I ought to have saddled my mustang and hit the trail, boss. I guess it ain't easy to go, and that's a fact. But I got to."

"Oh, shucks," said Mr. Sampson. "What's bittin' you now, you ornery young galoot?" He glared at the Kid in alarm. "You ain't s'ich a loosed mossahead as to get your back up over an old man shootin' off his mouth occasional? You surely ain't. I'd sure bite off my pesky tongue if I figured it was that."

"Forget it," said the Kid.

"Then what's the trouble?"

"I got to go, sir," said the Kid. He stared out over the wide, sunlit prairie, half-expecting to see a bunch of horsemen topping the grass, from the direction of Nuce; "I guess the time's come to put you wise, sir, afore I beat it. I sure hate to spill it; but you got to know."

He paused, and the Old Man stared at him.

"I guess you've found me a white man," said the Kid restively. "You'll remember me as a square man."

"Square as a die!" said the rancher. "But you ain't beating it any."

"I've got to bear it—or be taken!" said the Kid, with an effort.

"Taken—by whom?"
 "The sheriff of Nuce."
 "Shucks! What you done?" asked the Old Man incredulously.
 "You took me on trust hyer, sir!" said the Kid.

"I guess I know a white man when I see one," growled the Old Man. "Don't let on that you ain't square; that won't go with me."

"Did you ever hear of the Rio Kid?" The Old Man puckered his brows.
 "The Rio Kid! Yep—I guess I've heard the name—a young fire-bug who raised Cain in the Frio country—cow-stealing, holding up banks—a darned gunman wanted by half the sheriffs in the west of this state. Yep—I've heard of that darned young cuss. You sarelly ain't never had anything to do with that fire-bug!" exclaimed the Old Man, in alarm.

The Kid smiled bitterly.
 "I reckon they lay more to the Rio Kid, than he's ever heard of," he answered. "There ain't a hold-up between the Pecos and San Antonio, that they don't put down to his account."

"He's sure got some reputation," said the Old Man. "But you ain't nothing to do with that cuss, I guess."

"Only——"
 "Only what?" snapped the Old Man. The Kid drew a deep breath.

"Only—I'm the Kid. I call myself Kid Carfax here, sir—but in my own country they call me the Rio Kid."

It was out now! Old Man Sampson sat as if frozen in his rocker, his eyes fixed on the Kid's troubled face. A thunderbolt falling at his feet could not have startled him more. For a full minute he was silent, bereft of speech; and when he spoke at last, his voice was husky.

"You're loco," he said, "plumb loco! What you mean, you darned young ornery cayuse, letting on that you're that fire-bug, the Rio Kid?"

"It's true, boss."
 "It ain't true!" roared Old Man Sampson. "I tell you you're loco."

"I guess you got to get it down, boss," said the Kid wearily. "Any minute the sheriff's posse may be here for me; and if they find me, it's me for the long jump. I got to ride, or go back to Frio tied on a hoss. That pesky galoot Cactus Pete knew me in the Frio country, and he's given me away down at San Pedro."

The Old Man clenched his hands.

"You darned young galoot, why didn't you let on afore? The bunch would have strung that coyote up to a tree, if they'd knowed."

"I guess it was bound to come soon or late, sir," said the Kid. "I couldn't go without telling you; and I guess I didn't want to tell you. I'd rather you heard it from me than from the sheriff of Nuce—you'll hear it from him soon enough. You don't want to think too hard of me when I'm gone, sir. They tell a lot of varns about the Rio Kid; but he never heard of the hold-ups they put down to him, and

he'd never rustled a cow in his life. He'd be a square man if he was let!" added the Kid bitterly.

The rancher stared at him.
 "But how——" he stammered.

"I guess trouble was fond of coming my way," said the Kid. "I punched cows on the Double Bar Ranch once, down at Frio. One day I was sent into town to get the pay for the bunch; and I was held up by a mob of greasers, coming back, and they went through me and took the roll. Old Man Dawney, the boss of the Double Bar, never believed that I was held up—he figured that I'd roped in the roll myself, and come back with lies to him. That was the beginning of it—I lit out from the Double Bar before I could be handed over to the sheriff; and since——" The Kid shrugged his shoulders.
 "And since——" muttered the Old Man.

"Since then, all Texas can tell you about the Rio Kid. I guess I wasn't being roped in, sir, not so long as I knew how to use a six-gun," said the Kid grimly. "But you don't want to believe that I ever was the gun-man and fire-bug that they tell of. I guess if I had been, Cactus Pete wouldn't have lived long enough to tell his story to the sheriff at Nuce."

There was a long silence.
 The Kid broke it.

"I guess I've told you, sir, because you was bound to know. Now I reckon I'll saddle up and ride, before trouble hits this ranch on my account. It won't do you any good to have it known that the Rio Kid has bedded down here."

"Dog-gone you!" growled the Old Man. "You ain't riding; I don't care a pesky continental red cent what you was in the Frio country; I know you've been a white man hyer in San Pedro, and you're my pardner. You ain't riding—you're sticking to this hyer ranch, Kid."

"The sheriff——"
 "Dog-gone the sheriff!" roared Old Man Sampson. "If he wants to get busy, I reckon he can root out that gang of cow-thieves and boot-leggers down at San Pedro. There ain't a man in the bunch that won't stand by you, Kid, and see you through."

The Kid stood silent.
 "You're staying," said the Old Man. "You're my pardner, and you're not

goin' to quit. I guess it will have to be squared somehow—money talks. You ain't in the Frio country now. I tell you——"

The Kid, standing silent, was looking away across the prairie. What he had long expected to see, he saw at last. Far across the plains appeared a bunch of Stetson hats, bobbing over a group of horsemen.

The Kid breathed hard and deep. He had shrunk from telling the old man—he had hesitated too long. And now the sheriff was coming.

"You hear me?" hooted Old Man Sampson. "I tell you——" He broke off, as he followed the Kid's glance and started at the sight of the bunch of horsemen spurring towards the ranch. His face changed. "Kid—you reckon the——"

"They want me!" said the Kid. The Old Man leaped from the rocker. "Let 'em come! You ain't quitting! I tell you, this bunch will wipe that crowd out to the last galoot, afore they shall lay a finger on my pardner. Thunder! You pack a gun, don't you?"

"I tell you it means bad trouble for the ranch!" muttered the Kid huskily. "I tell you, I ain't bringing trouble on you and the bunch."

"Shucks!" snapped the Old Man. He roared from the porch.

"Hyer, you Jeff Barstow!"
 The foreman came striding up. Old Man Sampson pointed to the horsemen, spurring across the prairie, and rapidly approaching the ranch.

"That crowd's coming from Nuce, for the Kid," he said. "I've got a six-gun hyer what says they ain't laying a finger on my pardner. Who's going to stand by me and my pardner?"

"Every galoot in the bunch, I reckon," answered Jeff; and he strode away to the bunk-house.

The Kid made a movement; and the Old Man's iron grip caught his arm.

"Stand where you are!" he snapped. "Let me go!" muttered the Kid. "Dog-gone it, I should have ridden afore, and saved this! Let me go afore trouble hits this ranch, sir!"

"Forget it!" snapped the Old Man. There was a rush of the punchers towards the ranch-house. Every man who was not out on the range gathered there, and every man had a gun in his hand. A dozen excited cowmen stood waiting for the Nuce posse to arrive. Santa Fe Sam gave the Kid a cheery grin.

"Don't you worry, Kid!" he called out. "This hyer bunch is seeing you through!"

But the Kid's face was clouded. With a clatter of hoofs the sheriff's posse arrived at the gate. The gate flew open, and the horsemen—ten armed men—rode up to the ranch-house. They came to a halt before the porch, the burly sheriff of Nuce pushing out before the rest. Old Man Sampson glared at him under his grizzled brows.

"Waal, what's this hyer fandango, sheriff!" he rapped out.

The sheriff did not even glance at the bunch of punchers standing, gun in hand. His eyes lingered for a moment on the handsome Kid, and then fixed on the rancher.

"I guess we're told that that fire-bug from Frio, the Rio Kid, is hiding on this ranch, Mr. Sampson," he answered. "I've sure come for him—if he's here."

"There was a buzz among the punchers. 'You're sure loco, sheriff,'" said Jeff Barstow, with a stare, "there ain't any pesky outlaw hiding in this outfit?"

"He's known here as Kid Carfax." "Thunder!"



THE CONFESSION! "I'm the Kid—the Rio Kid!" said the young outlaw bitterly. "Wanted in my own country for half the hold-ups!" It was out now! Old Man Sampson sat as if frozen in his rocker, his eyes fixed on the Kid's troubled face. (See Chapter 2.)

The sheriff's hand rose and pointed at the Kid.

"Kid Carfax, if that's your name, I've got your description and your picture, since the information was handed over to me, and I guess there ain't any mistake. I ain't saying you're the Rio Kid, if you deny it, but I got to arrest you on suspicion. Hand over your guns."

"Tell him he's lying, Kid, and let daylight through him!" yelled Santa Fe Sam.

The Kid's lips quivered. "But he ain't lying, old feller," he answered.

"Gee-whizz!" "I guess I'm the Rio Kid, same as he allows!" said the Kid. "Put up your guns, you-uns! You ain't pulling on the sheriff for an outlaw's sake. I'm your prisoner, sheriff!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Word of an Outlaw!

"OUTLAW!"

The word passed from mouth to mouth in tones of amazement and consternation.

The Sampson bunch were taken utterly by surprise.

"You're loco, Kid!" gasped Santa Fe Sam.

"Plumb loco," growled Long Bill.

"What you giving us, Kid?" But the Kid's pale, set face carried conviction. A silence fell on the group of punchers.

The Rio Kid drew his guns quietly from their holsters, and, taking them by the barrels, held them out towards the sheriff of Nuce, butts foremost. It was the sign of surrender.

The sheriff pushed his horse a little nearer, and leaned down to take the guns. There was relief, as well as satisfaction, in the sheriff's bearded face. He was pleased at his luck in rounding up so celebrated an outlaw as the Rio Kid; but he was deeply relieved to find him in a surrendering mood. Now that he was certain that Kid Carfax, of the Sampson ranch, was the Rio Kid of Frio, he knew only too well what damage those walnut-butted guns might do, with the Kid's fingers on the triggers.

But the sheriff's triumph was not to be so easy as it seemed. The Kid was ready to surrender, to save trouble to his friends; but his friends were not ready to see him taken, outlaw or not. As the sheriff reached for the guns Jeff Barstow struck his horse with a quirt, and the animal reared and backed, the sheriff almost falling from the saddle. He gripped the reins and recovered himself, but out of reach of the extended guns. Jeff pushed the Kid angrily back.

"Freeze on to them guns, you dog-goned geck!" he snapped. "You ain't going to Nuce along with the sheriff."

"He sure ain't!" said Long Bill.

Old Man Sampson had pulled a gun now. His finger was on the trigger, and his eyes gleaming over the barrel.

"Stand back, Kid!" he snapped. "Now, then, sheriff, you want to hit the trail. You ain't touching Kid Carfax."

The sheriff gritted his teeth. "I tell you he's the Rio Kid, wanted for a dozen hold-ups and shootings, and there's a reward of a thousand dollars on him. I'm taking him dead or alive."

Old Man Sampson snorted contempt.

"You ain't taking him at all, sheriff. Ride while you're alive, man—I'm telling you. This hyer outfit don't stand for it."

"Not any!" roared Santa Fe Sam.

"Outlaw or no outlaw, we're standing by the Kid."

"All the way!" said Long Bill. "Fellers," exclaimed the Kid, in great distress, "I guess I ain't wanting you to pull a gun against the law—" "Oh, shucks!" exclaimed Old Man Sampson. "There ain't a man hyer that won't spill hot lead to keep you safe, Kid!"



STANDING BY HIS PARD! "I'm here for that outlaw, and I'm getting him," said the sheriff. "I give you a minute to surrender and save bloodshed, Kid!" "We sure ain't letting him!" said Old Man Sampson. And from the porch, his revolver covered the sheriff. "Stand where you are!" (See Chapter 3.)

"You bet!" roared the punchers.

"Hang on to them guns, Kid," said Jeff. "You want to take a hand when the gun-play begins, I guess."

The Kid breathed hard. If there was going to be shooting, undoubtedly he wanted to join in on the side of his friends. He reversed the guns, the butts in his hands now. Gladly he would have seen the bunch stand aside, leaving him to take his chance with the posse from Nuce. But that, he knew, they would never do.

Weapons were rising on all sides now. The sheriff's face was dark with anger, his eyes gleaming. The men who rode with him were resolute men, accustomed to hard fighting. But no man was in haste to fire the first shot, which would have been followed instantly by fierce shooting, and falling men on both sides. But there was no sign of yielding in the sheriff's face. He had come there to do his duty.

"I guess you-uns better think twice," he said, at last. "I got to take that outlaw."

"Forget it, sheriff," said Jeff. "I guess if you don't ride, there won't be a man of your crowd over see Nuce again."

The sheriff set his lips.

"That's as it may be," he answered. "I'm here for that outlaw, and I'm getting him, dead or alive. I give you a chance to surrender and save bloodshed, Kid."

"We sure ain't letting him," said Old Man Sampson. From the porch his revolver covered the sheriff. "You lay a finger that-a-way, sheriff, and you're as dead as Christopher Columbus the next minute."

"Hold your horses!" said the Kid, in a strained voice. "Sheriff, I guess we can fix this without gun-play. If you know anything about the Rio Kid, you know he's a man of his word."

"I guess that's so," said the sheriff of Nuce.

"You hit the trail for Nuce, then, and wait there, and within two days

I'll come in and surrender. I give you my word."

"The word of an outlaw!" jeered one of the posse. "A trick to get on a boss and vamoose."

"Can that, durn you!" interrupted the sheriff.

The Kid looked at the man who had spoken.

"I guess if I wanted to vamoose, I've

had time to hit the trail," he answered. "And I reckon I'd let these galoots pull the trigger. You'uns would come out at the little end of the horn. You ain't got a dog's chance of getting me by force, and I reckon the sheriff knows it." The sheriff nodded.

"I guess I'll take your word, Kid," he said slowly.

"I'll keep it," said the Kid simply. "I'd sure rather be taken back to Frio, roped on a boss, than let one of these galoots get wiped out standing by me. It's a cinch, then?"

"Not much it ain't!" roared Old Man Sampson. "You ain't giving

up, Kid, if I have to tie you to your bunk in the bunk-house."

The Kid smiled faintly. "What I've said goes, sheriff," he said.

"It's a cinch," answered the sheriff. He made his men a sign to ride.

The whole posse wheeled their horses and rode away to the trail. The punchers glared after them, with angry brows.

That the sheriff trusted to the outlaw's word was clear. And he knew that it was very doubtful whether he could have taken the Kid by force. The odds were on the Kid's side in a struggle, and every man in the bunch was a good man with a gun. Not until the bunch had been wiped out could he have seized the Kid—and few of the posse would have been likely to survive such a struggle, even if victorious. The sheriff of Nuce had a bunch that the boy outlaw would be as good as his word, and he rode away with his men—most of them glad enough to have avoided so fearful a conflict as had threatened.

There was silence at the ranch-house as the sheriff and his men galloped away over the prairie. They disappeared at last in the waving grass in the direction of Nuce.

Then the Old Man spoke.

"Kid, you meant that, I reckon?"

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

"Dog-gone you!"

The Kid smiled.

"I ain't letting this bunch get on the wrong side of the law on my account," he said. "You're too good a man to go up that-away, Mr. Sampson—and the bunch, too."

"I guess I meant what I said, too," said Old Man Sampson grimly. "You mean to surrender to that dog-goned sheriff—but I mean that you ain't! Jeff, you see that the Kid don't get near a boss. You see him nosing along by the corral, you rope him in."

The foreman grinned.

"I guess I'll rope him in so fast it will make his head swim," he answered. "We ain't losing the Kid."

"And if he gets on a boss," said Santa Fe Sam, "I'll sure drop that cayuse with a bullet in the laig."

"Ain't you a crowd of darned moss-heads?" said the Kid affectionately. "Why, you ginks, if I'd let you wipe out the sheriff and his posse they'd bring the soldiers here to handle you. I guess it wasn't good enough. If I'd had the sense of a gopher I'd have hit the trail afore this—but it's too late now. Now, I want you galoots to see sense, and let me ride to Nuce."

"Forget it!" said Jeff.

"You ain't saddling any horse on this ranch," said the Old Man. "You're sure staying where you are, Kid; and if the sheriff comes back for you he will sure be coming to his own funeral. That goes!"

And the punchers dispersed; and when a little later, the Kid went to the corral the horse-wrangler met him at the gate with a grin and a shake of the head.

"No boss for you, Kid!" he said. "Old Man's orders! You ain't backing a cayuse to ride to Nuce, you ain't, not even if you pull a gun on me."

And the Kid, with a smile, turned away.

He had given his word to the sheriff of Nuce, and he was going to keep it. But not if Old Man Sampson and the bunch could stop him, that was clear.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Kid Keeps His Word!

SANTA FE SAM started and awoke and rubbed his eyes in the gloom. It was past midnight, and all was dark in the bankhouse, the silence broken only by the steady breathing of many sleepers. Sam sat up in his bunk and listened. He had intended to remain awake that night to keep a friendly eye on the Kid, but he nodded off to sleep. And now he crawled out of his blankets and struck a match, and held it up to look at the Kid's bunk.

The next moment he gave a shout that awakened every man in the building.

"Hyer, you-uns! Wake up! The Kid's gone!"

"Thunder!"

Every man turned out of his bunk. There was a buzz of excited and angry voices.

"Vamoosed!" exclaimed Jeff Barstow, in disgust, staring at the empty bunk. "He's took his saddle, too. Hump it along to the corral!"

Santa Fe Sam threw open the door, and the punchers rushed out. In the dimness of the starlight they raced across to the gate of the corral. It was closed, but there was a sound of movement among the horses.

"The Kid's there!"

"There he is!" shouted Long Bill, pointing to a mounted figure that showed in the dim corral.

"I guess we're in time to stop him!" grinned Jeff.

And the punchers clustered at the gate, ready to grasp the Kid if he sought to ride out. There was a clatter of hoofs in the corral.

"Look out! He's sure coming!" grinned Santa Fe Sam.

"Thunder! He ain't!" yelled Jeff.

"He's taking the wall!"

"Great gophers!"

In the distance, dim in the starlight, the punchers glimpsed the figure of a rider leaping the corral wall at the farther end. The Kid, mounted on the

black-muzzled mustang, had cleared the high wooden fence, and was gone.

"After him!" yelled Jeff.

The punchers rushed for their horses, saddled up in hot haste, and dashed out on the starlit prairie in pursuit of the Kid. The shouting had awakened Old Man Sampson in the ranch-house, and he was in the saddle as soon as the rest. The Old Man's face was furious as he spurred on his horse, and rode with a dozen punchers clattering and thudding round him.

"Rope the pesky young cuss in!" shouted the Old Man. "And if you can't rope him, shoot the boss!"

"You bet, boss!"

And five or six revolvers blazed out after the figure of a shadowy rider that loomed in the starlight ahead.

Gallop, gallop, gallop!

The thudding of hoofs came back.



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echoing from the night. In a few minutes the rider was lost in the shadows.

Thud, thud, thud!

The bunch galloped on fiercely. But the black-muzzled mustang was the fastest cayuse on the ranch, and they realized that the Kid would beat them in a race. The Old Man swore furiously.

"I'll get him, if I have to ride into Nuce for him!" he roared. And he spurred on his horse.

Once or twice in the glint of the stars the Kid was sighted again. He was not riding in the direction of Nuce. Nuce lay to the south-west; and it was north-west that the Kid was riding. Fast on his track rode the Sampson bunch, headed by the Old Man; but fast as they rode, the black-muzzled mustang vanished into the dim distance. The Old Man savagely called a halt at last.

"I guess he aims to circle round to Nuce after dropping us," he growled. "Damn that mustang of his'n! We've lost him!"

"Hark!" exclaimed Jeff.

There was a sound of thudding hoofs in the silence of the prairie. The sound was approaching the halted horsemen.

"He's coming back!" breathed Old Man Sampson.

All eyes were turned in the direction of the hoof-beats. A horse—gray, with a black muzzle—came in sight—with empty saddle. Jeff Barstow's riata flew, and the mustang was swiftly roped in. The riderless horse puzzled the punchers; the Kid was not the man to have fallen from his saddle. But as the sweating mustang was pulled in and they looked at it they knew what had happened. The leather holsters, with the two walnut-butted guns in them, were slung on the saddle, and to the saddle a paper was pinned with a yucca thorn. Old Man Sampson, with a trembling hand, jerked it off. It was written on in pencil.

"I'm sending the cayuse back to the ranch. Take care of him. Adios!"

"THE RIO KID."

Old Man Sampson read that brief farewell in the light of a flickering match. He crunched the paper in his hand and stared through the dim starlight under wrinkled brows.

The Kid was gone! Night on the vast prairie had swallowed him up, and search was hopeless. The Old Man's eyes were dim, and there was a shake in his voice as he spoke after long silence.

"Dog-gone him, he's given us the slip! I reckon he's keeping his word to the sheriff—but they ain't got him back to Frio yet."

And the Old Man's grizzled brows were wrinkled in deep thought as he rode back to the ranch with the bunch, Jeff leading the Kid's mustang.

Weary from a long tramp on foot on the prairie, the Rio Kid walked into the town of Nuce under the morning sun. Dismounted, unarmed, the Kid had come—to keep his word. He sauntered coolly along the main street of Nuce, and called out to a lounging puncher to inquire the way to the sheriff's office. And, the way being pointed out to him, the Kid walked in that direction, whistling.

The sheriff's door stood open; the sheriff and several men were within. The Kid stopped in coolly.

All eyes were turned on him as he entered.

"Mornin'!" said the Kid.

"The Rio Kid!"

The sheriff strode forward. Two or three of his men had pulled guns—a proceeding that made the Kid smile.

"Forget it, fellers!" he said cheerily.

"I ain't come a-shooting; I've sure left my guns at home. I guess you want me, sheriff! Here I am—and the sooner you get me out of Nuce, feller, the better it will be for your health—before the bunch get cavorting around and raising Cain!"

"You've said it!" said the sheriff grimly. "You're going back to Frio, Kid—and you're going pronto!"

And within fifteen minutes the Rio Kid, with his feet tied under a broncho, was riding out of Nuce to the west, surrounded by armed men.

THE END.

(Now what's going to happen? How can the Kid escape from the sheriff's clutches? See: "THE KID WINS THROUGH!" next Tuesday's roaring Western yarn.)