POPULAR WINS EVERY TEST!

The POPULAR

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2d
EVERY TUESDAY.

The RIO KID GETS THERE FIRST!

See the Thrilling Western Yarn Inside!

FROM SEA CAPTAIN TO COWPUNCHER!

The Rio Kid vows he will turn Captain Shack, of the schooner Pond Lily, into a cowpuncher—but he finds his work cut out in attempting this extraordinary feat!

The New Recruit of Sampson's Ranch!

OUR ROARING WESTERN YARN WITH A THRILL IN EVERY CHAPTER.

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 hoein' 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 packed 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 missing from our range?" asked the foreman sarcastically.

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

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

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 hyer 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 pardner, Kid Carfax here, was kidnapped and shanghaied on board a durned dog-goned ship. And if you hadn't a hand in it, Seth Smith, you orter 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 didn't get 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 Starboy. 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 patching,'

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agreed the Kid, and the Old Man chuckled.

"And the crew have all deserted," went on Seth, "I reckon 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 hereabouts, assented the Kid.

"Well, a joke's a joke," said Seth. "But you want to hand over that sailorman, 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 on 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 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, Carfax. 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."

"Your mistake," said the Kid coolly. "That durned skipper as you call him, kidnapped me on his ship, and I was sure handled rough to make a seaman 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 gang at San Pedro, not to mention cow-stealin' and smugglin' hooch. There's a durned lot to keep you busy without worrying 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.

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

The skipper, who had shanghaied the Rio Kid and had been shanghaied in his turn, panted 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 durned 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 menace.

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.

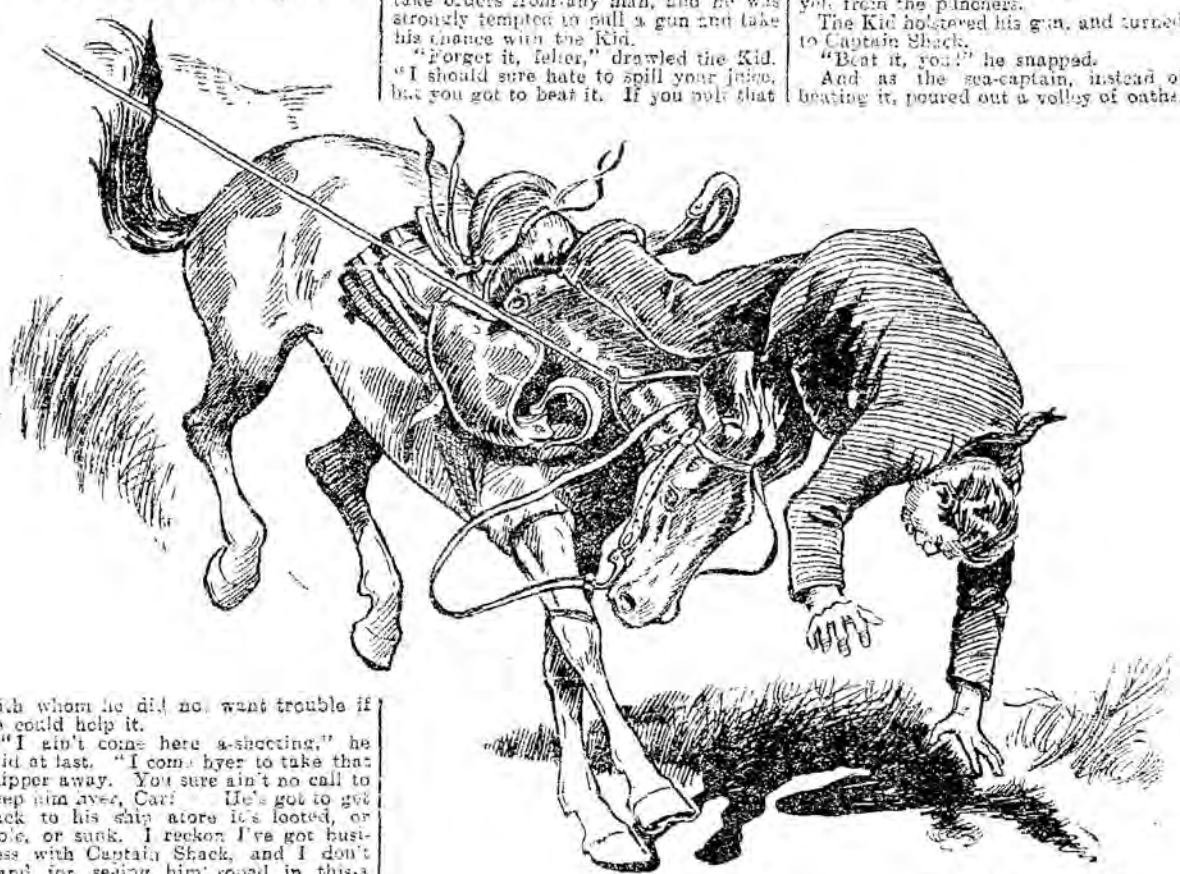
"You durned mosshead!" snapped the Kid. "I reckon I've a bunch to put the next through your cabeza. Beat it afore I make it last sickness for you!"

The marshal, without a word, clambered on his horse and rode away. He had been tempted to try his luck at 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,



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've sure lightning on the shoot, Kid," said the Old Man. "Where 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 kidnapping 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 shanghaied man, undergoing the process of breaking-in on his schooner. But if the lesson was a valuable one to Esau Shack, it was not agreeable. On the morrow 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 bumped on a bench, and stopped, and a sleepy 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-trampled 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 grass-land, 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 tramped, 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 glare 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 beast that had terrified him. He heard a mooing sound and a sound of retreating hoofs. It was borne in upon his mind that it was a cow he had encountered.

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 muzzle 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 groped 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 habited 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 trampled 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 doin' hyer? You've sure turned out airly!"

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

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

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

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 skipper 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' it, 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 lavanted 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 hyer ranch to quit. 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 yourn."

"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 "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.)

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 savagely. "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 earning 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 rodeo."

"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 tautened.

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 sullenly. 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 kidnappers, once 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, covering 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 gloated 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 land-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 guiding 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, eh?"

"You sure shanghaied me first, feller," said the Kid, mildly. "Don't one 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, gol-darn 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 gloating. "You're for it, you durned puncher! I guess you ain't coming after me again when I steer a course for the coast. I guess you're getting yours."

"Oh, shucks," 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, at 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 durned iceed tenderfoot, do you figure I'd have let you get a grip on that gun, if I hadn't taken out the cartridges, you mosshead?"

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, clubbing the gun. The Kid's quirt whirled up, and struck it from his hand, with a blow on on Shack's wrist that made him yell 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 durned polecat," said the Kid. "I took out them cartridges while you was bathin' the fire, you locoed 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, till 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 loo-se them critters, and get ready to hit the trail. Pronto, you sneakin' coyote."

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

It was near sundown when an echoing "Hi-vi" 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 comrade, 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 swing him up to a cottonwood on the end of a riata!"

"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 cayuse."

"I reckon he peters out," answered Sam. "I'd sure rather swing him up, Kid, or let daylight thu-ugh 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 clotted 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'll 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 hoss; but I'm through with this pesky polecat! 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 marooon me on the plains, without even a hoss?"

"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.)