WHO IS THE DEADLIEST SHOT IN TEXAS? THE RIO KID!—MEET HIM IN THE ROARING WESTERN YARN BELOW!

The NEW BOSS of the LAZY O!

The Lazy O bunch are the hardest, roughest, and most dangerous set of cowpunchers in the Packsaddle section. But that does not worry the Rio Kid, who has taken them over, together with one of the richest ranches in Texas!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Barney Baker of the Lazy O!

BARNEY BAKER, foreman of the Lazy O, walked into the Pack Hotel at Packsaddle. He glanced round him, nodded to an acquaintance or two, and crossed over to the bar—where the bar-tender slid his accustomed poison across the leaden counter before he had time to speak. But the foreman of the Lazy O did not touch the tanglefoot. There was a grim expression on his dark, harsh face, a glint in his deep-set grey eyes, an ominous tightening of his hard mouth. Barney was not a sweet-tempered man at the best of times, and his looks, at the present moment, showed that his temper was less sweet than ever. The two or three score of men in the place knew the reason for his black looks, as well as Barney himself knew it, and many of them would have grinned, but it was not healthy to grin at the foreman of the Lazy O.

Standing at the bar, leaning an elbow on it, Barney looked round, with glinting eyes under knitted brows, as if in search of offence. And most eyes dropped before his, or men looked another way. Nobody wanted to find trouble with the foreman of the toughest outfit in the valley of the Pecos.

The dust of the trail was on Barney Baker, thick on his chaps and his riding-boots. Perspiration clotted his forehead under the brim of his Stetson. He had ridden hard into town; his sweating broncho was now panting at the hitching-rope outside the timber hotel. But though only a few minutes had elapsed since the Lazy O foreman had dropped from his saddle, he had had time to gather the latest news of the cow-town. For Packsaddle was buzzing with the news from end to end. It was the biggest excitement that had ever struck the town. It was on every lip, and it had been fairly shouted at Barney, as the galoot most concerned. There were a good many in the Pack Hotel when he arrived, but more followed him in, wondering what the meeting would be like, between the foreman of the Lazy O, and the boy rancher who had bought the ranch and come along to Packsaddle to take possession of it.

After a grim survey of the crowd, that fell silent under his cold gaze, Barney Baker turned to the bar-keeper.

"I hear there's news in town!" he remarked, with a careless drawl in his voice, that was belied by the glint in his eyes.

"You've said it!" agreed the dispenser of varied poisons. "I guess Packsaddle is sitting up on its hind legs and waiting to hear something drop."

"Mr. Fairfax has horned in, I hear."

"He sure has."

"Where is he?"

"Gone up to his room, I guess," said the bar-keeper. "But he's coming down to grub any minute."

"He seems to have got this town rubbering!" said Barney.

"I should smile!" assented the bar-keeper. "Say, you heered that he booted Lariat like he was a Digger Injun?"

"Yep! I guess Lariat will be coming looking for him soon," said the foreman of the Lazy O. "I saw him on the street, and he looked riled, some."

"That guy Lariat has got him nine notches on his guns," said the bar-keeper casually. "Maybe he'll be making another notch."

"No 'mebbe' about it, I guess," said Barney.

"I dunno! Your new boss looks a kid—but he's sure some kid. He beat up two Lazy O punchers who stopped him on the trail, and he sure handled Lariat like he was a Chinaman. He's some kid!"

The foreman of the Lazy O bent his heavy brows at the bar-keeper.

"My new boss?" he repeated.

"I guess I mean the guy that's bought the Lazy O, down to Pecos Bend," said the bar-keeper hastily. "I allow he won't do a whole lot of bossing with you around, Barney."

There was a murmur of voices.

"Hyer he is."

"Hyer's the guy that booted Lariat!"

Barney Baker turned from the bar again. At the back of the large room that filled the whole ground floor of the Pack Hotel, was a wooden staircase, that led to the bed-rooms above. On the stair, which was more like a ladder, and innocent of hand-rail, a handsome figure appeared. All eyes were

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turned on it, keenest of all, the deep-set eyes of the foreman of the Lazy O.

What he saw was a handsome young rancher, dressed nattily, almost daintily, from the tips of his well-fitting riding-boots to the crown of his Stetson hat. He looked little more than a boy in years, but the Lazy O foreman knew a man when he saw one. He scanned the handsome, clear-cut sunburnt face, which was adorned by a little moustache, that did not hide the firm set of the steady lips. A "kid," as the bar-keeper had said; but "some" kid, Barney could see that. And it seemed to Barney that there was something familiar in the face—that it was a face he had seen before somewhere, though he could not place it. So far as he knew, he had never seen Mister Fairfax, or heard of him till he bought the Lazy O ranch.

But names went for little in the Packsaddle country, and Barney knew that he might have seen Mister Fairfax when he was called by some other name. Staring hard at the handsome face, he felt that it was familiar in some way. But assuredly it never entered his mind that Mister Fairfax had ever been called Kid Carfax, more widely celebrated as the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. Barney had surmised and speculated much concerning the latest buyer of the Lazy O, but in his wildest imaginings he had never dreamed that the ranch had been bought by an outlaw for whom half the sheriffs in Texas stretched out official hands. And now that he looked at his new boss, and felt that his face was familiar, he did not dream that the last time he had seen Mister Fairfax, was when the Rio Kid was riding a grey mustang at a mad gallop through the streets of White Pine, with a gun in either hand, spitting fire, and a wild mob raging round him. Barney remembered the shooting up of White Pine, but he did not recall it to mind at this moment.

Certainly it wanted a stretch of the imagination to take this handsome young rancher for an outlaw. The Kid did not even pack a gun, to all seeming. In a town where every man packed a gun, and sometimes two, the new boss of the Lazy O displayed no weapon. Yet he knew, by this time, that he had come to take possession of a ranch in the most lawless country in Texas, which had been sold over and over again, never to the profit of the buyer, and where Barney Baker ruled the roost, head of the toughest bunch between the Rio Grande and the Colorado river.

Heedless, apparently unconscious of the general stare, the Kid came down the steep ladder-like steps from the upper regions, and sauntered into the crowded room. At the back was a trestle table where supper was served by a Chinaman; this constituted the dining-room of the Pack Hotel. Hotel quarters at Packsaddle were not luxurious. Half a dozen voices greeted the Kid as he came, first among them the voice of Buck Sidgers, the town marshal of Packsaddle. Buck had a hard row to hoe as marshal of the wildest cow-town on the Rio Pecos, where law-abiding citizens scudded into their shacks, and the store-keeper put up his shutters, when the word came that the Lazy O outfit were riding in. If the Lazy O had a new boss who could keep that wild bunch in order, Buck was prepared to welcome him like a brother.

"Say, Mister Fairfax, there's your foreman yonder, by the bar!" Buck told the Rio Kid.

The Kid had already noted the dark, saturnine man who was watching him with such keen interest. There was little that escaped the Kid's eye, especially when he knew that danger dogged every step he took.

"That's good," said the Kid. "I guess I told Panhandle Pete to send him to town to meet up with me here. That's Barney Baker?"

"Sure."

The foreman of the Lazy O detached himself from the bar, and came across the room towards the Kid, with a heavy stride and jingling spurs.

And the Packsaddle crowd fell back on either side, prudently leaving plenty of room for the passage of lead.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Gun-play!

THE Rio Kid smiled gently.

Every man in the place expected gun-play—except the Kid. He did not expect it—from Barney Baker.

What had happened on his way to Packsaddle, and what he had learned since he had struck the town, had put the Kid wise to the state of affairs on the Lazy O.

Six or seven times, at least, the Lazy O ranch had been sold through Lawyer Lucas at Pecos Bend, and every time something had happened to the purchaser. One man had been quirted and scared away—another tarred and feathered by a crowd of uproarious cowmen—another ridden on a rail for miles and turned loose in the prairie. One man, at least, who had bought the Lazy O, had been shot up, and found dead on the range. A tougher customer than the rest and not to be scared off, the Kid figured. Again and again the Lazy O came on the market—again and again, sooner or later, it found a buyer; but all the time, Barney Baker ruled the roost at the Lazy O, with the toughest bunch in Texas at his beck and call. But in all the outrages that had happened, Barney's hand was not to be traced. There was little law in Packsaddle, but what there was, Barney respected, so far as appearances went. Every man in the town, every rider on the range, knew that Barney was at the bottom of the game that was keeping the Lazy O in his grip. But had any sheriff horned into the trouble, he would have found no vestige of proof. Barney's hand in the game was prudently kept dark.

Barney did not need to come out into the open. The bunch were his men, and he made it worth their while to back his play. There was always a chance that the law might prove too strong even for the wildest bunch in Packsaddle, and if that time came, Barney did not want to figure in a trial at the county seat. And Barney aimed, in the long run, to become something more than a ranch foreman. Every time the Lazy O came on the market, thrown there by a disgusted owner, the price came lower. Sooner or later it would come low enough for Barney himself to buy. In the meantime he ran the ranch, sold cattle on his own account, banked dollars at San Antonio, and sent away dismal reports of drought, and pest, and heavy losses to distant owners who never came near Packsaddle.

There was hardly a guy in Packsaddle who did not know Barney's game, and the buying and selling of the Lazy O was a standing joke. Twice some suspicious proprietor had sent a new foreman to replace Barney. Each new man had departed quicker than he came, learning that the Lazy O was not a healthy place for a man whom Barney Baker disliked. But in none of the lawless proceedings did Barney take an open hand.

The Rio Kid knew it all—now. And he was not expecting trouble with Barney Baker. He knew there was going to be gun-play, and he was ready for it. But the play would not come from Barney. No man in Packsaddle was to be able to say that the foreman of the Lazy O had shot up his boss. Even Packsaddle would not have stood for that.

So, while he was quietly wary, the Kid had no expectation at all that Barney would throw down the gauntlet, while every other man in the Pack was looking for trouble to break out.

In hushed silence, Barney Baker strode across the wide room, all eyes following his movements.

He came face to face with the Kid, and the excitement was breathless. Which would be the first to draw a gun—was the question in every mind. And there was a general gasp, and a falling of faces, when it became clear that there was no gun to be drawn. The Kid had read the Lazy O foreman aright; Barney had no intention of figuring in the public eye as a desperado who shot up his boss.

"Mr. Fairfax, sir?" said Barney.

"That's me," assented the Kid politely.

"I got your message from Panhandle Pete, and rode into town at once to meet you here, sir!" said Barney. "I guess you know I'm your foreman at the Lazy O."

"Sure," said the Kid, "and I'm glad to meet up with you, Mr. Baker. I guess if you'll join me at supper, we'll have a chin over the ranch—I'm coming out to see it in the morning."

"You've said it, Mister Fairfax," said Barney.

There was disappointment in many faces. Gun-play was not coming on, that was clear. The crowd in the Pack lost its tense attitude. Buck Sidgers strolled away to the bar.

"Barney's taking it like a lamb this time," he remarked to the bar-keeper.

The man of bottles and glasses winked.

"I should smile!" he said. "That's how Barney took it when the man from Austin came to take over."

"The man from Austin?" repeated the marshal of Packsaddle reflectively.

"The guy who was found shot up in a coulee a few days afterwards," said the man behind the bar.

"I guess I remember."

"Barney is sure dangerous when he talks turkey. I guess if Mister Fairfax had a friend hyer, that guy'd warn him to take the back back to Pecos Bend to-morrow."

The marshal nodded.

"Generally," grinned the man behind the bar," "the bunch scared 'em off. But a guy that ain't scared off, gets his all of a sudden. Barney ain't letting no boss cavort around at the Lazy O. When he lies low and talks turkey, it's time for somebody to watch out."

And the marshal nodded again.

Meanwhile, the Kid and the foreman of the Lazy O had sat down at the trestle table. Many eyes turned on them continually, but the manner of Barney Baker was that of a ranch

foreman meeting his new boss; the black look he had worn on entering the Pack had gone now. It was noted that Mister Fairfax sat with his back to the wall, in a position whence he could survey the whole room, and where no one could step behind him. Kid as he looked, the new boss of the Lazy O was evidently no slouch.

But he ate his supper with a good appetite, and talked cheerily, as if he had no care on his mind. To all appearances, the new boss of the Lazy O was feeling cheery and contented, and looking forward to taking possession of his property on the morrow. Yet any man in the cow town could have told him that he was unlikely to be seen alive after riding out to survey the Lazy O.

He talked in terms of cattle and markets and water supply to Barney Baker, and Barney came to understand quite clearly that he knew what he was talking about. The Kid had been raised among cows, and what he did not know about the ranch business was not worth knowing. Then he came to the subject of the bunch.

"They say there's surely a lively outfit at the Lazy O," he remarked pleasantly, "and from what I've seen, I reckon it's a cinch. There was two of the bunch met up with me on the trail, and I had a little trouble—they didn't seem to cotton on to the idea of a new boss. I had to handle one, and shoot up the other."

Barney gave him a look from under his bent brows.

"They came back and told me," he said. "They was sure surprised at the way you handled them, Mister Fairfax."

"And there was another of the bunch in this hyer burg, when the hack got in—a galoot they call Lariat," said the Kid. "I guess I've fired that galoot for shooting off his mouth too free, Mr. Baker, and you want to bar him off the Lazy O."

"It's for you to say, Mister Fairfax," said Barney with another stealthy look at the young rancher. "If you say that Lariat is fired, it goes."

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

"But I'm worried some, about that guy Lariat," said Barney. "I hear that you booted him——"

"I sure did."

"He ain't the guy to take it, Mister Fairfax," said Barney, shaking his head. "I guess that guy Lariat will be hunting you."

"Jest what I reckoned," said the Kid cheerily. "I shouldn't be a whole piece surprised to see him horn in any minute, gunning after me. Honest, I'll be surprised if he don't. But he's fired from the Lazy O, and he stays fired."

There was a buzz in the room, and the Kid's glance rested on the distant doorway. The wide door stood open to the street—outside, the naphtha lamps flared. In the doorway, now, stood a figure—a thick-set puncher with bow-legs in heavy chaps, with two guns slung in low-hung holsters. From a hard, ruthless face, two cold eyes searched the room, and gleamed as they lighted on the Rio Kid.

"He's come!" said Barney Baker, after a glance at the doorway. "I'm afraid this means trouble for you, Mister Fairfax."

"You reckon so?" asked the Kid. "Now, I was jest figuring that it meant trouble for that bandy-legged guy yonder."

Lariat stared round the room, his ice-cold eyes—the eyes of a killer—quelling every gaze that met his. Then he stepped in.

The Kid rose to his feet.

If there was any alarm in his breast, it did not show in his face. His hands were in the pockets of his riding-breeches, and he did not withdraw them as the gun-man, with a kind of slow crouching step, came across towards him. Well the Packsaddle men knew that crouching step, that cold gleam in the gun-man's eyes. A wide lane was left for the advance, and there was deathly silence.

Lariat came to a halt at last, facing the Kid across the narrow trestle table.

Still the new boss of the Lazy O stood with his hands in his pockets, and if he had a weapon, it was not to be seen.

He smiled at the gun-man.

"Say, you hunting more trouble, Lariat?" he asked amiably. "You ain't satisfied with one allowance of boot leather?"

Lariat's hands were close to the guns in the low-slung holsters. He grinned—a savage grin.

His enemy had no chance now, however quick he might be on the draw. Lariat knew that there was a gun at the back of the Kid's belt, and he was swift when it came to draw, but long before the boy rancher could disengage his hands from his pockets, and reach for his gun, the gun-man could draw and pile half a dozen shots into him. It was more sheer murder than a gun-fight that was coming, and many faces expressed grim disapproval, but no man spoke. Buck Sidgers stirred uneasily, where he leaned on the bar, but he made no motion. Gun-fighting was the rule in Packsaddle, and if a guy threw away his chances as Mister Fairfax was doing, it was his own funeral.

There was a tense silence following the Kid's words; it lasted only a few seconds but it seemed an age. Then Lariat spoke.

"Yep!" he said "You booted me, you scallywag, and you kinder took me by surprise, and got away with it. I guess the time's come now to settle."

"You want to be booted again?" inquired the Kid. "I'll sure oblige you if you want, and without taking you by surprise any. You dog-goned, pesky gink, I guess you fancy yourself some gun-man, and you sure seem to have Packsaddle scared to a frazzle, but I'll tell you, I have handled bad men before, and if you're honing for trouble, I'm the mutton you want, with the wool on."

The gun-man grinned ferociously.

"You've sure spilled a hatful," he said. "Why, you pesky little prairie rabbit, you figure that you've come to Packsaddle to run the Lazy O? I guess that's a man-size job that won't suit you. You allow that I'm fired from the bunch——"

"You sure are fired," assented the Kid, "and you stay fired. Don't let me see you around on the Lazy O. I don't aim to keep on giving you boot leather. Next time I'll take a quirt to you."

With a sudden movement, sudden and swift, the gun-man's hands dropped on his guns and they leaped together from the holsters.

Crack!

The Kid's hands were still in his pockets. But Lariat's guns were never lifted. With the weapons in his hands, the ruffian staggered back, and fell with a crash to the floor. One second more, and the Kid would have been riddled with bullets, but in that second the Rio Kid had fired from his pocket, and the most desperate and ruthless gun-man in the Packsaddle country went to the floor—and did not stir again.

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THE THIRD CHAPTER.
His Own Snare!

MORNING dawned bright and sunny on the cow-town of Packsaddle.

Mister Fairfax, alias the Rio Kid, breakfasted at the Pack Hotel, with a face as bright and cheery as the morning.

Barney Baker breakfasted with him, and the manner of the Lazy O foreman was quiet and subdued. While the Kid was eating, faces were continually put in at the doorway, to look at him. The Kid did not mind, in fact, he was rather enjoying the sensation he had made in Packsaddle.

The cow-town buzzed with the story of the gun-fight of the previous evening. Mister Fairfax, the kid rancher who had bought the Lazy O, had shot up the most desperate gun-man in a lawless town. The news that Lariat had been shot up spread like wildfire. The gun-man had been king-pin in the Lazy O bunch—even Barney Baker had feared him a little, and in Packsaddle he had been monarch of all he surveyed. Quick on the draw, utterly ruthless in the use of his skill with his guns, the "killer" had been a terror, and there was not a man in the town who did not breathe more freely when it was known that the dreaded killer was to be feared no more. Buck Sidgers had a smiling face that morning, and a cordial word for Mister Fairfax. Even men of the Lazy O were not sorry that the bully of the bunk-house had met his match. Mister Fairfax had leaped into local fame at a bound. The man who had shot up Lariat, was a man to be respected, kid as he looked.

For the fate of Lariat, Barney Baker cared not one straw, indeed, he had had a lurking fear of the cold-hearted desperado that made him feel some of the general satisfaction when he fell. But it was a blow to him. New boss after boss had come out to take possession of the Lazy O, and every time the ranch foreman had put paid to him. But he realised that this new boss was a man of quite a new calibre, and that a struggle of a very different kind was beginning. For the first time since he had run the Lazy O, Barney Baker envisaged the possibility of defeat in the game he had played so long and so successfully. In Packsaddle, Mister Fairfax had leaped into fame and popularity—even in the Lazy O bunch he had admirers now. It was no longer a matter of dealing with a stranger who did not know the ropes; but of dealing with a cool, keen galoot who was a better man than a professional killer, and who had made the whole cow-town his friends, and who had the hearty backing of the town marshal, so far as Buck could back him. That was a change, with a vengeance.

But Barney was glad, at least, of the caution that had prevented him from attempting gun-play himself with this surprising galoot. He had had no fear of him, he had avoided trouble because it was his game to keep in the background, and take no open part in fressing out the boss of the ranch. But he knew now that had he tackled Mister Fairfax, he would have gone to the cow-town cemetery even more

surely than Lariat. The guy who had shot up the gunman was not a guy with whom Barney wanted gun-play.

After breakfast, the Kid looked for a horse. He wanted a cayuse to ride out to the ranch. His own Side-Kicker was not with the Kid now, the grey mustang was rather too well known, and though the Kid had changed his own looks a good deal, there was always the danger of recognition. Later on, he figured it would be safe to bring Side-Kicker along from the place where he had left him, but for the present, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had a cautious game to play.

It was the Kid's intention, if fortune smiled on his new venture, to let the Rio Kid die to the world. He had never wanted to be an outlaw, and he longed to say farewell to the lonely trail and the shadows of the chaparral. As Mr. Fairfax, he wanted to run his ranch, and live a peaceful life, giving the walnut-butted guns a rest in their holsters. It was a happy prospect before the Kid, and in a remote region like Packsaddle, he had a good chance of carrying out his plans. Already his wild days of outlawry seemed to be falling far behind him, and the Kid was thinking of himself solely as a rancher. If it lasted, it was going to be good, though at the back of the Kid's mind there was a haunting doubt that the quiet and calm ways of peace were not for him.

When it was known in Packsaddle that Mister Fairfax was looking for a horse, there was no lack of offers. Nearly every galoot in Packsaddle had a cayuse to sell, and the Kid's boyish looks made those galoots hopeful. But in the course of an hour that morning, Mister Fairfax made it clear that he knew as much about horseflesh as he did about gun-fighting. Disappointed men shook their heads, and grinned ruefully, after they had tried to palm off every variety of a four-legged crock on Mister Fairfax. But Packsaddle could admire a man who knew horses, and the Kid's perspicacity added to the high opinion he had already gained in the cow-town. The young rancher was accommodated at last with a handsome pinto, not so good a cayuse, he reckoned, as Side-Kicker, but the best horse in Packsaddle, and that, as any Packsaddle man would have declared, was saying a whole mouthful. And when the rancher mounted the pinto, and rode away with Barney Baker, a crowd gathered to see him off, and gave him a shout—and wondered, afterwards, whether he would ever be seen alive again.

"That guy," said the bar-tender at the Pack Hotel, "is sure some guy with a gun, and he knows a whole heap about horses. But he don't know the Lazy O bunch yet. I guess I'm open to offer any gentleman two to one that nobody but the buzzards will know what has happened to Mister Fairfax, now he's rode out of town."

And no gentleman present was prepared to take the odds.

The Kid, certainly, was fully aware that he was riding into red-hot trouble when he rode away with Barney Baker. But his smiling face gave no hint of it. He had bought the Lazy O, he was going to take possession of the Lazy O, and if any guy got in the way, the Kid figured that it was going to be unhealthy for that guy. He had deliberately chosen to settle down in a country where sheriffs disliked to ride; the Kid did not want to meet up with any sheriffs. That meant that the law could help him little, but the Kid was prepared to help himself.

With quiet amusement, he noted that Barney Baker was riding a white horse, though he had come to town on a black cow-pony. That white horse, was a conspicuous object afar on the brown prairie, and he was not a rapid goer. Unless he was going to leave his foreman behind, the Kid could not let his pinto out. So he held his pinto in, having no intention of leaving Barney behind. For the first couple of miles out of Packsaddle, Barney rode in a rather glum silence, while the Kid cheerily whistled the tune of a Mexican fandango. They followed a scarcely-marked track, across wide rolling plains, towards the distant ranch, which was a good ten miles from the cow-town.

"Say," remarked the Kid, after a time. "That sure is some slouch of a cayuse of yourn, Barney."

GUN PLAY! With a sudden movement the gun-man's hands dropped on his guns, and they leaped together from the holsters. Crack! The Kid's hands were still in his pockets. But even before Lariat could lift his guns the young boy outlaw had fired from his pockets, and the ruffian staggered back. (*See Chapter* 2.)

"I borrowed him," said the foreman briefly. "I left my own pony with the blacksmith for a new shoe."

"Sho!" said the Kid, "and being white, I guess any galoot who might be watching for us on the llano, wouldn't be likely to make a mistake up to a thousand yards."

Barney Baker started, and his eyes flashed for a second at the new boss of the Lazy O.

"What you mean, *Mister Fairfax?*" he asked, after a pause.

"Jest what I say," answered the Kid amiably. "Puttin' it that some pard of Lariat's might be laying for me on the prairie, knowing that I was riding out to the Lazy O this morning, I guess he wouldn't want to bag the wrong bird with a long-distance rifle-shot. They would sure cuss him some, at the Lazy O, if he let daylight through his foreman instead of his boss. But you being fixed up with a white hoss, I guess the guy wouldn't make no such mistake, that hoss can sure be spotted from a long way."

Barney breathed hard and deep.

"I guess I never reckoned on anything of the kind, Mister Fairfax," he said slowly.

"You!" said the Kid. "Of course you *didn't!* Ain't you my foreman, and jest as spry looking after me as looking after your own hide? Wouldn't it jest jolt you a whole lot, if some pesky guy with a rifle picked me off from one of them branches of pecan or post-oak! It sure would!"

The foreman of the Lazy O muttered something indistinctly.

"What I'm figuring," explained the Kid, "is that some galoot with a grouch agin me, knowing you're riding a white hoss, ain't likely to make any mistake with a pot-shot from cover. You never

figured on it, Mr. Baker; but I allow that other guy would."

"What guy?"

"The guy that's laying for me somewhere between Packsaddle and the Lazy O, in cover, with a rifle to his shoulder," answered the Kid coolly. "I ain't looking for gun-play, after what happened to Lariat in town, but rifle-play at long range is a sorter different proposition. What you opine?"

"I guess there's nothing to it, Mister Fairfax," said Barney hastily. "The Lazy O bunch wouldn't stand for it."

"Sho!" said the Kid. "I guess they stand for a whole lot, from what I've heard about them guys who've bought the Lazy O from time to time. But if the whole bunch wouldn't stand for it, Mr. Baker, I guess there's two or three gun-men in the outfit who would. I've got a hunch that we shall not get in sight of the Lazy O without hearing a rifle talk."

Barney gritted his teeth under his beard. His scheme was as well-known to Mister Fairfax, as if the snare had been laid in his sight.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
A Change of Mounts!

THE foreman checked his horse.

"If you're getting skeered, Mister Fairfax, it ain't too late to ride back to Packsaddle," he said hastily.

The Kid raised his eyebrows.

"Skeered?" he said. "I ain't skeered any, Mr. Baker. Not on your life. Why, this game is jest pie to me."

He checked the pinto, rose a little in his stirrups, and scanned the surrounding plain. Far in the distance, brown dots on the grass showed where a herd of cattle fed. But there was no sign in sight of any human being. The wide ranges of the Lazy O were solitary enough. Ahead of the two riders, far ahead, the track they followed skirted a belt of post-oaks, winding away about six or seven hundred yards from the trees. At that distance, a very keen eye would have been needed to pick out one rider from the other, with both dressed much alike, but there was no mistaking the white horse.

"Jest pie!" repeated the Kid cheerily. "I'll tell the world, I've hit a lot of trouble in my time, Mr. Baker, and enjoyed the whole lot of it. This hyer little difficulty with the Lazy O bunch ain't worrying me any. After they find out the kind of galoot I am, they'll settle down with me like lambs, and I'm telling you so. You figure that there ain't any Lazy O man watching for us, say, in them post-oaks ahead?"

"Sure!" said Barney.

"You answer for that?" asked the Kid.

"Sure thing! Bet my life on it," said Barney confidently.

"You sure do make me feel a suspicious guy," confessed the Kid. "But if you bet your life on it, Mr. Baker, I guess it's O.K. And you ain't any objection to changing horses with me?"

Barney Baker almost tottered in his saddle.

"Changing horses!" he repeated faintly.

"Yep!"

"I—I guess——"

"You see, this is the how of it," said

(*Continued on opposite page.*)

TALES OF AN OLD SEA SALT!

Has the old bo'sun saved damsels in distress, and fought pirates? Well, he says he has. And this is his narrative!

The Episode of the Santa Barbara Pirates!

"EVER rescued any damsels in distress, bo'sun?" I asked. "You know the sort of thing—pirates, and all that!"

"Now you're tryin' to pull my leg, sir," said the bo'sun. "You're like a lot more—don't believe that pirates exists nowadays, eh? Well, look 'ere, I'll just tell you about an expeediment what 'appened to me a few years back."

* * *

Know the Santa Barbara Islands? They're off the coast o' America, an' when I was on the barque Noria we passed 'em on a voyage from Callao to 'Frisco. By that time we was runnin' short o' water, an' as there wasn't much wind about, the skipper thinks it's a good idea to send ashore to the first island we sights to see if there's any water there.

'E sends me in the little dinghy to scout around an' look for a stream, so's I could take a party ashore afterwards and fill up the casks. Off I goes on my own, and when I reaches the island I sees it's all 'igh land, wi' no landin' place, so I rows round the point an' makes for the other side o' the island.

'Twas a very rocky coast, and I keeps comin' across all sorts o' little inlets, but sees no sign o' a stream. Suddenly I rounds a point, and there, in front o' me, I sees an old four-master lying in a bay. Just as I'm about to row to 'er, a 'orrible 'ullabaloo breaks out aboard, and I sees the 'ole crew suddenly jump on the bulwarks, dive overboard and swim ashore as fast as they can.

This looks mighty suspicious to me, so I rows nearer, keepin' my eyes on the four-master. Presently I 'ears a shriek—a woman's shriek—and one o' the prettiest women I've ever seen in me life comes to the bulwarks and 'ollers out: "'Elp! 'Elp!"

Fair awful she looked, too, 'cos 'er face was all yellow like, wi' green eyes, and she was only there a minute afore she disappears, evidently bein' pulled back by someone on deck. Well, I wasn't goin' to stand for none o' that, so I rows as quick as I can, an' I gets to the four-master. By a bit o' luck there's a rope trailin' over the side, so I gets 'old o' it and shins up it. An' when I gets a look at the main deck I nearly jumps out o' my skin!

There's the woman, a-struggling in the 'ands of a big brute over six foot tall. An', while I watches, 'e drags 'er to the mainmast, ties 'er up to it, an' empties a cask o' powder around 'er and the mast. Then 'e runs a trail 'o powder along the deck, runs into a poop cabin for a minute and comes out again wi' a blazing torch.

"Now!" 'e says, ferocious like. "Unless you tells me where your father 'as 'idden that plan, up goes this ship an' you, too!"

"You villain!" she cries. "You'll not get nothing out o' me!"

"Then your blood be on your own 'ead!" 'e says, and 'e bends down to light the trail o' powder wi' the torch.

Well, I wasn't standing for nothing like that; sides, I'd 'ave been blowed up as well if the ship 'ad gone. So I makes a flying leap through the air, an' the next moment I was on 'im! The torch drops and fizzles out, and the two of us rolls about the deck!

Strike me, but 'e was a tartar! Still, I was fairly 'andy wi' my fists, myself, so we 'as a real dust-up on the deck. First I gets on top o' 'im, an' then 'e gets on top o' me, and all the time 'e's 'ollering out somethin' awful. 'E might 'ave downed me, for 'e was a bigger man, but we rolls near the mast an' I jumps to me feet and snatches a belayin' pin from the rack. 'E jumps for me, but 'e wasn't quick enough, an' I catches 'im a cosh on the side o' the 'ead what lays 'im out on the deck. Then I jumps to the mast, whips out my knife, and cuts the girl loose.

Then I wishes I 'adn't!

Phew! I've 'eard some women go off the deep end in my time, but that there woman wi' the green eyes was the worst I've ever known. She called me for everythin'! I was—accordin' to 'er——the blanketiest blanketty blank what she'd ever seen! Naturally I think as 'ow she's gone off 'er 'ead, but she suddenly yells out:

"Silas! Jim! Pete! Come and throw this flat-footed sea-cook overboard!"

Next minute I was surrounded by the ugliest-lookin' gang o' cut-throats you could find in a day's march. They went for me, and although I put up a good fight, I was about 'arf dead before a big fellow in a white suit wi' 'orn-rimmed spectacles an' a megaphone in 'is 'and came along and stops 'em.

Then 'e started on me—an' e was worse than the woman! But when the bloke what 'ad been goin' to fire the powder came to and joined in—well, I thought discreation was the best part of valure, so I runs to the side, dives over, scrambles into my boat and rows away as quick as I could! Not never again will I go ashore on the Santa Barbara Islands, mark my words!

* * *

I had my own ideas about the bo'sun's yarn, and when I went back to my hotel I looked up an atlas. The Santa Barbara Islands lie off the coast of California, about fifty miles or so from the city of Los Angeles. Then I remembered a certain famous pirate story which had an inci, dent very much like the one which the bo'sun had just described.

Then I remembered that in "making-up" for films, actors and actresses use yellow greasepaint for the face, and green for the eyes!

Which accounts for the fact that a certain American film company had to wait until their leading actor recovered from the effects of a "cosh" on the head with a belaying pin before they could "shoot" again a certain interrupted scene in their latest pirate film!

the Kid, with an amiable smile, but a merciless gleam in his eyes. "You reckon there ain't any guy watching the trail to take a long-range pot-shot. I reckon there is! I don't feel safe on this pinto, but you'll feel as safe as if you was in the middle of Main Street at San Antone. You get me?"

Barney Baker's face was white under its tan.

"I guess you're fooling, Mister Fairfax," he muttered.

"Not by a hatful! I'm talking straight out of my mouth!" declared the Kid. "You know the bunch better'n I do, and I reckon you may be right. So hop off the cayuse, and get on this critter, Mr. Baker."

"I reckon I don't aim to change hosses, Mister Fairfax."

"And why not?" cooed the Kid.

"I don't choose!" growled Barney Baker. "You're fooling, and I ain't a guy for fooling. I ain't changing hosses."

"I guess you've forgotten that you're my foreman, speaking to your boss!" remarked the Kid.

"Boss or not, you don't own this hoss, and you ain't riding it," said Barney stubbornly.

If the Kid had doubted before, he did not doubt now.

"You sure do give me a jolt, Barney," he said in a pained voice. "I hate to pull a gun on my own foreman." As if by magic a gun appeared in the Kid's hand as he spoke. "Git off that cayuse."

Barney glared at him. He longed to reach for a gun, longed with all his soul. But he was not tired of life.

"If—if you suspect me——" he stuttered.

"Suspect you?" smiled the Kid. "That's all hot air, Mister Baker—ain't you a white man, and my foreman? I aim to see my orders obeyed on my own ranch, and I guess I'm ready to let daylight into any guy in my outfit who don't jump to orders, foreman or not. I'd hate to spill your juice, but I'm going to ride that cayuse, and you're going to ride this pinto, and I ain't wasting time about it, any. Get down, Barney Baker, if you're honing to keep on this side of Jordan."

The Lazy O foreman dismounted. The sweat was thick on his brow. The Kid slipped from the pinto, and mounted the white horse. Barney Baker showed no disposition to mount the pinto.

"I'm waiting for you, feller!" said the Kid.

With a muttered curse, the foreman of the Lazy O clambered on the pinto. They rode on towards the distant post-oaks.

The trail skirted the trees, which lay to the right, at a distance of eight hundred yards. At that distance, the Kid figured, the marksman would have to judge them by their horses—and the man who rode the white horse would not get the lead.

They were almost abreast of the trees, when Barney Baker pulled a little off the trail to the right. This brought *him* nearer to the timber belt.

The Kid grinned. As he was no longer to be recognised at a far distance by the horse he rode, Barney wanted to get near enough to the marksman to be recognised on his own. But the Kid was not backing that play.

"Keep to the trail!" he rapped out.

"Mister Fairfax——"

The Kid rode close, grasped the rein of the pinto, and dragged the horse back to the trail. Barney's hand itched to grasp a gun. But the steely eyes of the Kid daunted him.

"Dog-gone you!" he muttered hoarsely. "Quit fooling, Mister Fairfax——"

"I ain't fooling any!" said the Kid grimly. "You dog-goned skunk, you know there's a pot-shooter fixed up in cover in them oaks, because you put him up to lay for me, and you fixed yourself with a white horse so that he wouldn't make any mistake at a distance. Now you got to take your chance, you pizen polecat, and if you get yours from your own gun-man, it's your funeral and not mine.

Barney Baker's lips opened—and closed again! The Kid knew—this new boss of the Lazy O did not merely suspect—he knew! It was death to resist—and it was as likely as not death to ride on, mounted on the Kid's horse. But Barney had no choice about that. With sweating brow, and a hand that shook on his reins, he rode on the trail, abreast of the long belt of post-oaks—from which, at any point and at any moment, the death-shot might come.

A puff of white smoke in the deep shadow of the trees! The bullet came before the report rolled the distance. Barney Baker gave a sudden sharp cry, and reeled over his saddle-horn.

The hidden marksman had fired—and the man who rode the Kid's horse had got the lead. Barney Baker sagged over the pinto's neck, holding on with clutching hands. The Kid, grasped his reins, urged both horses to a gallop, swerving to the left, and dashing away from the direction of the post-oaks that hid the ruffian. Barney swayed in his saddle as he rode, drunkenly, but still holding on. Far out of range of the hidden pot-shooter, the Kid pulled in the horses, and pushed close to the foreman of the Lazy O, with a helping hand.

Barney gave him a bitter, evil look, a look in which rage and hatred were concentrated.

"You done me!" he muttered thickly. "You done me, dog-gone your hide—but you ain't done the bunch yet! The bunch will get you——"

His voice choked, and he lurched heavily, and the Rio Kid caught him as he fell sideways from the saddle.

THE END.

(Now, chums! Look out for another topping long complete tale of the West in next week's issue!)

CHANGING MOUNTS! "I hate to pull a gun on my own foreman," said the Kid. And as if by magic a gun leaped into his hand. "But we're sure changing mounts. You're going to ride my hoss now, and chance the man who's waiting in that belt of timber yonder for us!" With the perspiration thick on his brow, the foreman of Lazy O dismounted. (See this page.)