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"ATTA-BOY!"

LIVELY WESTERN YARN *Every Week!*

RULER OF THE MOUNTAIN TRAILS!

Fear'd by all, Rafael Gonzago, the bandolero, ruled the mountain passes with a rod of iron. He was monarch of all he surveyed on those wild trails—until the Rio Kid headed that way!

The BANDOLERO! by RALPH REDWAY



THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Between Two Foes!

THE lazo flew so swiftly, so silently, that the Rio Kid never knew that it was coming until the noose slipped over his shoulders and tightened round his arms.

The Kid, for once, was caught napping; but he could hardly blame himself. He was looking for danger in quite a different direction when the rope circled him from behind.

For a whole morning, as he followed the old camino real in the heart of the Sierra Madre of Mexico, the Kid had known that he was followed.

Thrice, looking back from high ground, he had caught a glimpse of the horseman who was riding in his tracks, at a distance—a man in sombrero and serape, but once when the wind blew the serape loose, the Kid glimpsed a uniform under it.

The Rio Kid had no hunch for trouble with a Mexican military officer; it was to leave trouble behind him that he had ridden over the border from Texas. If this particular Mexican was looking for him, as it appeared, the Kid preferred that the Greaser should not find him. For that reason he turned off the camino, and rode into the hills by a rough trail that led up a wild and rocky canyon. Where the trail led he did not know, and did not care, so long as it led him out of the way of his pursuer. The Kid really wanted to dodge trouble. If the Mexican rode on by the camino, so much the better. If he followed the Kid up the canyon, then the boy outlaw of the Rio-Grande had to stop the pursuit by a more effectual method. A mile up the canyon, the Kid halted, dismounted, and, leaving his mustang under a cottonwood, stepped on a high rock to look back.

Far in the distance down the canyon, a big sombrero nodded for a moment and then disappeared again. But that glimpse was enough for the Kid. The horseman had turned from the road and was following him up the mountain trail, and the Kid's bronzed face set grimly. If the galoot was bent on trouble, and was not to be denied, the Kid was the man to give him all he wanted, and a little over. He stepped down from the high rock, but he did not remount the black-muzzled mustang. At that spot he was going to wait for the horseman to come up and see what he wanted—and give him what he probably did not want.

That was how the Kid came to be taken by surprise. He was in the midst of a rocky, lifeless wilderness, and no sound or sign had warned him of a foe.



at hand. The first warning he had came in the shape of the lazo settling about him, and then it was too late. As he grabbed at a gun the lazo tightened, and he was plucked from his feet, and came down with a crash on the rocky earth. From a clump of pecans and mesquite a dozen yards away, a man ran swiftly, gathering in the riata as he ran. The Kid, with his arms pinned to his sides, struggled fiercely in the grip of the rope, but he struggled in vain. The Kid was a good man with the lasso himself, and he realized that the man who had roped him in was a good man, too, with the rope—a master hand. The Kid was a helpless prisoner as his assailant ran swiftly up to him.

A swarthy man, with a scarred face and flashing black eyes, stood over him, gripping the rope in his left hand, a gleaming machete in his right. The black eyes blazed down at the Kid.

The Kid looked up at him coolly. He was at the swarthy ruffian's mercy, but he was cool as ice. Not that he expected mercy. There was no hint of it in the savage, scarred face and the flashing eyes.

"Say, feller, you've sure got me," drawled the Kid. "I guess I hand it to you, feller."

"Gringo dog!" The brigand gritted his white teeth as he glared down at his prisoner. "Gringo fool! You walk into my hands. I have hunted you night and day—and now you walk into my hands!"

The Kid nodded.

"You've said it," he agreed.

He smiled grimly. He could guess that this swarthy scoundrel was a mem-

ber of the gang of Rafael Gonzago, the brigand of the sierra, the gang the Kid had helped to cut to pieces. Probably the brigand chief himself. And the Kid watching for danger from the pursuing horseman, who was still a quarter of a mile away, had had no eyes for a deadlier enemy upon whom he had come by an unlucky chance.

"You know me, seniorito?" grinned the brigand savagely.

"I guess I ain't seen you that I know of," answered the Kid; "but I reckon you're one of that bunch of cut-throats that I had trouble with."

"Rafael Gonzago, senior—Rafael Gonzago!" grinned the Mexican. "Your guns will not help you now, caballero."

"Not any," agreed the Kid. "But I reckon my guns have made some vacancies in your bunch, Greaser. There sure ain't quite so many bandoleros in this sierra as there was afore I came over from Texas."

"And you walk into my hands!" the brigand grinned tigerishly. "You walk into my hands, senior! I take my siesta in the mesquite and I hear you. I watch you; you walk into my hands! I do not shoot so surely as you, senior, but with the lazo few equal Rafael Gonzago, and el lazo has taken you, senior!"

"Sure!" yawned the Kid.

"Twice my men have met you, seniorito, and each time you have beaten them—"

"And you!" said the Kid coolly.

"And me. But this time you will make no more vacancies, as you terny it, in my band, senior. There are but four men who remain to me in my home in the hills, senior, but—no es nada—Rafael Gonzago will not long wait for followers." The Mexican thrust the machete into his sash, stooped, and began to wind the rope round the Kid, to fasten him more securely. "You will go with me now, little senior, to my retreat in the sierra. There you will learn what the vengeance of a Mexican bandolero is like." The swarthy face blazed with ferocity. "You will beg, as the greatest of boons, for a bullet through the heart, or the blow of a machete to dash out your brains. You, who have defeated me and slain my men, you will not die swiftly."

"You've sure spilled a mouthful, Greaser," said the Kid coolly.

He was listening.

The horseman who had followed him up the canyon could not be distant now. That he followed as an enemy the Kid was certain. But such an enemy the Kid would have been glad to see at this moment, as he lay at the mercy of the savage brigand, threatened with a death

by torture. If the horseman was at hand, however, he must have dismounted, for the Kid could hear no hoof-beats. Rafael Gonzago evidently had no suspicion that anyone was at hand. He was not aware that it was because the Kid had been watching for pursuit that he had been caught napping so easily. He wound the tough rope round and round the Kid, pinning his arms more securely to his sides. As he bent, intent on his task, the boy puncher looked past him, and sighted a sombrero that bobbed over the rocks at a little distance. The horseman had dismounted, and was approaching warily. The Kid wondered what would be the outcome. His pursuer was a military officer, and likely to be keener on capturing a desperado like Rafael Gonzago than any outlaw from Texas. And the brigand had no suspicion that he was approaching. Those were moments of thrilling interest for the Kid.

Footsteps sounded suddenly close at hand, and the brigand, with a startled Spanish oath, leaped up from the Kid and stared round him, his hand flying to his machete.

"Para!" rapped out a sharp voice. "Tenga cuidado!" The soldier had left his serape with his horse, and he leaped into view, a handsome figure in a dusty uniform, a revolver in his hand, levelled. "Hombre—"

The gleaming machete flashed out and spun through the air, hurled with deadly aim at the Mexican officer. But the soldado stepped lightly aside, and the whizzing weapon passed him and crashed on the rocks, and at the same moment he fired. Rafael Gonzago uttered a fearful yell as the bullet scored along his swarthy face, drawing a stream of blood.

For an instant he stood, glaring like the wild beast he was; then he turned and bounded away, with the swiftness of a hunted coyote and plunged into the thicket from which he had first appeared. A second later, there was a wild beating of a broncho's hoofs, and the brigand was riding away at a mad speed. The Mexican soldado shrugged his shoulders, returned the revolver to his belt, and came towards the Kid. In a few moments the rocks ceased to echo the flying hoof-beat of the brigand. Rafael Gonzago was gone.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Kid's Way!

THE Rio Kid staggered to his feet. His arms were fast; he was still a prisoner, with a change of captor. But the change was a welcome one to the Kid.

"Eso me agrada muchisimo, senior," he said, in his best Spanish. "I guess I'm mighty glad to see you. You going to shift this hyer rope off a galoot?"

"Surely not," answered the soldado, in good English. "I think you are the Texas outlaw called the Rio Kid, senior?"

"You've got it once," assented the Kid. "But I guess we ain't in Texas now, and you sure ain't hired out to the Texas sheriffs none."

"I have followed you far, senior," said the Mexican captain. "It is a lucky chance that brought you my way."

"I sure don't see the luck," said the Kid.

The Mexican smiled. He was a young man, well set up, and handsome in a dusky, Spanish way, and the Kid liked his looks. But he evidently had no intention of letting the boy outlaw loose. The Kid was still a prisoner, though in better hands.

"That hombre, whoever he was, has done my work for me," said the Mexican. "Believe me, senior, I should have been sorry to kill you. I saw you once in Texas, and I never forget faces. When I saw you in the camino yonder some hours since, I knew the Rio Kid. I followed you to take you, senior, and to kill you if you resisted; but I should have had a thousand regrets to shoot you dead."

"You'd sure have had cause for more than a thousand, senior, if you'd come on me with my hands loose, and a gun in one of them," answered the Kid. "I'd stopped to wait for you, and ask you what you wanted, when that dog-goned coyote roped me in from behind!"

"He has saved me trouble, senior." "He sure has," agreed the Kid. "A whole heap of trouble, not to mention a funeral."

The Mexican laughed. He was evidently pleased with his easy capture, and disposed to be good-humoured.

"I did not expect it to be easy," he said. "As you see, I had left my horse, and was stalking you on foot, with every possible care, senior. Nuestra Senora! I know how the Rio Kid handles a gun. It will be—what you call—a feather in my cap, senior, to take you to Las Aguas a prisoner. But you have no—what you say?—kick coming, for you are better off in the hands of Captain Don Carlos Alvaro than in those of a mountain thief who had taken you in his lazo."

"Sure!" agreed the Kid. "I guess I never was so pleased to see any hombre in my life. That galoot, Rafael Gonzago, was sure going to put me through a course of sprints that I should have disliked a whole lot."

Captain Alvaro uttered an exclamation.

"Que? What name did you say, senior?"

"Rafael Gonzago," answered the Kid. "I guess you've heard of him. I hear he's the big noise here in the bandolero line."

"Carambo! That hombre was Rafael Gonzago?" yelled the Mexican.

"Sure!" "And I let him go!"

Captain Alvaro made a stride up the canyon. But the brigand was gone. The hoof-beats of his broncho had died away in the distance. The Mexican turned back to the Kid with a clouded brow.

The Kid watched him with a rather amused smile.

"You want that hombre, senior?" he asked.

Alvaro gritted his teeth. "Carambo! If I had known! It is of that brigand that I am in pursuit, Senior el Tajano. I have fifty men camped now in a canada in the sierra. We have been hunting that lepero for weeks. But he eludes us like a coyote. And I have seen him—and let him go!"

The Mexican captain cursed in Spanish for some moments, the Kid listening with a cheery grin. "You are sure that it was Gonzago, senior?"

"You bet!"

The Mexican swore again.

"But, after all, I have seen him now, and I shall know his villain face again," he said. "Now I must be content with the Rio Kid as a prisoner. Despues de todo, that is something." He smiled.

"I had left my men to ride to a mountain aldea to pick up information concerning that brigand, senior, when I sighted you on the camino real, and followed you. I did not dream that you would lead me to Rafael Gonzago, and that I—carambo!—would let that vil-

lain, thief, and assassin slip through my fingers. That hombre is sought for a score of murders, a hundred robberies. But one must be content with what one has, senior. You are my prisoner, at least."

"You bettin' on that?" drawled the Kid.

The brigand had left the Kid wound in the lazo, but he had been interrupted before he had knotted the rope.

While Don Carlos Alvaro was talking, the Kid had been silently, strenuously, exerting his strength, and the gripping rope round him had loosened.

He had no chance of getting free. Much time was needed to get the binding lasso from his arms. But he had loosened one hand sufficiently to slip into the pocket of his goatskin chaps, where the Kid kept a small, single-barrelled derringer.

With his arm tied down to his side, only the fingers of that hand free to act, few would have dreamed that the Kid could bring off a successful pot-shot.

He could not move his arm sufficiently to draw the tiny pistol from the pocket of his chaparejos. But in that goat-skin pocket his fingers were gripping it.

Shooting from the pocket was no new game to the Kid.

There was a smile on his face. To the Mexican captain's eyes he was bound and helpless, yet for whole minutes Don Carlos Alvaro's life had been at the Kid's mercy.

Not that the Kid would have killed him, even to save his own liberty, after what had happened. But the Rio Kid could plant his lead exactly where he wanted it. The Kid had "creased" a steer in full career with a shot quick as lightning; and creasing a man who stood within four paces was child's play to him, even with a shot from his pocket.

"You bettin' that you got me dead to rights, senior?" drawled the Kid. "You bankin' on it, feller?"

The Mexican gave him a quick look. But he laughed as he saw that the coils of the lasso were still fast round the boy puncher.

"Si, si, senior," he answered. "I do not think you will escape me. But if you seek to escape, I shall put a bullet through your head, Gringo! I take no chances with the Rio Kid!"

The Kid laughed.

"Senior el capitano, you're sure a good little man, and you've sure done me a big turn in scaring off that bandolero coyote," he said. "I'd hate to spill your juice. Put up your hands!"

"You jest, senior!"

"Not by a whole jugful," said the Kid. "I guess you're right smart for a soldier boy, senior; but this child was born with a gun in his hands. Don't touch your gun, senior. It's sure death if you do. I've got you covered from the pocket of my chaps!"

"Carambo!"

Don Carlos Alvaro, heedless of the warning, snatched the revolver from his belt.

Crack!

The derringer rang sharply from the pocket of the chaps, and the Mexican captain, his revolver half-drawn, gave a cry and pitched at the Kid's feet.

THE THIRD CHAPTER. The Upper Hand!

THE Kid winced. He had hated to do it. But he had no choice, unless he was to let Captain Alvaro lead him, a prisoner, to the canada, where his men were camped, thence to be sent a

prisoner to Las Aguas, in irons. The Kid had seen the inside of a Mexican carcel once since crossing the border, and he had no hunch to see the inside of another.

He looked down on the fallen Mexican with a sombre brow. Captain Alvaro lay like a log, or a dead man. But the Kid knew that he was not dead. A trickle of blood ran down the dusky face from a cut under the thick, black hair. The Kid's bullet had creased the Mexican. It had passed close enough to the skull to stun him. But the wound was superficial, and in a quarter of an hour Don Carlos would return to the world he had now forgotten. In that quarter of an hour it behoved the Kid to move quickly; for there was no doubt whatever that the Mexican would have shot him dead had he recovered to find the Kid still a bound prisoner. And there had been only the one bullet in the tiny derringier hidden in the pocket of the goatskin chaparejos.

The Kid wriggled fiercely in the gripping lariat, and worked it loose. The coils fell away from him, and only the noose remained, cruelly taut. But the slip-knot worked loose under the Kid's efforts, and he cast off the lasso. There was no sign of returning animation yet in the fallen Mexican. He lay like a log.

The Kid threw the lasso aside, with a sigh of relief. He hurried over to his mustang, took the water-bottle, and returned to the Mexican. The insensible man's revolver the Kid picked up, for safe keeping, but he did not deprive him of his sword. A sword was a weapon that made the Kid smile; he was quite willing to leave it to the capitano. He

guessed that Don Carlos would not be able to do any harm with it.

Captain Alvaro's eyes opened, wild and starting, under the ministrations of the Kid. The trickle of blood was washed from his face, and cool water laved his brow. For some moments the captain stared wildly and blankly at the boy puncher from Frio. Then he seemed to remember, and groped for his revolver, and found it gone.

"Carambo!" he muttered faintly. "I guess you're O.K., senor," said the Kid reassuringly. "I jest creased your cabeza to keep you from mischief; but I sure wouldn't spill the juice of a nice little soldier-boy like you for keeps. You ain't hurt, senor."

"Por todos los Santos!" Captain Alvaro sat up dazedly. He passed his hand over his head, and swore again in Spanish. The Kid had a gun in his hand now, but the expression on his face was calm and friendly.

"You shot me down!" gasped the Mexican.

The Kid laughed.

"Jest creased you, like we do an ornery steer that won't come to the rope," he explained. "You was stunned, senor, and I guess you'll have a bit of a headache; but you ain't hurt. I guess I wouldn't hurt you after you scared off that bulldozer, Gonzago. I sure wouldn't!"

The captain's face reddened with rage and shame. His eyes flashed at the puncher.

"Gringo! You—you—" He choked with rage, and clutched at his sword.

"Don't!" warned the Kid.

But the Mexican captain was mad with rage and humiliation, and he

flushed out the sword, heedless of the leveled six-gun in the Kid's hand.

Bang! Don Carlos gave a cry of pain as the sword went flying from his hand, smashed away by the bullet. He made a stride after the weapon, cursing in Spanish; and the Kid unceremoniously shoved him aside, picked up the sword and tossed it into a deep crevice.

"Aw, forget it, feller!" said the Kid. "What's bitin' you? You've come out at the little end of the horn, but you sure ain't got no kick coming! You reckon I was going to let you tote me along to your camp? Not on your life, captain!"

The Mexican stood trembling with rage.

He stood unarmed, and his life was the Kid's to take. The Kid returned his gun to the holster.

"You sure don't want to get mad, feller!" he said. "What's biting you? You ain't the first galoot that's tried to rope in the Rio Kid, and slipped up on it!"

"Shoot!" hissed the Mexican.

The Kid shook his head. "Not on your life," he said. "I ain't got no grouch agin you, Captain Alvaro. I was sure pleased when you horned in and scared off that fire-bug, Gonzago. You give your word to talk peaceable, and I'll let you have your gun back. I'm sure a friendly guy when you know me."

Alvaro gritted his teeth. "Give me my pistol, and I will shoot you dead!" he snarled.

The Kid laughed. "I sure ain't giving you the gun, then, senor. I don't want to have to spill your vinegar over these rocks. You better beat it. You know where you left your horse. Hit it back to your cayuse and hit the horizon."

The Mexican captain eyed him furiously. His easy defeat at the hands of the Texas puncher had roused all his passionate fury. But he was unarmed and powerless, and he turned away.

"Next time, senor the outlaw, I will make sure of you!" he said between his teeth. "Next time, a bullet through the head—"

"Aw, forget it!" drawled the Kid. "I guess there ain't enough captains in the Mexican Army to give me mine. You beat it back to your men, and lead them after that fire-bug, Gonzago. I guess you can handle him, but you sure better give me a long rope. Adios, senor!"

With a glare and a muttered curse, Captain Alvaro strode away down the canyon to the spot where he had left his horse.

The Kid stood by his mustang, and watched him. He would have preferred to part on good terms with the man who had, after all, done him a big service. But Don Carlos seemed to be a bad loser. In the distance, the Kid saw him drag his horse from a clump of mesquite, and mount. But he did not ride away down the canyon. He rode up to the Kid, who watched him uneasily, gun in hand. The Kid hated the idea of "spilling the juice" of the man who had driven off the brigand, and he hoped that the captain would not drive him to it.

But the captain, with a bitter look, and without a word, passed the Kid. He rode up the canyon, and the Kid stared.

Then, vaulting on his mustang, the Kid dashed after him and speedily overtook him.

"Say feller, what's this game?" he exclaimed. "You aiming to go after that firebug, Gonzago?"



A SPORTING OFFER! "It is your choice to give me my weapon or let me ride off without it," said the Mexican. The Rio Kid thought a moment. Then he held out the man's revolver by the barrel. "You ain't going unarmed, senor," he said; "and I guess you're a white man, and here's your gun." (See Chapter 3.)

IN MERCILESS HANDS! Looking past a mass of rocks the Kid beheld a strange sight. Captain Alvaro stood against a tree, lashed there by ropes. And standing facing him was Gonzago, with a gun in his hand. "You have gashed my face, señor," the brigand was saying. "You shall receive a gash for every bullet in this revolver!" (See Chapter 4.)



"Si!" snarled the Mexican. "If I have lost one prisoner, I may yet get the brigand; and it was Gonzago I was seeking."

"You better get your men——"
"I will ask your advice, señor, when I need it," said Alvaro.

The Kid coloured.
"Look here, Greaser!" he said. "You sure do raise my dander; but I ain't forgetting what you done for me. You sure can't go after that fire-bug unarmed—you surely can't!"

"It is your choice to give me my weapon or keep it, señor," said the Mexican mockingly.

The Kid thought a moment. Then he held out the Mexican's revolver by the barrel.

"You ain't going unarmed, señor," he said; "and I guess you're a white man, and there's your gun."

The Mexican gripped the revolver. For a moment, it seemed that he would raise it against the Kid. But the Kid had judged him correctly. Enraged as he was by his defeat, Captain Alvaro had a soldier's honour. He flushed, thrust the revolver into his belt, and raised his sombrero to the Texan.

"Señor, I salute you!" he said. "Next time we meet, I shall kill you, or you will kill me! For the present, adios, señor!"

"Adios, amigo!" answered the Kid, raising his Stetson; and the Mexican galloped up the canyon, the way Rafael Gonzago had fled, and disappeared among the winding rocks.

The Kid sat his mustang, looking after him till he had vanished and the beat of his horse's hoofs had died away. There was a dissatisfied expression on the Kid's face. He felt a liking for the young Mexican, all the more, perhaps, because he had defeated him

so easily; and although Don Carlos had followed him as an enemy he had saved the Kid from torture in the lair of the brigands. Smarting from his defeat, the captain was eager to get hold of Rafael Gonzago, whom he had allowed to slip through his fingers; and if he lost no time he had a good chance of running down the brigand. Certainly, had he ridden away to the distant Canada to summon his troopers, Gonzago would have escaped into the remote recesses of the sierra, leaving no trace. So close upon his trail, Alvaro had a chance of riding him down. But the Kid doubted what would happen if he succeeded in getting to close quarters with the bandolero. A wounded wolf was as safe to track, single-handed, as Rafael Gonzago. The Kid shook his head in dissatisfaction.

"I guess it's his own funeral!" he said at last, as he dismounted and camped under the cotton-woods, to wait for the heat of midday to pass before he rode back to the camino to resume his way.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Kid Chips In!

CRACK!
Far off, in the hot stillness of the mountains, the shot echoed. It was the report of a revolver. The Rio Kid sat up.

The Kid had fed his horse and himself, and was resting in the herbage under the cotton-wood trees, while the sun blazed down outside his circle of shade, and baked the rocks of the canyon. It was hot, even for Mexico; and the Kid had no intention of moving for some time to come. The Mexican habit of midday "siesta" rather appealed to him, in the glare of tropical heat.

He was thinking, as he lay lazily in the grass, his mustang stretched in the shade near at hand. The Kid had crossed the border into Mexico to leave trouble behind him; but trouble seemed to dog his steps in this new country. His rookus with the brigands of the sierra was a small matter; and the Kid was not worried by the fact that Rafael Gonzago had sworn his death. All the bandoleros in Mexico would not

have worried the Kid to any extent. But the outlaw of Texas was not so unknown in this country as he had hoped. He had defeated Captain Alvaro, but the captain would report at headquarters that a celebrated Texas outlaw was riding the sierra, and the result was inevitable. The Kid, who had been hunted by the sheriffs of Texas, would be tracked by the alguazils of Mexico. Trouble, it seemed, was not to be left on the back trail as he had hoped and figured.

The echo of the distant shot made the Kid sit up and take notice. In that lonely mountain, he had little doubt that the shot was fired by Captain Alvaro, and that it meant that he had sighted the brigand chief he was pursuing. The Kid hoped that he would have better luck with the Mexican brigand than with the Texan outlaw. But he felt very far from sure of it. Captain Alvaro doubtless made a handsome figure on parade, and he was brave enough; but in the Kid's opinion he had asked for death in taking the trail of the brigand single-handed. Cunning and ferocity were likely to be more than a match for reckless courage. It was, to the Kid's mind, something like a prairie rabbit taking up the pursuit of a prairie wolf. In fair fight Carlos Alvaro was worth three or four of Gonzago; but the brigand was not likely to give him an even break.

Well, if Gonzago killed him in the mountains, it was all the better for the Rio Kid. His report of the Texas outlaw's presence would not be made; and it was more than probable that Alvaro was the only man for a hundred miles who knew the Kid by sight. He knew him only because he had chanced to see him in Texas, long before. Alvaro wiped out by the brigand, the boy puncher of Frio could ride a safe trail as Kid Carfax, leaving the Rio Kid behind him. It was quite clear to the Kid that nothing could suit him better than for Don Carlos Alvaro to be wiped out. And it was quite in accordance with the Kid's nature, that, knowing it, he should leap to his feet, mount his mustang, and ride in the direction of the shot, to help the reckless soldier if

there was yet time. Not if the Kid could help it, should that wild beast of the sierra destroy the man whose life might mean death to the Rio Kid. Carlos Alvaro was the Kid reckoned, a good deal of a gink; but he was a good man, and the Kid was going to help him if he could.

Clatter, clatter, clatter!

A riderless horse came dashing down the canyon, with stirrups flying. At a distance the Kid recognised Captain Alvaro's horse, and he neatly roped in the animal as it careered by. The frightened horse was held by the Kid's rope. Obviously, the shot that Alvaro had fired had not saved him; the riderless horse told of disaster. The Kid tethered the horse to a tree, with the lazo Gonzago had left behind, and rode on his way with an anxious face.

The canyon narrowed to a mere gorge as the Kid advanced by a difficult path. Deep, shadowy gulches opened from it on either side, riving the rocky hills. A horse could proceed only at a walk; and there was little sign on the rocky earth to guide even the best trailer of the Texas plains. But a single hoof-print on a patch of sand, a trampled bush, a torn trailing juniper, sufficed for the Kid's keen eyes. He dismounted at last, and leaving his mustang, advanced on foot, his eyes wary, a gun in his hand. Captain Alvaro could not be far away now, he knew, dead or alive; for the brigand would not double-load his horse on that steep trail, and if the captain was a prisoner, he was on foot. Crack!

It was the ring of a revolver close at hand. It was followed by a faint cry.

The Kid pushed on, treading softly among the rugged boulders of the gorge. A voice speaking in Spanish reached his ears as he crept on with the stealthiness of a prairie wolf. It was the voice of Rafael Gonzago, vibrating with hatred and savage triumph.

"You, fool of a soldado, you seek Rafael Gonzago!" The bandolero was speaking in Spanish, but the Kid understood. "Well, you have found him."

"Ladrone," came the voice of the Mexican captain, "my men will hang you for this!"

The Kid heard the brigand's mocking laugh.

"Your men will seek me long before they hang me, *senor el capitano*."

Crack!

It was another shot.

"You have gashed my face with a bullet, *senor*." It was the brigand's voice again. "You shall receive a gash for every bullet in this revolver—your own revolver, *senor*—and then—then, fool of a soldado, I will hang you over a rock at the end of my trail-rope!"

The Kid was close at hand now. Looking past a great mass of rocks that had hidden the scene from his sight, now he saw what was passing.

Captain Alvaro stood against the trunk of a stunted pine-tree, bound to it with a trail-rope. Evidently he had fallen into an ambush of the wary bandolero, and the shot the Kid had first heard had been fired by him, in

vain, when the clutch of the brigand closed on him, as the ruffian leaped suddenly from cover. He had been made a prisoner, and bound to the tree, while his riderless horse clattered away. Now his own revolver was in the bandolero's hand, and the ruffian was firing at the bound man, from a distance of seven or eight paces; but he was not shooting to kill. It was a form of torture that appealed to the ferocious nature of the brigand. On either cheek of the Mexican captain appeared a crimson streak, where a bullet had gashed. Under his dusky complexion his face was white.

"Patience, *senor*," continued Gonzago. "Three more shots, and then the trail-rope for your neck! And then I will seek that accursed Tejano, and—"

"I guess you can save yourself that trouble, feller," drawled a cool voice, as the Rio Kid lounged into sight, gun in hand.

"Carambo!"

Rafael Gonzago spun round. "El Tejano!" he said between his teeth. "You—"

He threw up the revolver to fire.

Bang!

The Kid's six-gun, still held at the hip, roared.

Rafael Gonzago staggered back.

His shot flew into the air as he fell, and the revolver was dashed from his hand as he crashed on the rocks.

The Kid gave him one glance; he did not need a second. Rafael Gonzago, the dreaded bandolero of the Sierra Madre, did not stir again.

The Kid holstered his gun, stepped towards the tree, and with his bowie-knife cut through the trail-rope. Captain Alvaro stood a free man.

"*Senor!*" he gasped.

"I guess I owed you a good turn, feller," drawled the Kid, "and that firebug sure won't worry you any after this. He's got his!"

"The dog!" muttered Don Carlos.

"He leaped on me from a tree, like a jaguar. *Senor*, you have saved my life; and not only that, but you have saved me from a death of shame! He would have—"

"I guess I heard him blowing off his mouth as I moseyed along here, *senor*," drawled the Kid. "He sure asked for what he's got. I got your horse roped down the canyon."

The Kid let loose the tethered broncho, and the animal clattered away. In silence Captain Alvaro followed the Kid down the canyon. His life was saved, and, but for the two scratches on his cheeks, he was unhurt. And Rafael Gonzago, the dreaded brigand for whom he had sought, needed seeking no longer. There was a strange expression on the face of the Mexican captain as he looked at the Rio Kid.

The Kid smiled.

"I guess you can beat it, *amigo*. And when you get back to your men you can take my trail," he said. "I reckon we're quits now, and you can hunt for me all you want. Gonzago sure won't want hunting any more."

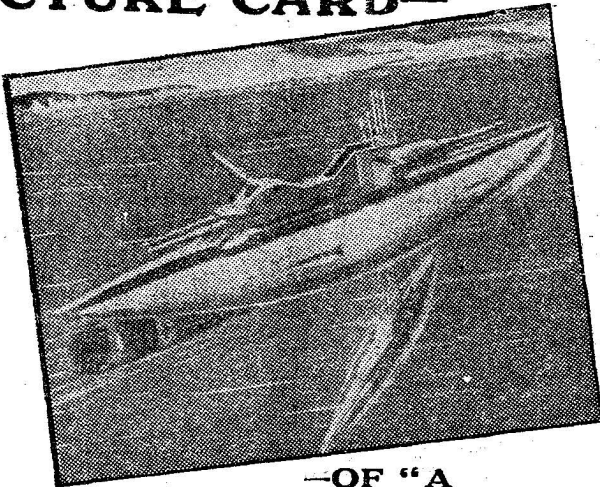
"*Senor*, you are an outlaw," said the Mexican slowly. "It was my duty to take you. But you are not known in this country, and if I am silent you may ride free and safe. *Senor*, when I leave you, I shall forget that I have ever seen the Rio Kid."

And the Mexican mounted his horse, and, with a wave of the hand, rode away down the canyon.

THE END.

(Now look out for the Rio Kid's next adventure—"The House of Don Bal-tazar!" It's the goods!)

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