

WHAT! NOT MET THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW? THEN MAKE HIS ACQUAINTANCE AT ONCE IN THE ROARING WESTERN YARN BELOW!



HUNTED ON the PLAINS!

Little does the Rio Kid dream, when he gives his word to guide a young girl and her father across the plains to the frontier, what fearful perils are to befall him as a result of his gallantry!

THE FIRST CHAPTER. Riders of the Llano!

THE bunch of horsemen came suddenly into sight from a hollow of the grassy plain.

Mile on mile the Rio Kid had ridden under the blazing Mexican sun without seeing a soul. Like an ocean of grass, the vast plain stretched round him, broken only here and there by the dark line of some yawning barranca. Far away, a dark blur against the blazing sky showed where a clump of cottonwoods grew—a prairie island in the sea of grass. It was for that distant "motte" that the boy puncher from Frio was heading; for where the ceibas grew there would be water, and the Kid was looking for a camp. But the timber island was yet many miles distant when the bunch of horsemen rode out of the hollow directly in his path.

The Kid slackened speed a little and shifted a holster to bring the walnut butt of a gun a little nearer to his reach. The Kid had no enemies that he knew of in the cattle country of the Rio Rojo, but on the plains a galoot had to keep his eyes peeled. From a bunch of vaqueros he had nothing to fear, but the riders did not look like Mexican cowpunchers. Neither did they, to the Kid's eye, look like bandoleros. A gang of contrabandistas, as likely as not, he decided. Anyhow, there were six of them, armed to the teeth, and the Kid sagely opined that it would be wise to keep a gun handy.

suddenly as the Kid sighted them. They swung round their horses to face him, dark eyes gleaming at him intently. Then, as the Kid continued to advance, they pulled in their steeds and waited for him to come up.

The Kid rode on slowly, eyeing them as he drew nearer. Had the Kid's horse been fresh, he would have been inclined to turn aside and show them the heels of his mustang. Whether they were contrabandistas or some fugitive gang of revolutionists, or whatever they were, the Kid was not looking for trouble. But the Kid had followed a long trail that day under the burning sun of Mexico, and the black-muzzled mustang was in no condition for a hot chase.

So the Kid trotted onward, keeping a gun handy and his keen eyes on the alert. The outfit waiting ahead of him looked as if they, like the Kid, had been riding long and hard. Horses and riders were covered with dust, dark faces shone with perspiration; every man in the bunch showed signs of fatigue.

As the Kid approached, one of the Mexicans pushed his horse forward from the rest, advancing a little to meet the Texas puncher. He was a fat man, gaudily dressed in velvet trousers with silver braiding, with a crimson silk sash, short jacket, and the usual enormous sombrero. His dark face was handsome in a swarthy Spanish way, and not unfriendly in its expression. But the dusky jaw was square and determined; the black eyes keen and

searching. He held up a dusky hand for the Kid to stop, and, polite as his manner was, the Kid read in his face that there would be trouble if the signal was not obeyed. The Kid pulled in his mustang.

"Para, senor! Si usted gusta!" said the Mexican.

The Kid grinned. It could not have been put more politely. He was told to stop, if it pleased him to do so; while it was quite evident that the bunch of riders were ready to pull guns on him if he did not stop.

"Con todo mi corazon, senor," answered the Kid, not to be outdone in politeness.

Then the Mexican grinned. "The senor is a Gringo?" he asked in English.

The Kid's Stetson and chaps might have told him as much, but perhaps he guessed also, from the Kid's Spanish, that he came from the northern side of the border.

"You bet!" answered the Kid. "What you guys in this country call a Gringo. From the Rio Frio, in Texas, if you want the particulars, senor."

"Un Tejano?"
"Jest that," agreed the Kid.
"You are a long way from your country, senor."

"You've said it," agreed the Kid. "Y porque?" said the Mexican. "And why, senor, are you riding the llano in this Rio Rojo country?"

The Rio Kid laughed. He was not likely to confide to this

stranger that he had ridden out of Texas because he was outlawed in his own country.

"I guess I've got my reasons, señor," he answered, "and them reasons I ain't shouting out to every Greaser I meet up with on the trails."

"Sin duda!" agreed the Mexican. "You are not here, perhaps, to meet some particular person on the banks of the Rio Rojo?"

"Right in once," assented the Kid. "I ain't."

"Is the name of Don Antonio Pasquale strange to you, señor?" asked the Mexican, his black eyes fixing on the Kid's sunburnt face with sudden penetration.

"Sure," said the Kid.

"You have never heard it?"

"Nix."

"You have not seen that señor?"

"I guess I've seen a whole heap of Mexicans that I don't know the names of," grinned the Kid. "Don Antonio Pasquale may be one of the bunch, for anything I know. You looking for that hombre?"

The Mexican's jaw shut hard.

"Si, si, señor!" he answered. "I and my comrades are searching the llano for Don Antonio Pasquale. Perhaps you have seen a rider on the plains since you broke camp this morning?"

"Nary a galoot," answered the Kid cheerily. "I reckoned I'd got this prairie all to myself till you guys pulled out yonder. I guess I've seen nothing bigger than a cicada since sun-up."

"An old man, señor," said the Mexican—"an old man, with the face of a wolf, and a senorita riding with him, and a pack-mule. You have not seen such a party on the plains?"

The Kid shook his head.

"I'll tell the world I ain't seen hide nor hair of any of the outfit," he answered.

The other Mexicans had pushed their horses closer, and were listening to the talk, with knitted brows, as if trying to make out the meaning of the words uttered in a tongue that was strange to them.

Two or three of them now broke out in angry Spanish. They addressed the square-jawed man as Don Guzman, and evidently with respect. The Kid figured that Don Guzman was "some" guy in the estimation of this rather mysterious bunch of Greasers.

Don Guzman waved a hand, and the others were silent, though lowering looks were cast on the Kid, and more than one dusky hand fumbled near a weapon. The leader turned to the Kid again.

"My comrades have their suspicions of you, señor," he said. "They think it likely that Pasquale may have obtained the help of an Americano to escape across the border."

"I guess we're a long way from the border here," remarked the Kid.

"True. But if Pasquale does not escape across it, he is a dead man!" said Don Guzman, with a glitter in his black eyes. "It would be like him to have fixed with a Gringo to guide him to safety—and perhaps, señor, you are that Gringo?"

"I'm telling you I ain't!" said the Kid cheerfully. "I guess I've never heard of your Pasquale, and I ain't taking any great interest in him. Who is the galoot, anyhow?" added the Kid. "What's he done to get your bunch on his trail this-a-way?"

"He has robbed us, señor," said Don Guzman. "He has robbed us and fled with the pesos. We have hunted him far and wide, señor. So far, he has escaped

us—the llano has swallowed him up. We have scouts riding on all sides, but we have not found his trail. But if you know something of that caballero, señor—"

Guzman paused.

"I keep on telling you that I don't!" granted the Kid restively. "Can't you take a galoot's word?"

"I should be desolated to doubt it, señor," said Guzman politely. "But my comrades think—"

"Dog-gone your comrades, feller!" interrupted the Kid. "I guess I'm hounding to hit the trail. I want to bed down by sunset, hombre; and I ain't a lot of time for chewing the rag!"

Don Guzman looked at him long and doubtfully. The Kid's hands were very close to the butts of his Colts. He was ready for trouble, if it came. And if it came, though the odds were terribly heavy, obviously it would not be pic for the bunch of Greasers. It was easily to be read in the Kid's face that he was a bad man to crowd.

The bunch of Mexicans, the Kid could see, suspected him of knowing something of the man of whom they were in search. They were willing to crowd him on that suspicion; for, anyhow, he was a Gringo, of a race hated in Mexico. But their leader doubted; and, doubting, he was not keen on beginning a conflict which could not fail to be a terrible one.

How the matter would have been decided the Kid never knew; for while Guzman hesitated there came a sudden ringing shot from a distance to the south. It was followed swiftly by two more. The three shots rang out so rapidly after one another that they sounded almost as one.

Instantly there was a stirring among the Mexicans. Every man swung round to the southward, staring across the grassy plains. No one was to be seen on the plains—the signal shots had rung from a great distance. Rifle-shots, the Kid knew, yet sounding like the pops of a popgun at the distance. That it was a signal was clear, for the excitement among the Mexicans was evident.

"Todos los Santos!"

"Vaya!"

"Oiga usted, Don Guzman!"

The square-jawed Mexican swung his horse round.

"Felipe has found the trail!" he shouted in Spanish. "Follow me!"

He dashed the long Mexican spurs to the flanks of the horse, and started at a gallop. After him went the whole bunch, with a clatter and a jingle and a wild thudding of hoofs. The Rio Kid was left alone, sitting his mustang, and staring after the bunch of Mexicans as they disappeared to the south in a cloud of dust.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Foe in Ambush!

"CARRY me home to die!" ejaculated the Kid.

He did not immediately resume his way.

He sat in the saddle, where the Mexicans had left him, staring across the llano after the bunch.

They were riding hard. Their horses, weary from a long trail, were spurred to speed. Quirts rose and fell sharply on heaving, sweating flanks.

Far away to the south the skyline was broken by a blur, which the Kid figured to be a patch of chaparral. From thence the signal shots had come. Fired, the Kid figured, by some of the scouts of whom Don Guzman had

spoken—the scouts who were hunting for the trail of the mysterious Pasquale.

The keenness of the bunch to get in touch with their quarry was proved by the swift eagerness with which they had answered the signal.

While the Kid gazed after them, the beating of hoofs on the rugged plain died away in the distance, and only a cloud of dust, with here and there a gleam in it, remained to tell where the bunch of Mexicans had gone.

The Kid smiled.

He was glad enough of the interruption, which had taken the bunch off his hands. He had not been honing for a single-handed fight against half a dozen Greasers, armed to the teeth; and he had little doubt that it would have come to fighting had not the signal from the south called off Don Guzman and his men. Doubtless the signal had convinced the Mexicans that the Kid had told the truth, in denying knowledge of Pasquale; for the signal came from the far south, and it was from the east that the Kid had come, nowhere within miles of the spot where, it seemed, Felipe had picked up the trail of the hunted man.

The Kid watched the bunch till the cloud of dust vanished in the distance and the grassy folds of the llano hid all sign of the Mexicans from his sight. Never had the Kid been so glad to see the backs of a bunch of Greasers.

He rode on his way again.

The Kid's way lay to the west, where the distant clump of ceiba trees blurred the red of the sinking sun. Long miles distant, as yet, was the timber island; but the Kid hoped to strike it well before sundown.

As he cantered on he was thinking of the encounter with Guzman and his band, and of the man they were hunting. Who the bunch were was rather a puzzle to the Kid. They looked a rough and fierce bunch, yet they had not the look of law-breakers—certainly not bandoleros, and most probably not contrabandistas. Guzman, their leader, was, the Kid reckoned, a man of some substance—he looked like a hacendero of good fortune. If the mysterious Pasquale had robbed him, as he stated, the Kid cordially wished him good luck in his hunt; and he was inclined to believe that the square-jawed Mexican had spoken the truth. But he felt, at the same time, something like compassion for the man Pasquale, if that square-jawed guy got him where he wanted him. Guzman looked as if the thrust of a poniard, or the slash of a machete, would be his way of settling a dispute.

Anyway, it was no business of the Kid's, he told himself; he was done with the bunch now, and he was not likely to fall in with the fugitive Pasquale. He dismissed the matter from his mind at last, and cantered on towards the motto, which was growing larger and greener as he drew near to it.

Tall cottonwood trees spread mighty branches against the blue of the sky, interlaced with masses of Spaniards' beard and giant lianas. In the glare of the sun on the baked llano, the Kid looked with a longing eye at the shade in the distance. And there would be water there—and the Kid's canteen was empty. Water was wanted for both horse and rider; and the black-muzzled mustang stretched his tired limbs to a greater speed, as if already he scented it.

Crack!

The ring of a shot came suddenly from the shadows of the ceiba trees,

while the Kid was yet a hundred yards from their welcome shade.

The Kid felt the wind of the bullet as it whizzed by.

"Shucks!" ejaculated the Kid.

In an instant he was out of the saddle, and the mustang was lying in the grass, and his gun was in his hand.

The Kid's eyes gleamed.

That timber island, with its water and its grateful shade and coolness, was not untenanted. In the trees lurked the rifleman who had pulled trigger on him.

Crack!

The Kid and his horse were deep in cover of high grass when the second shot screamed harmlessly over them.

"Gee!" murmured the Kid. "I guess that guy means business, whoever he is! He sure does!"

The Kid's jaw set.

Whoever was lurking in the timber island had fired on him, as he came riding across the sunlit plain, from cover, without warning. Some loafing bandolero, perhaps, or some disgruntled Mexican vaquero who disliked the sight of a Gringo.

The Rio Kid was not the man to take pot-shooting like that without kicking. Leaving his horse in the cover of the thick grass, the Kid wormed his way towards the timber island, on his hands and knees. Whoever had burned powder at him was going to learn that it was not a safe game with the boy puncher of Frio. Not one of Guzman's bunch, that was certain; that bunch was miles away to the south-east, the Kid reckoned. Perhaps some scout belonging to that bunch; that was possible. Whoever it was, he had the Rio Kid to reckon with.

But the Kid was cautious.

The rugged ground, thick with bushes of high grass, gave him plenty of cover as he wormed his way towards the timber island. This was an old game to the Kid, and he was as wary and cunning as any Apache, or Comanche on the war-path.

Thick, shady branches shut out the blaze of the sun over his head at last. He was close on the timber.

Now a faint rustle caught his ear.

He smiled grimly.

He was close on the marksman. The rustle came from a mass of lianas that hung, thick and juicy, from a horizontal branch of a ceiba, like a natural screen. That screen hid the man who had fired, and the Kid reckoned that he was watching through some slit in the green stems—watching and waiting for a chance of another shot. No doubt the disappearance of the Kid and his horse in the grass had puzzled the man in the timber, and doubtless he was waiting for them to rise into view again. Certainly he did not know that the Kid had crept through the high grass like an Apache, and was now close at hand. He was about to make that discovery.

The Kid wormed his way, crawling now like a snake, round the nearest of the trees. Silent as a snake, he moved inch by inch, till he was fairly in the timber and behind the screen of lianas where the marksman stood and watched.

Then the Kid rose quietly to his feet, a six-gun in his hand, and a gleam in



TERROR-STRICKEN! As the beautiful Mexican girl led the Kid up to the camp, the old man by the tree leapt to his feet with a cry of terror. "There's no need to get leared by me, feller!" drawled the young outlaw. (See Chapter 3.)

his eyes. Thick creepers were round him, and peering through them he could make out a sombrero and the glimmer of a coloured sash amid the green.

It was a Mexican who stood there and who had fired, and who was still watching the spot where the horseman had sunk out of sight in the grass a hundred yards out from the timber. The Kid could hear a deep-drawn, quivering breath.

Quietly the Kid parted the hanging creepers and stepped towards the Mexican, whose back was to him as he stared out over the plain. It went against the grain with the Kid to shoot a man from behind; and, within a few paces of the slim, half-hidden figure of the Mexican, he raised his six-gun, but he did not pull trigger.

"You dog-goned, pesky skunk, turn your face this way—gol-darn you!" snapped the Kid. "Here's the guy you was potting at, you coyote! You—"

The Rio Kid broke off suddenly.

There was a crash, as a rifle was dropped into the underbrush from startled hands; the Mexican spun round, and two large dark eyes were fixed on the Kid in terror. And the Kid's gun sagged down, and he stared foolishly, as he found himself face to face with a Mexican girl.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Hunted Man!

"GEE whiz!" gasped the Kid. The girl stared at him, evidently amazed and terrified to find him close at hand when she had believed him to be out on the plain. For it was this girl who had fired on him, there was no doubt about that. The rifle she had dropped was the weapon from which the bullet had whizzed so close to the boy puncher from Frio.

The Kid knew it, but all his animosity was gone. Had it been a man that he found there he would have paid dearly for firing on the Kid from cover. But the Kid had no bunch for a rookus with a woman. Indeed, he made haste to get his gun out of sight.

"I guess you don't want to be skeered, miss," stammered the Kid awkwardly. "I sure ain't here to hurt you, nohow. I sure don't know what in thunder you pulled trigger on me for, miss; but you don't want to be skeered, you sure don't!"

The girl seemed too terrified to speak. Her dark eyes were fixed on the Kid's face, dilating.

"I guess you reckoned I was some sort of a rough galoot, and you was scared, miss," said the Kid, smiling. "You ain't no call to be scared, I'll tell the world."

"Senor!" gasped the girl. "Uu Gringo! You are not one of them, then?"

"I guess I'm cavorting around on my lonceome, miss, if that's what you mean," said the Kid. "You ain't no call to be skeered of a puncher from Texas, senorita."

Her breath was coming in great gasps. Under the shadow of the big sombrero her face was white and tense. The girl spoke English with the lisping accent of a Spaniard, and in a voice that seemed sheer music to the ears of the Rio Kid.

"Senor," she gasped, "who are you?" "Kid Carfax, miss—and at your service," answered the Kid gallantly. "A puncher, miss, from the Frio country in Texas."

"Nuestra Senora! And I might have killed you!" breathed the girl.

The Kid grinned. "I guess your bullet never went near enough to worry me any, miss," he said.

said. "I reckon you took me for some other guy?"

"Si, señor, si! We are hunted—hunted by bitter enemies!" panted the Mexican girl. "I thought—I feared that—"

"You reckoned I was one of the bunch?"

"Si, señor. A thousand pardons!"

"Don't you worry any, miss," said the Kid reassuringly. "But, say, you ain't alone here in the middle of the llano, señorita?"

The girl made a gesture towards the dark interior of the timber.

"My father!" she whispered.

The Kid wondered what sort of a guy it was who remained out of sight and left the shooting to be done by a slip of a girl.

"They are hunting us, señor!" she whispered. "And when I saw you riding up I fancied you were one of them."

And then the Kid thought that he understood.

Guzman had said that the man he was hunting was accompanied by a señorita. It was borne in upon the Kid's mind that by sheer chance he had stumbled on the fugitives.

"Oh, great gophers!" said the Kid. "Say, miss, is the galoot who is hunting you a guy with a jaw like a vice, calling himself Guzman?"

"Guzman Carrero," she breathed. "Don Guzman Carrero! You have seen him? You know—"

"I guess I met up with him on the prairie way back," said the Kid. "He allowed that he was hunting for a guy named Pasquale."

"Mi padre!"

"I guess he's a good step from here, miss," said the Kid comfortingly; "and he sure wouldn't be allowed to do you any harm while there's a Texas puncher around with a six-gun in his grip."

His gaze dwelt curiously on the girl. Guzman had stated that Pasquale had robbed him, and fled with stolen pesos. If that was true, the Kid was prepared to swear that this girl knew nothing of it. The Kid was, perhaps, only a boy in years, but he was a man in experience; and in the beautiful, olive face he could read fear and anxiety, but nothing of guile. Whatever her father was, or might be, the Kid reckoned that this señorita was genuine goods, and all the chivalry of the Kid's generous heart was roused now.

He was not in the Rio Rojo country looking for trouble, but he was strongly tempted to make this señorita's trouble his own. Anyhow, the Kid knew that if harm threatened her, it would not reach her so long as he could pull the trigger of a six-gun.

"Señor, I ask your pardon once more," faltered the girl. "It was my fear that caused me to take you for an enemy. I feared that they had found us. If they find us, Don Guzman Carrero will kill my father; and he is old, señor, and sick, and he has only me to defend him. Nuestra Señora! I am his only friend now."

"I guess a guy could be worse off for friends, miss," said the Kid. "But, mobbe, a galoot about my size could help. I reckon I don't know what the rookus is about; but if any guy lifts a finger to you, miss, while I'm around, I guess he will get his so sudden he won't know how he struck Jordan."

The girl smiled tremulously.

Before she could speak again a voice came from the depths of the timber—an old man's voice, high-pitched and querulous.

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"Estrella! Estrella, mi muchacha! Estrella!"

That, the Kid reckoned, would be the father. He did not like the voice.

"My father!" said the girl. "Oh, señor, if you have spoken in earnest—if you would help us—help my father to escape those leperos—"

"I guess you can count me in, miss," said the Kid, subduing an inward doubt.

He could not help having a hunch that in this unknown dispute the right of the matter might very likely be on the side of the men who were hunting Pasquale. But a woman in danger and distress had an irresistible appeal for the boy puncher.

"Venga usted!" said the Mexican girl.

"Si, señorita!"

Donna Estrella trod away through the thickness of the vegetation. She seemed to have forgotten the rifle she had dropped, and the Kid picked it up and carried it for her. He gave a long, low whistle, and the girl's head turned to him in sudden alarm.

"Only calling my cayuse, miss!" said the Kid apologetically. "I left him out on the plain while I humped along this-a-way."

The black-muzzled mustang rose from the high grass, and trotted on to the timber, and followed his master.

Estrella led the way into the interior of the motte.

There was a musical murmur of water, a welcome sound to the ears of the Kid, and to those of his horse. Somewhere in the timber inland there was a spring, and a little stream, not more than a foot wide and deep, flowed winding among the trees, till it was lost on the grassy plain. Under the spreading branches by the stream, a pack-mule was hobbled, the pack lying in the herbage. Two horses, tethered close at hand, were cropping the grass. With his back to a trunk, a man was seated, with a dark, old, wrinkled face shadowed by the brim of a sombrero. The face of a wolf, Guzman had said, in his description of the man he was hunting; and the Kid, looking at the wrinkled face, reckoned that that description was near the mark. There was cunning in every line of that mask of a face.

"Estrella!" The old Mexican was speaking, as the girl came up to the camp. "De que se trata? Que hay que hacer?" Then, as he saw the Rio Kid, Pasquale leaped to his feet with a yell of terror.

"Un amigo, mi padre!" exclaimed the Mexican girl, hurriedly.

The man was tottering with terror, staring at the Kid.

"Amigo?" he repeated hoarsely.

"Si, si! un Gringo!"

"Por todos los Santos!" muttered the old Mexican. The effort that he made to pull himself together was painful to see. Never had the Kid's eyes fallen upon a man so racked with fear as the Señor Pasquale evidently was.

The Kid felt an impulse of compassion, though it was largely tintured with contempt. He figured that that square-jawed guy, Guzman Carrero, was enough to rattle a galoot whom he was hunting for his life; but the Kid could not understand any man being rattled to this extent. Pasquale wiped large drops of sweat from his brow.

His puckered eyes scanned the Kid's handsome, sunburnt face. It was with obvious relief that he discerned that the puncher was not a Mexican.

"Señor, you are very welcome," he said, speaking in English, with trembling voice. "Welcome to share what little our camp can offer you, señor.

If you are a friend, you are doubly welcome; I have few friends now, señor—I am abandoned by all but my brave daughter." He turned to the girl: "Estrella, I heard a shot—"

"It was I who fired, father," said the Mexican girl, "and I thank all the saints that the rifle missed, for it was at this bravo caballero that I fired, taking him for one of Guzman's men. And not only has this noble hidalgo forgiven my mistake, but he offers to help us."

"Your help shall be well rewarded, señor," said the Mexican, his bright, bird-like eyes scanning the Kid. "I am a poor man, señor—I have fled from my enemies with nothing—nothing—but across the border I have resources, and a rich reward—"

The Kid saw the flush of shame that came into the olive cheeks of the señorita. But he did not need that to tell him that the wretched man was lying. The Kid had little doubt, if any, that the old man had in his possession the pesos of which Guzman had spoken.

"Cut it out, señor!" interrupted the Kid brusquely. "I guess I ain't honing after any reward. Forget it! If I can help this señorita to get to safety, I guess I'm going all out to do it."

"We are lost, señor," faltered the old man. "We fled from Olillo barely in time to escape the knives of those leperos; but—we are lost on the plains—if you can guide us to safety, señor—"

"I guess I'll try," said the Kid. "Gracias, señor!" murmured Donna Estrella. "Save my father—only save my father—"

The Kid made a grimace. He had no great hunch to save Pasquale, whom he more than suspected of carrying with him money that did not belong to him. But he was certain the señorita did not know; and the Kid would have cut out his tongue rather than have uttered for her hearing what was in his mind. Anyhow, if the old Mexican was a rascal, it was likely enough that his enemies were little better; for their pursuit was obviously a lawless one, and had nothing to do with the authorities. It was not an alcalde or the rurales who were hunting Pasquale; but private foes for vengeance; and so the Kid reckoned that he was free to chip in if he had a hunch to do so. But certainly he could have wished that Donna Estrella's father had been anyone but that old Greaser with the face of a wolf.

"Count on me, miss," said the Kid; "and I reckon you want to break camp instanter, and hit the trail—"

"Night is at hand, señor!" faltered Pasquale; "and we are weary—"

"I guess the night is going to be our best friend, señor," said the Kid. "I'm telling you that that guy Guzman has found your trail, if I don't miss my guess; and he's sure riding for this timber at this very minute."

"Nombre de Dios!" gasped Pasquale, trembling in every limb. "Let us go—let us go!"

And he stumbled to his horse.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. Hitting the Trail!

FROM the highest branch of a cottonwood the Rio Kid scanned the plains to the south, in the level rays of the setting sun. From the grass, in the distance, came the bobbing of sombreros—five, six, seven, the Kid counted. The horsemen, still distant, were riding towards the timber. The Kid had expected it. The

scout, Felipe, had found the trail far to the south-east, and Guzman and his bunch had ridden to join him—and it was obvious that they would follow the trail to where it led; and it led to the timber island where the old Mexican and his daughter had camped, and where, by a freak of chance, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had fallen in with them.

The Kid watched the distant riders long and earnestly. If it came to gun-play the odds were heavy, and the Kid had no bunch to burn powder in this quarrel if he could avoid it. Not for an instant did he hesitate to help Donna Estrella, and he could not help her without helping her father. But he had an awkward feeling that he was on the wrong side of the quarrel, all the same. If there was anything in looks, that old Greaser was an all-fired lobo-wolf, and more likely than not those jaspers yonder had good cause for hunting him down. The Kid hoped that he would get through this trouble without burning powder, though he had to admit that it did not seem likely.

He swung himself down from the branches of the cottonwood.

"You have seen them, senor?"

The girl's dark eyes read his face.

"I reckon," said the Kid, "they're less'n a mile off, and heading for this timber. I guess they'll hit it by dark."

"And—they would have found us here?" breathed the girl.

"Sure! But they ain't going to find us now," said the Kid reassuringly.

"Nombre de Dios!" muttered the old Mexican. "Our horses are weary, but let us go—let us go! Sonor el Tejano, we trust ourselves to your guidance, and a rich reward—"

"Forget it!" snapped the Kid.

It was strange and touching, to the Kid's eyes, to see the care and tenderness with which the girl helped the wretched man to his saddle and arranged round him the folds of the serape against the night air. She swung herself lightly to the back of her pony. The Kid had fastened on the mule's pack, and he mounted his mustang and took the pack-animal's lead. From the plains to the southward came a distant beating of galloping hoofs, a sound that made the old Mexican start and cringe with terror. The little party rode out of the timber on the northern side, keeping the cottonwoods between them and the approaching riders.

The Kid's brow was dark with thought as he rode. Only the night, he knew, could save them from pursuit. But the night was already falling on the llano. The red rim of the sun was dipping to the western plain; from the east, shadows rolled over the grassland. The last daylight would be gone, he reckoned, by the time Guzman and his bunch hit the timber. Likely enough, they would camp in the motte for the night and seek a further trail in the morning. If they did, the night and its long hours would be the Kid's. If they followed by the light of the stars it would come to shooting. If it came to that the Kid had to dismiss uncomfortable thoughts from his mind and handle his six-guns.

Darkness fell on the plains.

The weary horses were going at a trot, the pack-mule loping behind. The Mexican girl rode gracefully astride, in the Mexican style, Pasquale was hunched like a sack of alfalfa on his saddle. Occasionally some muttered word fell from the Mexican, some whimpering of fear. At such moments the girl would speak softly—soft words

THIS WEEK'S LIST OF BIRTHDAY DATES!

Readers who were registered in the POPULAR Birthday Gift Club before June 1st, 1929, may claim one of the following gifts:

Fountain Pen.
Penknife.
Table Tennis Set.
Combined Compass and Magnifying Glass.
Conjuring Outfit.
Drawing Set.
Electric Torch and Battery.
Leather Pocket Wallet.
Hobby Annual.
Holiday Annual.

—if the date of their birth is the same as a date in the following list—

April 1st, 1915.	Oct. 3rd, 1914.
May 9th, 1915.	Nov. 3rd, 1917.
Feb. 2nd, 1913.	Aug. 2nd, 1911.
July 9th, 1915.	Jan. 3rd, 1916.
Dec. 13th, 1918.	June 5th, 1913.
March 8th, 1917.	Sept. 4th, 1919.
Aug. 20th, 1912.	April 12th, 1930.
Jan. 3rd, 1910.	Nov. 17th, 1908.
May 14th, 1916.	Dec. 23th, 1917.
June 18th, 1912.	Oct. 15th, 1919.
July 1st, 1914.	Feb. 15th, 1915.
March 23th, 1915.	Sept. 19th, 1910.

If you were BORN on any of these dates, fill in the CLAIMS COUPON provided on this page and send it to:

The Editor,
POPULAR Birthday Gift Club,
5, Carnalito Street,
London, E.C.4,

so as to reach this address not later than June 13th, 1929. Please write the word "CLAIM" in the top left-hand corner of your envelope.

No reader may claim a Gift unless he or she has already been registered as a member of our Birthday Gift Club.

A published date must be exactly the same in day, month, and year a that given on your registration coupon.

You CANNOT claim and register AT THE SAME TIME. Should your birth date happen to be published in this list, and you are NOT already registered, YOU WILL NOT BE ELIGIBLE FOR A GIFT.

ANOTHER LIST OF BIRTHDAY DATES WILL APPEAR IN NEXT WEEK'S ISSUE.

BIRTHDAY GIFT CLAIM COUPON

(For the use of REGISTERED READERS ONLY.)

Name

Full Address (please write plainly)

.....

I declare myself to have registered in your Birthday Gift Club, before Saturday June 1st, 1929, and as the date given above (here state date)

is the date of my birth. I wish to claim a (state name of the Gift you would like)

..... in accordance with the rules of the club.

THIS COUPON IS ONLY AVAILABLE UNTIL JUNE 13th, 1929.

POPULAR. JUNE 8th.

of comfort and encouragement, in the liquid Spanish. The Kid's heart went out to her, for he knew that the chances of escape were slim. But he was going to save her father if he could—not for his own sake.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

The Kid listened.

From the dark dome of the sky the stars gleamed like jewels.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

"We are followed!" came in a hoarse croak from Pasquale.

The Rio Kid did not need telling that.

He listened intently.

From the darkness behind came the galloping of a horse—a single steed, as his ear told the Kid. One of Guzman's scouts, perhaps, seeking the trail, or Guzman himself, pushing on while his weary followers rested in the motte. The Kid pulled in his mustang. A gun was in his hand, and a glitter in his eyes.

"Ride on!" he said tersely.

Pasquale was pushing on his tired horse desperately. But the Mexican girl lingered.

"But you, senor?"

"Ride on!" answered the Kid.

And Donna Estrella spurred on after Pasquale.

The Rio Kid waited.

From the starry shadows a horseman loomed up, riding hard. The Kid had a glimpse of a sombrero and a crimson sash as he threw up his six-gun and fired.

There was a yell from the darkness and a crashing fall. Whether the rider or the horse had received the bullet the Kid could not tell; but both had gone crashing down.

The Rio Kid wheeled his mustang and galloped on after the fugitives. He rejoined them in a few minutes, and they rode on into the darkness of the night. From behind came no longer any sound of pursuit.

THE END.

(Another roaring long complete story of the Rio Kid, boy outlaw, next week, entitled:

"THE TRAIL OF THE TRAITOR!"

By RALPH REDWAY.

Don't miss it, chaps. It's a winner!

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