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The POPULAR

Complete Story Weekly 2^d



'GAINST
FEARFUL ODDS!

*A Gripping Long Tale
of the Rio Kid, Outlaw, inside!*

EVERY TUESDAY.

Week Ending
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New Series.
No. 543.



Never before, in all his adventurous career, has the Rio Kid found himself up against such a formidable foe as Don Guzman Carrero. But back down the Kid never will—he has vowed to save a Mexican scnorita from her enemies!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Beset By Foes!

"DOG-GONE all Greasers!" muttered the Rio Kid.

He stared discontentedly out across the shining waters of the Rio Rojo.

The sun, sloping to the west, blazed down on the wide Mexican llanos, on the broad bosom of the river, on the wooded island round which the yellow current swirled, with burning heat.

Under many a burning sun had the Kid ridden since he had crossed the border into Mexico. But that little island in the Rio Rojo, thick and tangled with luxuriant tropical growths, was the hottest corner he had ever struck. There was only one place, the Kid reckoned, that was likely to be hotter. A place, however, that the Kid was not likely to name aloud at present. The boy puncher from Texas was very careful of his talk in the hearing of Donna Estrella Pasquale.

But his brow was grim and savage as he stared from the thick cover on the river island, watching for foes.

The Kid was in one of the tightest as well as the hottest corners of his wild life. His old failing had found him out. He never could land on trouble without horning into it. The Kid surely had no call to be stalling off the attack of a bunch of Mexican revolutionists, in a quarrel for which he did not care a continental red cent. For one side or the other, in the political disputes of that land of unrest, the Kid cared nothing, regarding both sides impartially as a set of dog-goned Greasers, who let their country go to ruin while they disputed over the loaves and fishes. Yet, here he was, watching for attack, expecting it every minute, and not expecting to live to see the sun sink below the western plains. For the odds

FACING FEARFUL ODDS *by* RALPH REDWAY

were overwhelming, and the struggle was likely to be determined and desperate. And the Kid's only solace was that he would take a bunch of Greasers over the range with him. For little as he looked for victory, the Kid was the galoot to fight so long as he could pull a trigger or grasp the handle of a bowie-knife.

When he looked round at the camp in the clearing, under the giant cottonwood that towered over the isle, the Kid's brow darkened, and under his breath he "dog-goned" all Greasers. For if he thought little of the bunch that were against him, he thought less of the man he was defending at the risk of his life. Old Pasquale, squatting on his serape under the shady branches, trembling with apprehension, the prey of terror and of a guilty conscience, was a sight to get the Kid's goat sorely. For that greedy, skulking, shivering wretch the Kid had burned powder, and was to burn it again. But his eyes softened, the dark frown left his brow as his glance turned on the Mexican girl who came out of the wattled jacal and knelt by her father's side, laid a gentle hand on his shoulder, and whispered words of courage in soft Spanish.

If the Kid had doubted his wisdom

in allowing himself to be drawn into this rookus, he doubted it no longer as he watched the Mexican girl. The old rogue, with the face of a wolf, might have been cut to pieces by Guzman Carrero and his bunch, and the Kid would not have worried. But no hombre in Mexico should lift a finger to harm his daughter while the Kid was around with a six-gun in his grasp.

"We are lost! Nombre de Dios! We are lost!" the old Mexican was muttering, his lips palsied, his sunken eyes haggard.

"Mi padre, we live yet, and that brave caballero is here to defend us!" murmured Donna Estrella.

"One against so many! We are lost!" He rocked himself to and fro.

The Kid turned his head away. The wretched man's poltroonery made him ashamed of his manhood. Yet, even in his abject terror, Pasquale was clutching in claw-like hands a leather sack which was hooked to his belt, and which the Kid guessed easily enough to contain the pesos with which he had fled from Ollilo, the funds of the revolutionary junta, trusted in his care, and with which he had fled. Miserly greed was as strong as fear in that hard old heart.

THE POPULAR.—No. 543.

Yet the girl clung to him, comforted him, soothed him, as if he had been the best of fathers, as plainly he was the dearest. The Kid could have flung him into the yellow flood that swirled past the river island. But for that faithful and loving daughter he could have shed gladly the last drop of his blood.

Crack!

The report of the rifle was followed by a burst of firing that awoke every echo along the solitary banks of the Rio Rojo.

The enemy were at hand.

At once the Kid forgot Pasquale, forgot even the *senorita*. Gun in hand, finger on trigger, he glared out from the thick greenery of the isle ready for foes.

Sombreros nodded along the bank of the river opposite the isle. The Mexicans had left their horses in the high grass, and approached the bank on foot. Twenty men at least, the Kid figured, were scattered along the bank, firing on the island.

Bullets ploughed through mesquite and maguay and juicy lianas. Masses of Spaniards' beard, cut away by the whizzing lead, dropped from high branches. Leaves and twigs fluttered down in showers.

The Kid's eyes blazed.

From the thick cover he aimed at a sombrero twenty yards away across shallow water. The roar of the six-gun was followed by a yell from the Mexican who wore the sombrero. He leaped up from the grass, his rifle dropping from his hands, and then fell. From his comrades came a shout of rage.

"El Tejano!"

"Carambo!"

A few moments later the Kid saw the wounded man crawling away in the rustling grass.

But no sombrero was any longer to be seen. That shot had warned the Mexicans, and they had promptly hunted close cover. Deep in hollows of the bank, in thick grass, in straggling bushes they crouched, not showing so much as the crown of a hat as they continued to burn powder at the river island.

The Kid smiled grimly. A single shot had driven them to hunt cover. They had learned already what his shooting was like, and that shot had reminded them.

The rifles continued to blaze away, loosing off incessant shots. Through and through the wooded isle the lead tore its way. But it was only by chance that a bullet would hit, and the fire gave, the Kid little concern for himself. But he was anxious for Estrella.

There was no sign as yet of a rush coming. The Kid turned back and hurried to the camp in the centre of the little isle. Pasquale was shaking like an aspen leaf. His haggard eyes stared almost unseeing at the Kid. Donna Estrella looked up quietly.

"They come, caballero!" she murmured.

"I guess they're keeping off a piece," answered the Kid. "They're sure burning a lot of powder, but that cuts no ice. Say, miss, you want to keep in good cover. A chance shot—"

The girl shook her head and smiled faintly. Her face was deadly pale, but there was no fear in it.

"But you want to keep safe, miss," urged the Kid. "I guess I seen a lot of lead flying in my time, and a bullet sure ain't particular where it gets home. Jumpin' Moses!" A bullet flew past within a yard of the group and crashed into the trunk of the big cottonwood. There was a howl of alarm from Pasquale; no sound from the girl. She did

THE POPULAR.—No. 543.

not stir or flinch. "Senorita, you got to lie low. Keep down in the grass."

"Si, *senor*."

"I guess they're trying to get us rattled with all this shooting," said the Kid. "The rush will follow. I guess I'm ready for it. But keep low, miss. Keep out of the fire. Shucks! I guess they're coming."

There was a splashing in the shallows of the Rio Rojo. The Kid rushed back to his post. The attack was coming, and in the next few minutes life and death hung in the balance.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Fighting for Life!

"GEE!" muttered the Kid.

From the high bank of the river, a wall of rugged mud, a score of riflemen were keeping up their fire on the isle. Below the bank, under cover of that heavy fire, a bunch of horsemen had gathered for a rush—more than a dozen of them, fierce-looking, swarthy men, in sombreros and gaudy sashes, pistol or machete in hand. Hoofs splashed in mud and water, with a wild jingling of bridles and stirrups. As fast as the swirling water allowed the horses to move, the Mexicans rushed at the isle, Guzman Carrero at their head, his black eyes glinting, his square jaw set. With a six-gun in either hand, the Rio Kid stood in the wall of greenery on the island shore, ready.

The horsemen came with a splashing, eddying rush across the score of yards of shallow water and mud. The crack of the Kid's six-guns greeted them sharp, staccato.

The roar of the six-guns as he fired told his position to the enemy; and the bullets from the riflemen on the bank flew closer. The Kid paid no heed. He could not afford to think of chance shots. That rush of desperate horsemen was to decide his fate, and the Kid knew that the odds were heavy on the side of the rush getting home.

But the Kid could not have been cooler, steadier, had he been firing at a mark at some rodeo in his native Texas. Peering from the tangled thickets, steady as a rock, he fired, and fired again, and man after man went down under his accurate shooting.

Six shots, and as many saddles showed empty. Dead or wounded men splashed into the reddened water; riderless horses plunged and cavorted, whinnying wildly. Two or three, sickened of the deadly reception the Kid gave them, swerved and rode past, instead of charging to the shore. But five or six had hurled themselves in a bunch on the low mud of the island, Guzman Carrero at their head. Even as they plunged ashore, Guzman rolled from his horse and went headlong into the river, under a shot from the Kid, whether dead or wounded the Kid knew not nor cared. What he knew was that four or five desperate enemies were upon him, and that the struggle was hand-to-hand.

Tangled in the clinging thickets, the Kid faced them, stern-lipped, set, desperate. He shot down another as they closed on him; but three men were on him like savage wild-cats. A cuchillo drove at his heart, but he twisted and eluded it. A machete swept downwards at his head, and grazed his shoulder as it missed. A sinewy arm was flung round him, and he was dragged to the ground.

The Kid had fought hard and well, and he had taken terrible toll of his foes; but they had him, as he knew they had to have him, with such odds. But down, in the grasp of his foes, the Kid

was still fighting. He was tooth and claw to the finish.

His fist crashed like a lump of iron in a swarthy face, dropping a Mexican whose knife was at his throat. His clubbed Colt crashed on a head, crushing through the big sombrero, smashing like an eggshell the skull beneath. But it was the Kid's last blow. He was on his back, tangled in brambles. A swarthy, savage face glared down at him, a knife was lifted swiftly to descend—

Defiant to the last, the Kid glared up at descending death.

Crack!

The firing from the bank had ceased, once the assailants had plunged into the isle. It had become more dangerous then to the Mexicans than to the Kid. A crowd of swarthy foes were wading across the muddy channel, to back up the attack of the horsemen. Whence came the shot that barked out suddenly under the thick trees? The Kid saw one moment the fierce, swarthy face above him, the descending knife—the next moment the Mexican had fallen across him heavily, with a deep groan. The Kid, amazed that he still lived, lay dazed under the body.

But only for a moment. He threw the dead man aside and started up.

"Thunder!"

Donna Estrella, rifle in hand, stood at a few paces distant. The rifle was still smoking. It was the Mexican girl who had fired the shot that had saved the Kid's life.

"Senorita!" panted the Kid. "You saved—"

But there was no time for speech.

He lived! Estrella had saved him! His revolvers were empty, and there was no time to reload. But his rifle stood by a tree at hand. The Kid snatched it up. Dead men and wounded lay at his feet. A dazed man was crawling away in the underbrush. The Kid did not heed them. A swarm of foes were almost upon the isle—almost upon him; but the Rio Kid lived yet, and he rushed, rifle in hand, to meet them. The Winchester was fully loaded; shot after shot rang, scattering death among the Mexicans crowding across the shallows.

By the Kid's side was Donna Estrella, and her rifle rang as an echo of his. Fast and furious the whizzing lead sprayed among the enemy, and men fell right and left. Even then the Kid figured that it was only the last throw of the dice, the final turn of the cards before he went under. Had Guzman Carrero still been leading his men, doubtless it would have been the finish. But the square-jawed Mexican was no longer there, and the Greasers sickened of the deadly hail. With fierce yells and howls they plunged away in the shallows; and, the example of flight once set, it became a panic. Wounded men, struggling for their lives, whirled away in the waters. Dead men floated down the current of the Rio Rojo. And the rest, frantic with terror and defeat, fled for the bank and scrambled ashore, and plunged wildly into the cover of bush and high grass.

The Kid, an empty rifle in his hands, stood staring.

The attack had ceased.

From the bank came angry firing; whizzing bullets that tore leaf and branch on the river island. But no living Mexican was at hand. The last wounded fugitive had crawled away; only fierce shots and yells of rage came from the high bank.

"Gee!" said the Kid.

His first care was to reload. If they rallied, they would find him ready. But they did not rally. For the present, at

least, the Mexioans had had all they wanted.

The Kid turned to Donna Estrella. The wild excitement of the struggle over, the girl had dropped the rifle, and now she leaned, half-fainting, against a tree.

"I guess they're beat, senorita," said the Kid. "Gee! I reckoned we was gone coons, I sure did! I reckon I ain't got used to being alive yet, after that rookus. It sure was some jamboree! Say, miss"—the Kid's face and voice were anxious—"you ain't hurt?"

"No, senor. But it was terrible—"
Her voice died away.
She moved back to the camp under

him that Guzman was not killed. The swarthy face was pale, and there was a bloodstained bandage round the forehead under the big sombrero. But Don Guzman Carrero was very much alive. He stood staring across at the isle with a black brow, and the Kid raised his gun; but the Mexican disappeared into cover again. But the look on the swarthy, determined, bandaged face of the square-jawed Mexican had been enough for the Kid; he knew that there would be no loosing of the grip. It was a struggle to the death—one man and a girl against a horde. The Rio Kid's face was grim as the sun sank lower to the west.

that. But in the darkness there was nothing to prevent them from wading across the shallows to the island, creeping ashore at various points, closing in on the camp from all sides in overwhelming numbers.

Why that movement was delayed the Kid could guess. Likely as not Don Guzman was sending for more men. The chief of the revolutionary junta of Olillo had plenty of forces to draw upon. The intended rising at Olillo had not taken place, owing to Pasquale fleeing with the funds of the rebels. But the junta had many followers among the vaqueros on the haciendas, and the loafing leperos of the pueblos. The



NEARING THE END! Suddenly, without warning, the pony sank under Donna Estrella, and floated away. The girl struggling in the stream, was grasped in the Kid's strong hand. "Hold on to the cayuse, miss!" breathed the boy outlaw And he slipped off his horse. (See Chapter 4.)

the cottonwood, and disappeared into the watted jocal.

Don Antonio Pasquale, crouching on his scrape in the grass, turned haggard eyes on the Kid.

"They are gone, senor?"
"Sure," said the Kid briefly.
"But they will watch. There is no escape for us," muttered the old Mexican. "Unless Guzman is dead; then perhaps—"

"I reckon he was hit, anyhow," said the Kid. "And I guess they won't try to rush this hyer island agin in a hurry. I've a hunch that we're safe till dark, but we got to watch out."

The Kid posted himself in the thickets to watch. Lower the sun sank in the western sky, and the fierce heat of the tropical day was cooling off. The fire from the bank slackened, only occasional shots tearing through the thick tropical vegetation on the river island. Once or twice a sombrero showed itself for a moment or two. The Kid waited and watched, but there was no sign of an attack. That deadly struggle had sickened the swarthy bunch—for the present at least. They had had a heavy loss. Dead men had floated away down the current of the Rio Rojo, and there were many wounded. If Guzman had been killed, the Kid reckoned there was a chance that the bunch would loosen their grip.

But a little later, the sight of a dark, square-jawed Mexican on the bank told

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Last Chance!

BLACKNESS on the plains, blackness on the river, blackness doubly black under the thick branches on the river island. Not a glimmer of light in the camp under the cottonwood—a spark might have gleamed through the vegetation and guided a shot. Silence, save for the murmur of the river, lay on the scene. The Mexicans along the bank of the Rio Rojo had long ceased firing—perhaps realising that they were wasting their lead—perhaps to throw the fugitives into a false security. The Kid, listening again and again with keen, intent ears, had been able to hear no sound of the enemy. In Donna Estrella's heart dawned a hope that they were gone, that they had given up the trail of the traitor. But the Kid knew that they were not gone. He knew that Guzman Carrero would never give up the trail of Pasquale, unless death stopped him.

The Kid's face was gloomily thoughtful in the darkness. Almost by a miracle the attack of overpowering odds had been beaten off. The dice had been loaded against the Kid; yet he had pulled through. But it was not the end. It was, he knew, only the beginning. So long as daylight lasted the Mexicans had not ventured on another attack. The deadly shooting of the Texas puncher had sickened them of

Kid's shooting had taken severe toll of Don Guzman's bunch; but he had plenty of recruits, within a ride, if he wanted them. The Kid figured that he was calling on a strong force, to make all sure when the attack came—to surround the island at every point, to make assurance doubly sure that the traitor should not escape in the darkness. Meanwhile, the fugitives were penned on the river island, waiting for the blow to fall, like sheep in the shambles, as the Kid reflected grimly. Miraculously, he had pulled through that fearful attack, against all probability; but that would not happen a second time, when swarming numbers surrounded him in the dark.

"We got to beat it, you-uns," said the Kid, at last.

That was the outcome of his cogitations.

The old Mexican started as the Kid's quiet voice broke the silence. Donna Estrella's dark eyes turned upon him.
"There ain't no two ways about it," said the Kid. "We got to beat it, somehow, and take a chance. I reckoned when we got cover on this hyer island, and blanketed our trail, that we might lie doggo till dark, and then make a get-away. But they rooted us out; and they're watching." They sure got us where they want us."

"You fear another attack, senor?"
THE POPULAR.—No. 543.

came the quavering tones of old Pasquale.

The Kid grunted. "They ain't leaving us alone till dawn, feller," he said. "I guess they don't like the way I handle a gun in the daylight. They can surround us in the dark, and get to close quarters afore a shot's fired. It's going to be a black night—jest what they want, darn them! If we're here when they come, we're gone coons."

"But can we go, senior?" murmured Donna Estrella.

"We got to take a chance, miss," said the Kid.

"They will fire!" breathed Pasquale. "You can bet your boots on that!" assented the Kid. "I guess it ain't too dark for them to spot us when we get going. They'll sure blow holes through us if they know how. But we got to take the chance. I reckon it's all we got left."

"Then we are ready, senior," said Donna Estrella, in a low, clear voice.

The Kid hesitated. "Senorita," he said earnestly, "it will be an all-fired rookus when the guns begin, and us out of cover. Miss, that guy Carrero allowed that his bunch ain't got nothing agin you. It's your father they want. They're a bunch of dog-goned Greasers, but they ain't honing to hurt a girl. I reckon they'd be glad enough if you was out of this. That guy Guzman is sure a bloodhound on the trail; but he's a white man, in his own way. I guess we could fix it for him to let you safe back to Ollilo. And I'll sure give you my word to stand by your padre long as I'm alive, miss."

The girl shook her head. "I cannot desert my father, senior."

Old Pasquale broke in. "Hija Mia, do not leave me."

"I will not leave you, mi padre."

The Kid set his lips. Perhaps the selfish old man believed that, when the climax came, his daughter's presence might be some protection. Perhaps he feared that the Kid's devotion might slacken, when it was no longer inspired by the presence of Estrella.

"Look here, feller!" the Kid muttered.

"They would not spare her, senior," whined the old man. "If Estrella were at their mercy, they would not spare her. At least, they would hold her as a hostage for the pesos."

"I'm coming to that," said the Kid quietly. "Them guys are after your life, because you've double-crossed them. But I reckon what they want most is that stack of dust you've got in your sack. You've run with the money that belongs to the junta."

"No, no, senior!" quavered Pasquale. "Carrero lied! The money is my own—all I have in the world. I have little—very little, senior, I swear to you by all the saints—but what I have is my own!"

"Aw, can it," growled the Kid, in disgust.

"Caballero, my father tells you the truth," said Donna Estrella's quiet voice. "My father is no ladrone, senior."

The Kid made a grimace. He had a pretty clear idea of the truth, but he would not willingly have shaken the girl's faith in her father.

"Call it that, then, miss," said the Kid. "Say it's your father's roll. All the same, that's what the guys are after. And I reckon it's worth the roll to save your life, miss. Let them have the money they're after."

THE POPULAR.—No. 543.

"Jamás!" squealed the old miser.

"Jamás! Never—never!"

The Kid breathed hard. "Feller, it may save your daughter's life," he said. "I tell you the cards are stacked agin us, when we make a break from this island. We got jest a dog's chance of getting through."

"Jamás!" breathed old Pasquale.

Even in dire terror, even in the shadow of death, the miser clung to his money.

"Mi padre," whispered Donna Estrella, "if this brave caballero advises—"

"Jamás!"

The girl sighed.

"My father does not believe that those leperos would abandon the pursuit, if they had the pesos, senior," she said. Instinctively she excused the old man's greed and selfishness. "And I would not leave my father, senior. I will die with him, but I will not abandon him."

The Kid was savagely silent.

"Caballero"—the girl's voice trembled—"you have done much for us, and

"We are in your hands, caballero!" whispered Estrella. "Heaven reward you for your kindness to a wronged man."

The Kid made no answer to that. It was possible that Pasquale was a wronged man, unjustly suspected by the junta. The Kid did not believe so, but for the girl's sake he hoped it.

Since the girl refused to leave her father, and the old miser would not listen to the suggestion of giving up the loot, there was nothing to be gained by discussion. Only one chance remained—of escaping from the river-island before the overwhelming attack came in the darkness. The Kid proceeded to action, which anyhow was more in his line than chewing the rag.

The horses were saddled, the mule packed. As quietly as he could, the Kid led the animals to the shore of the island in the direction of the current. There was but one way of escape, slim as it was. To cross the wide, deep river that rolled by the island was impracticable; to go against the current, impossible; to cross the shallows to the near bank was to run into the enemy. Down the river by the current was the only way; and what perils might lie ahead the Kid did not know; he was in strange country, in the valley of the Rio Rojo.

It was a chance that they had to take—a hairbreadth chance. Dark as it was, the Kid knew that the shooting would begin the moment they left the shelter of the river island. The pale gleam of the stars was sufficient to betray them to the watchers on the bank. Instant fire, and immediate pursuit, the Kid knew must happen. There was a hope in his heart that, by steering with the current, he might follow a slanting line across the river, and gain, in the long run, the opposite shore. Alone, on his mustang, he would have taken the chance with a light heart. But with two companions, a girl, and a terrified man, he knew how slim the chance was. But it was all that was left; and the Kid was cool and clear-headed as he made his preparations.

"Keep together, you 'uns!" he said quietly. "I guess the cayuses will have to swim, when we hit deep water. We got a dog's chance—if we keep together and keep cool."

"Lead on, caballero!" said Donna Estrella.

The Kid led the way.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

From the Jaws of Death!

CRACK! Crack! Crack! Fire from many rifles blazed out, the instant after the three riders, followed by the pack-mule, left the black shadows of the river island.

Crack-ack-ack-ack! Bullets whizzed and whizzed, splashing in the river, ricocheting from the water.

The Kid did not think of returning the fire. His hands were full with the horses and the pack-mule.

For some little distance from the river island the animals trod the shallows, going with the swirling current of the Rio Rojo. Bullets whizzed and splashed round them, unheeded. The splashing of horses in shallow water was heard; foes were already riding the river in pursuit. Dark figures loomed up in the night, lit by the flashes of firearms. Keeping to the shallows was impossible, without being ridden down by the shadowy horsemen. It was deep

WHEN

you turn to page 14 of this issue, you will find published there a long list of dates.— It

IS

these dates that you must read carefully, for should one of them be the date of

YOUR

Birth, and you are a registered member of the "Popular"

BIRTHDAY

Gift Club, you can claim a Topping Gift. Now, are you one of the lucky ones this week

?

we had no claim on your generosity. You are brave and generous, senior, and we must ask no more of you. Senior, save yourself. Take what chance may yet remain, and leave us."

"Aw, forget it," growled the Kid. "You figure that I'm thinking about my own carcass, miss? I reckon your father would stand a better chance of getting clear if he left them pesos behind—sure!"

It was the last appeal, to the terror of the fugitive, as strong a passion as his greed. But it failed.

"Jamás!" muttered Pasquale. "Jamás!"

"That clinches it, then," said the Kid. "I guess all that's left is to make a break, and take a chance."

"The saints will protect us, senior."

"I guess they'll have to go all out to do it, miss," said the Kid grimly. "But it ain't no use chewing the rag, if you've got the thing fixed. I reckon we want to beat it afore them guys begin to crowd us."

water, or death, as the Kid knew it must be; and he swung the bunch out into the river. The horses were swimming now, borne onward by the current.

A shrill squeal rang hideously through the night, as the pack-mule turned over in the water, struggling. The Kid instantly cast loose the lead. The mule had been shot, and had to be abandoned with the pack it carried.

The squealing of the stricken mule died away in the darkness, drowned in deep waters.

There was a cry from the Mexican girl.

"Mi padre! Save him, caballero, save him!"

Pasquale was struggling in the water, shrieking.

Either his horse had been struck by a bullet, or dragged over by the current, fierce and strong in the deep river.

The horse vanished in the glimmering water. The Kid's strong grasp closed on Pasquale, and dragged him to the back of the Kid's mustang.

"Hold on!" he snapped.

"Todos los santos—todos los santos!" babbled Pasquale, frantic with terror.

"Caballero—"

"I've got him, miss!" breathed the Kid. "Keep close, and keep on!"

The old Mexican lay like a sack of alfalfa across the Kid's horse. The Kid had a grip on Donna Estrella's reins, and was guiding both steeds. Both were swimming now with unknown depths beneath them. Desperately the Kid drove out into the river. Deep water would check the pursuit, and the shadowy riders were close now—splashes from their horses reached the Kid.

The Kid was right—several of the riders were soon in difficulties with the current—others halted with their horses breast-deep, firing furiously. One rider, swimming a powerful broncho, swept out to the Kid and reached him, and there was the gleam of a machete in the gloom.

But a bowie-knife was in the Kid's hand, and he drove home the blow before the machete could strike. A choking cry and the Mexican and his horse swept away together, vanishing in the darkness.

The black-muzzled mustang, double-loaded, swam and struggled bravely. The Kid held the senorita's pony by his side. A bullet grazed his shoulder; one pierced his stetson and cut a lock of hair from his head. The Kid heeded them no more than the stings of a mosquito. He was fighting for his life and the life of another, in a fierce current and deadly darkness. But the pursuit had dropped, as they drove farther into deep water; only behind them, and along the river bank, the gloom was lit up by ceaseless flashes of fire.

Suddenly, without a warning, the pony sank under Donna Estrella, and floated away. The girl, struggling in the stream, was grasped in the Kid's strong hand. The Kid slipped from the saddle, and gave the girl a hold on the saddle-horn.

"Hold on to the cayuse, miss!" breathed the Kid.

Side-Kicker still swam strongly, the half-senseless Pasquale sprawling across his back, the girl clinging to the saddle, the Kid swimming and holding the bride. Flashes of fire lit the night behind; bullets crashed and splashed. The Kid pushed on desperately.

The current was sweeping them fast down the river, but the Kid still kept on a slant towards the farther bank. Along the east bank, horsemen were

riding, some keeping pace with the fugitives, some riding ahead, all of them blazing away shots at the river. But for the darkness the fugitives must have been riddled with lead; but the firing, fast and furious as it was, was mostly at random.

The Kid's eyes searched the blackness anxiously. Miles, at least, he knew, he must have been swept down the river by the fierce current; miles lay between him and the island he had left. Yet the farther bank did not seem to draw nearer. Once the black-muzzled mustang plunged under, but he came up gallantly again, under the Kid's grip on the bridle. Would they never reach the bank?

Blackness, blacker than the night, loomed before the Kid's anxious eyes. The firing of the Mexicans on the east bank was distant now; the shots flew wider and more at random. Blackness barring a dark sky—the Kid knew what it was. He was close on the western bank at last, and there the Rio Rojo flowed through a forest. Closer the Kid drove and dragged the struggling mustang and his burden, and dimly the shapes of giant trees loomed over him, huge branches extending over the river, shutting out what pale light there was from the stars.

Mud was under the mustang now—thick, evil mud, and the straggling stems of mangroves. The panting horse struggled through clinging mud and ooze, head and back well out of the water now. A faint moaning came from the old Mexican sprawled on the mustang's back, holding on convulsively. Not a sound came from the Mexican girl; the Kid wondered whether she had lost consciousness. But when he spoke, her answer came.

"We're hitting the bank now, miss!"

"Si, sencer!" came Estrella's faint voice.

The Kid's riding-boots trampled thick mud. In blackest darkness he dragged the horse up the bank. The mustang, exhausted by his long struggle, stumbled after his master, breathing in great gasps.

Blackness as of the pit, giant shapes of trees, tangled creepers, and trailing lianas! It was a thick Mexican forest into which the Kid plunged from the mud of the river—a forest as wild, as untrodden, as savage, as in the old days before Cortes landed in Mexico. In blackness, under dark foliage, tangled in sprawling lianas, they stopped—and the mustang sank down exhausted. Pasquale, half-senseless, moaning faintly in terror, lay on the ground in a mass of creepers. The Kid's strong arm helped Donna Estrella to safety, and the girl sank fainting at the foot of a tree.


The Rio Kid, drenched, dripping, aching with fatigue, stood and looked back across the dark river. Faintly from afar came flashes of fire from the Mexicans across the river; dully the reports rolled on the night wind. The Kid's face was hard and grim. Only one horse remained to the three; and that one sunk with fatigue. Further flight was impossible; where the fugitives had dragged themselves from the river they had to stay.

And the Kid, with no hope in his heart, only the fierceness of a cornered tiger, waited for what fate might send.

THE END.

(Isn't it just like the Rio Kid to land himself in dire peril by shouldering other people's troubles? Will he be able to escape the merciless Don Guzman and guide his companions to safety; or—See next week's powerful yarn, entitled: "THE TRAIL OF VENGEANCE!")

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