

A ROARING YARN OF THE WILD WEST, STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

FALLEN AMONG FOES!

BY RALPH
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When the Rio Kid saves Joan Valence from the clutches of a kidnapper, and brings her back safely to her friends, he does not expect a reward—that's not like the Kid. But reward he does reap, in a most amazing shape!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Trail!

THE Rio Kid rode slowly under the stars that were paling at the approach of dawn.

The powerful grey mustang, strong and wiry cayuse as he was, showed signs of fatigue. Even the Kid's iron limbs were tired. Side-Kicker's gallop had slowed down to an easy lope, but he still carried his double burden gallantly.

But the Kid figured that there was no great hurry now.

Hours had passed since he had ridden away from the Mexican's camp at the timber island in the desert. Many a long mile had the swift mustang covered since then. That Don Alvaro Alvarado and his men would hunt him, fiercely and relentlessly, the Kid was well aware. But that they would pick up his trail in the arid, stony desert—at least before daylight—was unlikely. After so long an interval the Mexican bunch could trail him if they liked; the Kid wished them joy of it. With twenty miles to the good, and a horse under him that could beat any other cayuse in Mexico, the Rio Kid did not fear anything that Alvarado's bunch could do.

He was glad that he was clear of them—glad that he had got clear without

burning powder. He had rescued Joan Valence, the Texas girl, from the camp of the Mexican ranchero, and that was all the Kid wanted. Now he was clear of the rancher and his men, and did not expect to see them show up again over the rim of the Sonora desert.

The Texan girl was asleep.

Wearily with the long ride in the darkness, she had fallen asleep, and the Kid held her carefully on the horse as she slumbered. Her head was pillowed on the Kid's shoulder; his left arm supported her, his right hand held the reins. The regular motion of Side-Kicker's lope did not disturb her. Once in sleep her lips moved, and she spoke a name, and, to the Kid's amazement, the name was "Alvaro"—the name of the Mexican who had carried her off from her home at Pajito.

The Kid wondered.

He figured that the Texan girl must have a deep grudge against the Mexican who had taken her away from her home, away from the care of her guardian, and carried her into the trackless desert. Yet there was a smile on the sleeper's face in the starlight as she murmured the name.

The Kid did not understand.

But the Kid did not understand much about women, anyway. Horses he knew, and guns, and the sierra and the

llano, but women were a mystery to him.

The Texas girl had appealed to him for help; he had rescued her from the ranchero's camp, and she had been eager to flee into the desert, anywhere to escape from the hands of Alvaro Alvarado. Yet in her slumber she murmured his name, with a soft smile on her lips.

The Kid gave it up.

Anyhow, it mattered little to the Kid. His business was to get the Texas girl back to her home at Pajito, or to hand her over to her guardian who was seeking her in the desert. That done, the Kid was free to ride on his own trail again—and his own trail lay northward. The Kid had had enough of Mexico, and he was going for his own country again. Texas was his country, and thither lay his trail, though in his own country the hands of the sheriffs were stretched out for the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande.

Until the dawn came the Kid could not make out with any certainty the way to Pajito. Southward he knew it lay, and southward he had ridden from the timber island. But it was many a long mile to the Mexican settlements on the border of the Sonora desert—at least another day and a night before he would strike white men's country. He gave

Side-Kicker little guidance now, trusting to his horse, and when he noted that the mustang bore more and more to the westward the Kid did not check him. He guessed that the cayuse scented water, and the Kid was anxious to strike a water-hole. The Sonora desert was new and strange country to the Kid, and he figured that his horse knew more about it than he did.

The first gleam of the sun showed over the rim of the arid plain, when the Kid knew for certain that Side-Kicker had scented water. Afar in the distance ahead of him bunches of cactus and sword-like yucca broke the weary flat. Fatigued as he was, the mustang quickened his pace now. The Kid would have dismounted and walked to ease the tired mustang; but he would not wake the girl who leaned on his shoulder in slumber. Not till the mustang reached the water-hole did the Kid dismount.

From some hidden spring, water welled up and spread over the sandy soil for a little distance. In a hollow it had gathered in a pool, and the mustang's head sank to the pool, and he drank deeply. The Kid waited till the horse lifted his head, and then gently he awakened the Texas girl and slid from the saddle and helped her down.

Joan stood a little unsteadily, leaning on the Kid's strong arm and gazing about her in wonder.

For the moment she did not realise, and evidently had expected to awaken in the tent in Alvarado's camp.

"What—where are we?" Her eyes turned on the Kid, and she coloured and drew herself away from his arm.

"I guess we've struck a water-hole in the desert, miss," said the Kid, "and we're more'n twenty good miles from the Greasers."

"From Alvarado—I mean, Alvarado?"

"Sure!"

Joan's eyes swept round at the sandy, stony expanse, lighted now by the rising sun.

The chill of the night still hung over the desert. Ere an hour had passed it would be burning with tropical heat.

"Are they following us?"

The Kid smiled.

"I guess Alvarado is going all out, miss, to find us. But don't you worry any—they galoots won't strike this bunch again. Even if they pick up our trail, they ain't got a dog's chance of coming up with us."

The Kid sorted out a tin pannikin from his slicker pack and dipped it full of cool, clear water.

Joan thanked him with a nod and a smile, and drank.

But her eyes still sought the spaces of the desert.

"We're going to camp here for a piece, miss," said the Kid. "I reckon you want to rest. After that we're going to hit for Pajito. I reckon if we had another hoss we'd make the grade by sundown to-night; but there's only Side-Kicker, and I got to walk and let you ride, miss. Don't you worry any; we'll strike Pajito if we don't run into your guardian and the alcalde and their outfit first."

"They are seeking me, I am sure of that," said Joan.

"You bet. I've sure seen them," said the Kid.

Joan started.

"You've seen them. Mr. Carfax?"

"Or their ghosts," said the Kid, with a chuckle. "I saw that outfit in the mirage in the desert yesterday, miss. I reckon it was them, anyhow. That guardian of yours, Mr. Manderson—ain't he a lean galoot, with a nut-

cracker jaw and eyes as sharp as a pair of gimlets, miss?"

Joan smiled.

"That is Mr. Manderson," she admitted.

"And his friend, the alcalde of Pajito, a fat greasy-looking Greaser, with a black beard—"

"Yes, yes."

"Then that's the outfit I saw in the mirage," said the Kid. "They've got thirty men, and I guess they're hunting for you, miss. They're somewhere in the desert now, and if we could strike that outfit you'd be with your guardian, which I reckon you'd like better than hitting the trail with this infant."

"If we could but find them!" breathed the girl. "They—they are seeking Don Alvaro, and if they come upon him there will be bloodshed. If we could prevent that—"

"Gee-whiz!" ejaculated the Kid suddenly.

He was staring at the sandy earth round the water-hole.

"What—"

"Skuse me, miss, interrupting you!" said the Kid apologetically. "But I guess we're going to strike that outfit instead of hitting for Pajito. There's a trail."

"A trail?" repeated Joan.

The Kid nodded.

"I reckon that outfit from Pajito struck this water-hole," he said. "It's the trail of a big bunch, anyhow. I guess I'll look for sign, miss!"

Leaving the girl standing by the mustang, the Rio Kid examined the earth surrounding the water-hole.

There were tracks of numerous horses and mules, where the ground had been softened by the water.

Not less than forty animals had halted there the previous day. The party had gone on, and the trail led westward.

The Kid reflected.

In the mirage the day before he had seen the Pajito outfit; thirty men or more, with a number of pack-mules. There was little doubt that these tracks belonged to the same party. Travellers in the Sonoro desert were few and far between, and the Kid knew that the trail was not that of Indians. It was not likely that another large party of white men was travelling the desert. He returned to the Texas girl.

"I guess this here is the trail of your friends, miss," he said. "They hit the West from here, and that will take us away from Pajito. But I figure we'll come up with them before noon."

Joan compressed her lips.

"Are they on the trail of Don Alvaro?" she asked.

The Kid shook his head.

"Not a small piece, miss! I guess they ain't never hit Alvarado's trail. That Mexican bunch is due north from here, and the Pajito outfit have headed west. They won't never strike Alvarado's bunch, that-a-way!"

The girl's relief was clear.

"Then—if we can overtake them—there will be no fighting, no bloodshed!" she murmured.

"That's so, miss!"

"Let us go."

"I guess you want a rest, miss—"

"No, no! I can rest when I have joined my friends!" exclaimed the girl eagerly. "Let us go—at once!"

"It's your say-so, miss," said the Kid. "You think we can overtake them?"

"An outfit that size don't travel fast," explained the Kid. "They was taking it easy when I sighted them in the mirage. You see, they ain't no call to hurry till they strike the trail of the man they

want—and they sure ain't struck it. I guess we'll join that outfit easy."

"Let us go, then."

The Kid smoothed his horse's neck.

"You got to put it on, old hoss," he murmured.

And, with the Texas girl in the saddle and the Kid walking beside the horse, they started from the water-hole and headed into the west.

THE SECOND CHAPTER. The Camp in the Desert!

"**C**ARAMBA! Que calor hace!" Jose Velasquez, the fat alcalde of Pajito, wiped his perspiring, greasy brow and grunted.

It was hot.

Overhead, the sun blazed down on the desert, that shimmered with heat.

The alcalde's outfit was in camp. Horses and mules lay about in languid rest. Dark-browed Mexicans sprawled, their faces shaded by their big sombreros.

It was the halt for noon; in the heat of noontide no Mexican would have dreamed of moving on.

Job Manderson gave the fat alcalde a sour look, lifted his field-glasses, and scanned once more the boundless expanse of desert.

The lean, wiry Yankee, though he belonged to a cooler country, did not feel the heat like the fat, greasy Alcalde of Pajito.

And he was keener on the quest that had led the party from the settlements into the heart of the Sonora desert.

Every day that outfit rode the desert and failed to find a trace of Alvarado and his prisoner added to the sour humour of Job Manderson. Every day he cursed the slackness of the alcalde and his cuadrilla.

Every hour of the day he scanned the desert with his glasses, but he scanned it in vain.

Alvaro Alvarado and his vaqueros had vanished into the trackless desert, taking Joan Valence with them; and for long, weary days the hunt had gone on in vain.

There were skilful trailers in the alcalde's outfit, but they had found no sign; in the wide spaces it was largely a matter of chance whether they picked up sign of the rancho or not.

The fat alcalde, sprawled on a buffalo-robe, shaded by his sombrero, fanning himself to keep off the flies, stared lazily at Manderson.

"We shall find them, amigo," he said. "Sooner or later we shall find them! Caramba! I will never give up the trail till I have found them and taken the seniorita from the hands of that picaro Alvarado! And my men shall hang him on the nearest tree!"

"Let us push on!" growled Manderson.

"In this heat, senior?" murmured the Mexican.

"We shall not find them by lazing here!"

Don Jose Valesquez shrugged his fat shoulders.

"Senior, I love the seniorita, who is to marry me," he said. "But in this heat, senior—"

He fanned himself again.

Manderson muttered a curse and looked through the glasses, though with little hope of seeing anything but the dreary desert, the stony arroyos, the patches of yucca.

"I love the seniorita Juana," murmured Don Jose, with fat sentimentality. "Is she not to be the Senora Valasquez? But, in this heat—"

He sighed, and once more fanned his fat face.

The lean Yankee cursed again, and scanned the desert through the powerful glasses. Suddenly he gave a start.

"Thunder! There is someone—"

"You see someone, señor?" asked Don Jose, without moving.

"Yep!"

"Some Redskin perhaps—"

"A horseman," said the other, his eyes fixed on the distant object on the plain, "coming this way."

"Some wanderer of the desert. He may give us news of the party we seek, it may be," murmured Don Jose. He made a movement to rise, but sank back again with a grunt. "After all, if he is coming this way we shall see him when he arrives. Hace mucho calor!"

Manderson looked down at the sprawling fat man, with a snarl.

"Is that how you expect to win the heart of the senorita, Don Jose?" he asked sourly. "She is in the hands of a scoundrel—"

"The señor Alvarado is no scoundrel, señor," yawned Don Jose. "He is a young romantic fool. That he would never harm the senorita I am assured. Caramba! He is in love with her, and he dreams that he is playing the part of a noble caballero in taking her away from me! And if he has told her all, señor, I doubt whether Donna Juana is anxious to be rescued by her guardian and his friend the alcalde de Pajito. Por tados los santos! I am well aware that she does not yearn to become the Senora Velasquez."

Manderson did not answer.

His face grew more and more set and curious in expression as he stared through the glasses across the desert.

"It is she!" he exclaimed at last.

"But who?"

"Joan!"

"The senorita!"

Don Jose sat upright in his astonishment. He would have risen to his feet, but again the heat and his own fatness were too much for him, and he remained sitting.

"Yes, yes!" Manderson's face was excited now. "I can recognise her through the glasses! Get up, man, and look!"

"Señor, I will take your word," answered the alcalde de Pajito. "You should know your ward, señor. And it is she?"

"Yes, yes, riding, with a man walking beside the horse—a man I do not know; not a Mexican. What can this mean?" exclaimed Manderson, in bewilderment. "She was carried off by Alvarado and his cowboys, and we tracked them to the edge of the desert; we know that they took to the desert, though we cannot find the villains. And now—"

"It is amazing!" murmured Don Jose, fanning himself.

"But it is she—and we have found her." Job Manderson grinned with satisfaction. "We've found her, Velasquez!"

"Muy bien!"

"Bring me my horse!" shouted Manderson, and a peon brought a horse promptly. "I am going to meet her Velasquez. You will ride with me?"

"In this heat, señor?"

"And you wish her to believe that you love her!" snarled Manderson.

"Todos los angeles! But I love her madly!" sighed the fat alcalde. "But in this heat—"

"Fool! Call for your horse!"

"You Americans are so energetic!" said Don Jose, staring at him placidly.

without moving. "That is why you have taken from us lazy Mexicans the half of our country, and will some day take the rest! Señor, it is rash to ride in the heat of the day; there is danger of sunstroke—"

"If you desire Joan to become the Senora Velasquez—"

"Is not that a settled matter?" drawled the alcalde. "Do you not give me your ward in marriage, in return for the concession of the oil-land? Is it not a compact?"

Manderson scowled at him.

"There will be no trouble, señor," said the alcalde, fat and placid and satisfied. "In Pajito, the senorita laughed at my suit. She would not marry a man so old and fat, though he is the richest man in Sonora, and able to grant oil concessions to her guardian. Here in the desert it is different. We are in no haste to return, señor. When we return to Pajito, Donna Juana will already be the Senora Velasquez. It will be a settled thing. She will learn that Jose Velasquez cares for her very much, señor—"

"Then ride to meet her!"

"Oh, señor! In this heat!"

Manderson, with a curse, swung himself on his horse and galloped away into the desert. Velasquez shrugged his fat shoulders, and closed his fat eyelids, to slumber in peace till Joan arrived in the camp.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

In Strange Company!

"I GUESS that's the outfit!" said the Rio Kid.

Joan nodded.

They were in sight of the camp in the desert. From the camp a single horseman rode, heading towards them at a gallop.

Side-Kicker was going at a walk. By his side tramped the Rio Kid. Both were weary, but both kept steadily on.

Joan's eyes lightened at the sight of the distant horseman.

"They have seen us," she said.

"Sure!"

"That—I think—is my guardian, Mr. Manderson," said the Texas girl. "He is coming to meet us."

The Kid's keen eyes were fixed on the distant horseman. It was the lean-featured Yankee he had seen in the mirage the day before, riding with the Mexican outfit.

In that glimpse in the mirage, the Kid had not liked the face of the hard-featured, sharp-jawed man. Now that he saw it in the flesh, he liked it still less.

"And that galoot's your guardian, miss?" said the Kid thoughtfully.

"Yes."

"A relation, maybe?" asked the Kid. The girl shook her head.

"No, I belong to Texas, and Mr. Manderson to New York. But he was a friend of my father in his lifetime, and he was appointed my guardian. That is why I am in Mexico. Mr. Manderson has business in Sonora. We have been in Mexico several years now."

"Not ranching?" asked the Kid. He could not picture the lean-faced man as a rancher.

"No, My guardian is interested in oil. They say that there is a rich oil-land near Pajito—waiting to be developed. It is said to be as rich as the oil-field of Tampico. Mr. Manderson hopes to get the concession from the Mexican Government. When that matter is settled, we leave Mexico."

The girl's face became pensive.

The beat of the horse's hoofs could be heard now. The horseman from the camp was rapidly approaching.

He came up at last, at a good distance from the camp, in a cloud of dust.

"Joan!" he exclaimed.

He drew his horse in by the side of the mustang. His lean face was glowing with satisfaction, though there was, so far as the Kid could see, nothing of affection in his look.

He took no notice of the Kid for the moment.

"Joan, I have found you!" he exclaimed. "I could not believe my eyes when I saw you from the camp! Where is Alvarado?"

"Many miles away," said the girl. "Mr. Carfax, my brave friend here, took me away from the Mexican camp last night—"

Manderson glanced at the Kid, taking in the sunburnt face, the Stetson hat, the silk neck-scarf, the goatskin chaps, the silver spurs, with one sharp, searching glance.

"A cow-puncher?" he said.

"You've said it," assented the Kid.

"What are you doing in Mexico?"

"Jest riding around," answered the Kid. "Jest at present I'm toting Miss Valence to your camp, mister."

"I'm obliged to you for helping my ward," said Manderson acidly. "No doubt you know that this young lady is my ward. I will now take charge of her. Any reward you claim for your services—"

"Aw, forget it!" said the Kid.

"Mr. Carfax has saved me at the risk of his life!" exclaimed the girl indignantly. "Is this how you thank him?"

"I thank him, of course," said Manderson. "I've said that I'm obliged, and any reward—"

"Cut it out," said the Kid. "Miss, I guess I'll see you as far as the camp yonder, and then I'll sure hit the trail."

"You are welcome to come to the camp, of course, said Manderson ungraciously. "You are welcome to rest and refreshment before you go on your way. Tell me what has happened since you were taken from Pajito, Joan."

The oil magnate gave the Kid no further heed.

That he was glad and relieved to recover his ward was clear enough. But it was quite as clear that he did not want the company of the Texas puncher.

The Kid walked on beside the mustang, silent, as Joan rode beside her guardian and talked to him.

The Kid was not easy in his mind.

Alvaro Alvarado had carried off the girl from her guardian's house at Pajito, and taken her into the desert. Yet he had struck the Kid as a square man, a man he could like and respect. Job Manderson did not strike him in the same way, by long chalks.

Don Alvaro had said that it was to save the girl from some danger of which she knew nothing, that he had taken her away. And the Kid wondered whether, after all, the young ranchero had been right, and whether Joan would not have been safer in his camp than in that of her guardian. If ever there was a hard case, a real lobo-wolf, the Kid figured that Job Manderson was that galoot.

They reached the camp, and the Kid gave his hand to the girl to dismount. The crowd of Mexicans gathered round to stare, and Don Jose Velasquez rolled forward to greet the senorita. The Kid stood quietly watching the scene. A tent had been put up, and Don Jose conducted the girl to it, with an air of fat gallantry. But before Joan entered, she

beckoned to the Rio Kid, and he came up at once.

"You are not going now?" she asked, in a low voice.

"I guess I got to give Side-kicker a piece of a rest afore I hit the trail, miss," said the Kid. "That cayuse has sure humped it some."

He could see that the girl was relieved.

"If you would remain with the outfit,

low tone to Manderson, who stared after the Kid as he went.

The Kid returned to his mustang and rubbed down the tired horse with tender care, watered and fed him before he thought of rest for himself, much as he was in need of it.

While he was so engaged the Kid's thoughts were busy.

Many of the Pajito Mexicans stared at him curiously. But neither the

nothing to say to him. Strangely enough, it was borne in on the Kid's mind that the Texas girl, whom she had rescued from Alvaro Alvarado, might be more in need of help in the camp of her guardian, than in that of the handsome young rancharo!

It was a strange enough thought; and the Kid scouted it at first, but it would not leave his mind. It was still in his mind when he laid down, shaded



The horseman came up at last in a cloud of dust. "Joan!" he exclaimed. "I have found you!" It was Joan Valence's guardian, Mr. Manderson, and his lean face was glowing with satisfaction. But so far as the Kid could see, there was nothing of affection in his look. (See Chapter 3.)

and ride with us till we reach Pajito!" she murmured.

"Sure, miss, if you want."

"These men are all Mexicans," said Joan, "and—the alcalde. It was kind of him to help my guardian search for me in the desert, but—but— You are from my own country, Mr. Carfax, and if you would remain till we ride into Pajito—"

"I sure will, miss, if the outfit will let me," said the Kid; "and if they won't—"

"My guardian will not refuse. He is grateful to you for having rescued me."

The Kid smiled and nodded.

"That's all O.K., miss! I'm staying, sure! You don't want to be left with a crowd of Greasers, without a white man. These galoots sure look a tougher crowd than Alvarado's bunch. Count on me, miss."

The girl smiled, and disappeared into the tent.

Don José Velasquez had watched that brief interview, his little piggy eyes watching the Kid from the layers of fat of his podgy face.

As the Kid turned away from the tent, the alcalde of Pajito spoke in a

alcalde nor Manderson gave him any heed.

Don José Velasquez had gone to sleep again, under the shade of an awning stretched on poles stuck in the earth. Manderson was pacing to and fro at a little distance from the tent.

His brow was lined, and he seemed to be thinking deeply.

The Kid, observing him once or twice, wondered what the subject of his deep cogitations might be.

More and more it was borne in upon the Kid's mind that there was something wrong afoot, though he could not guess what it was.

When the heat of the day had passed there was no sign of the outfit breaking camp. The return to Pajito from the wilderness of the Sonora desert was postponed, for no reason that the Kid could see. And a galoot might have expected a warm welcome, and heartfelt gratitude, from the guardian of the girl he had saved from a lawless abductor.

Manderson, however, seemed to have forgotten his existence. Apparently he did not care whether the Kid camped with the outfit or not; he had

his face with his Stetson hat, and slept the sleep of deep fatigue.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. Hit the Trail!

"SILENCIO!"

The word, hissed in Spanish in the Kid's ear, awoke him.

He was silent as he was bidden.

His eyes, as they opened, burned with rage; but he did not stir, and he was silent. For the keen point of a poinard was pressed over his heart, and it needed but a movement to drive the blade home.

The Kid lay and looked.

It was the fat alcalde of Pajito who had spoken. Two Mexicans were kneeling beside the Kid, grasping him; two dark-browed Greasers, one of whom held the knife to his heart.

Behind them stood Job Manderson, his lean face looking down on the Kid, his flinty eyes glinting under his shaggy grey brows.

"Silence!" he said.

The Kid looked up at him. The sun was setting on the desert, level red rays turning the stony expanse to fire.

The girl was not to be seen; no doubt she was still sleeping the sleep of utter weariness in the tent. And evidently these hombres did not want her to hear, or to draw her attention.

"You need not be alarmed, Carfax," said Manderson coldly. "No harm is intended you. You saved my ward from a scoundrel of a Mexican, and I am thankful. But be silent—I do not wish Joan to hear. Speak low!"

"I guess you're the king-pin here, feller," said the Kid calmly. "What does this hyer surprise-party mean, Mr. Manderson?"

"Only that you are not wanted in this outfit," said Manderson. "But no harm is meant—you may go in peace, if you go quietly, without a word to Miss Valence, and without giving trouble. If you give trouble that knife will reach your heart; but I am unwilling to harm you, after what you have done."

"I guess I aimed to ride to Pajito with this outfit," said the Kid, speaking low, as he was bidden.

"No need of that," said Manderson. "You have no business at Pajito, I guess."

"Nope."

"My ward asked you to ride?"

"Sure."

"And why?"

"I guess the young lady liked the idea of a man from Texas riding with the outfit, among all these Mexicans," answered the Kid. "Why not?"

"We do not love the Gringos in Sonora," said Velasquez, with a grin. "You will take your caballo and go, señor."

The Kid breathed hard.

He was helpless in the hands of the Mexicans. He had had his doubts about the outfit; but he had never looked for treachery like this. Neither could he see any motive for it. Why should Manderson care whether he rode to Pajito with the party or not? His mind reverted to Alvaro Alvarado's words—of some danger that threatened the Texas girl at Pajito. Was it from her guardian and the fat alcalde that the danger was to come?

"Joan asked you to ride with us," said Manderson. "Well, it was but a fancy, and of no consequence. You will go about your business, Mr. Carfax, now that my ward has rejoined me in safety. You have no further concern in the matter."

The Rio Kid, in his heart, felt that he had a good deal of further concern in the matter. But it was not his cue to say so—with a Mexican poinard pressing over his heart.

"If my company ain't welcome here, feller, I guess I ain't the galoot to horn in," he said. "I reckon you'll explain to the young lady that you asked me to beat it, if she wants to know."

"Sure!" said Manderson, seemingly relieved at the Kid's careless submission. "You need not worry about that. And, as I have said, if you desire a reward for helping Miss Valence to escape from Alvarado—"

"Aw, can it!" said the Kid.

Manderson shrugged his shoulders.

"Take his guns!" he said.

"You ain't sending me into the desert without my guns, feller?" objected the Kid.

"Your belongings will be returned to you, outside the camp," said Manderson coldly. "Get up, and lead your horse away. Go quietly—I desire you no

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harm, but if you call Joan's attention, you are a dead man."

The Kid rose to his feet. His cool, careless face gave no sign of the rage that was in his breast. These galoots had him now, and it was the Kid's cue to talk turkey—till circumstances changed. If he hit the trail, as he was bidden, Manderson had no further concern with him, and was not likely to give him another thought. But if the lean-featured, fox-eyed man supposed him to be dangerous, the service he had rendered would not save him. The Mexicans were ready enough to drive a poinard to his heart if the order were given, and Manderson would not have been slow to give it if he had known what was in the Kid's mind.

One of the Mexicans led the black-muzzled mustang away; the other kept a grasp on the Kid's arm, and led him after the horse. The fat alcalde watched them go, a grin on his podgy face.

Manderson followed them from the camp, carrying the holsters with the Kid's guns in them. Several times he glanced uneasily towards the tent, as if fearing to see Joan look out and discover what was passing.

Down by the Sea.

This is the time of the year when a good many readers of the "Popular" spend their summer holidays down by the sea. To those boys and girls this announcement will come as a pleasant surprise:

A "Popular" representative will be touring the seaside resorts, and, to any reader displaying his copy of the "Popular," he will present a novel free gift selected from the following list:—Kites, Large Balloons, Flags, Mystery Packets, and Windmills.

"Make haste!" he snapped.

"It's your say-so, feller!" agreed the Kid.

Under the red sunset, the mustang was walked out into the desert, till a fold of the plain hid them from the eyes in the camp. Then the two Mexicans, at a sign from Manderson, stopped. The lean-faced man signed to the Kid to mount his horse. In a moment, the Rio Kid was in the saddle. Manderson handed him the holsters.

"Now beat it!" he said curtly. "Go—and without even looking back. Look back, or turn, and a bullet will reach you. Go where you like—so long as you do not strike my camp again."

"I guess I ain't honing for your company, feller," said the Kid. "You ain't what I call a hospitable galoot. I reckon I'd have liked to say good-bye to Miss Joan, but I'll sure be glad to see the last of you."

"Ride!" answered Manderson.

"It's me for the trail!" agreed the Kid.

And he gave the mustang a touch of the quirt, and rode away into the desert. He did not look back.

He was well aware that the two Mexicans had their rifles ready, and that if he showed any signs of disobeying Manderson's injunctions, whizzing bullets would follow him.

The Kid rode on at an easy gallop till a fold of the plain hid him from the sight of the Mexicans. Manderson walked back to the camp with a thoughtful brow, the Mexicans following him,

"He is gone?" asked Jose Velasquez, as Manderson came up.

"He is gone."

"The thrust of a poinard would have been safer, amigo," said the fat Mexican.

Manderson shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"He is but a wandering cowpuncher—he is not dangerous! He is gone now, and will not trouble us. He might have given trouble, had he stayed—but we shall not see him again. Forget him!"

The alcalde of Pajito stared out across the plain, red in the sunset.

"Sin duda, he is gone," he said, "but what—"

"But what?" snapped Manderson.

"Caramba—if he should be curious—if he should linger to spy—"

"He will not linger. He is gone about his business."

"I will make sure of that," said Velasquez, and he called to one of the Mexicans in Spanish: "Pedrillo, take your horse, and follow the gringo, and if you find him, shoot him dead."

"Si, señor!"

"It is futile—he is long gone," said Manderson.

"We shall see."

Pedrillo mounted his broncho and rode away across the plain in the direction the Rio Kid had taken.

Manderson and Velasquez watched him till he became small in the distance, and at last disappeared over the fold of the plain that had hidden the Rio Kid.

Manderson started suddenly.

Faintly from the distance came the sound of a shot. It was far and faint, but it was clear, and it brought all the Mexicans to their feet, staring.

"Caramba! Pedrillo has fired!" said the alcalde. "Does that look, amigo, as if the cowpuncher had gone, as you supposed?"

Manderson gritted his teeth.

"All the worse for him if he had not!" he snarled.

"Cierto!"

"Mira!" shouted one of the Mexicans.

Over the rolling ground a horse came into sight, galloping back towards the camp.

The saddle was empty. The reins hung loose. The stirrups dangled. It was the broncho on which Pedrillo had ridden out of the camp—and it came thundering back without its rider.

"What—" breathed Manderson.

He stared at the riderless horse. What had happened, unseen, in the distance in the desert? The alcalde of Pajito uttered a curse in Spanish.

The scared horse came thundering into camp, and one of the Mexicans secured it. It stood panting, trembling, and there was a buzz of voices as half a dozen fingers pointed to blood on the trappings.

"He is not gone," muttered the alcalde. "He is not gone—Pedrillo found him, señor, he found him, and it was not the puncher who fell! Caramba! He has killed Pedrillo!" He shouted an order to his men. "Mount—ride—seek him—seek that Tejano, and shoot him down and leave him for the coyotes!"

A dozen men scrambled into their saddles, and rode out on the darkening plain. Far from the camp they found Pedrillo, lying where he had fallen, his rifle still in his hands, and a bullet in his heart. But they did not find the Rio Kid.

THE END.

(The Rio Kid's in the thick of adventures again next week. Look out for the splendid Western tale, entitled: "HITTING THE TRAIL!")