

HITTING *the* TRAIL!

by RALPH REDWAY

Certainly since the day he first met the fair Miss Joan Valence from Texas, the Rio Kid has had his full share of perilous adventures. But he has not done with them yet, as you will see in the Roaring Western Yarn below!



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Kid Horns In!

THE Rio Kid strained his ears to listen.

Faintly, from the blackness of the desert, came the sound of horses and mules stirring at the trail ropes.

But there was no other sound to tell the Kid that he was near the camp of the alcalde of Pajito.

Not a gleam of light broke the blackness.

Cold as the night was on the Mexican upland no camp-fire burned. The light of a camp-fire might have drawn the attention of wandering Apaches or Yaquis in the desert. There were thirty armed men in the alcalde's outfit; but they had no hunch for a conflict with a swarm of outcast Redskins. The camp was dark and silent, and save for the faint sounds that came from the tethered horses and mules, a galoot might have passed within a dozen yards of it without knowing that it was there.

The Rio Kid cursed the darkness under his breath as he crawled through sand and stones towards the Mexican camp, pausing every minute to listen with strained ears.

There was a glimmer of stars in the dark vault overhead, but only objects close at hand could be seen in the pale

glimmer. At a few yards all was dim and indistinct.

The Kid figured that there would be sentries round the camp. There were too many dangers in the desert for the Greasers to sleep without keeping watch. He knew that he might run into one of them at any moment, and that a shot or a shout might give the alarm.

But that was a risk that the Kid had to take.

Suddenly he stopped, suppressing his breathing.

The scent of a cigar came to him through the deep dusk of the night. The Kid, lying still on the sandy soil, watched attentively. And the tiny red glow caught his eyes—the burning end of the cigar.

His eyes gleamed.

Dimly, under the red-glowing tip of the cigar, he made out now the figure of a Mexican, leaning on his rifle, looking towards the desert. It was a sentry, and the Kid would have been upon him in a minute more had not the scent of the cigar warned him.

For long minutes the Kid lay still,

watching, listening. He had to get past that watchman if he was to enter the Mexican camp, as he was determined to do, under cover of the darkness.

He moved at last.

An Apache creeping on his enemy, a panther stealing along a branch to leap down upon his prey, could not have been more silent than was the boy puncher of Texas as he circled round the Mexican sentry in the dark.

The Mexican heard nothing, knew nothing, till from behind a sudden grip was placed on his neck, and the point of a bowie knife was pressed against his ribs.

"Silencio!" whispered the Kid.

The Mexican gave a faint gasp.

The sharp point, pressed between two ribs, with a strong hand ready to drive it home at a word, warned him to be silent, as well as the fierce whisper of the Rio Kid.

Save for that startled gasp the Mexican uttered no sound.

He stood still, his knees knocking together under him, his hands still, resting on the muzzle of his rifle.

THE POPULAR.—No. 551.

"Silence!" the Kid repeated, in Spanish. "Silencio, o la muerte!"

No sound, not even a gasp, from the Mexican. It was silence or death, and he chose silence.

Keeping the bowie knife pressed to the Mexican's ribs, the Kid reached out with his left hand and took away the rifle, and laid it down. Then a revolver and a cuchillo were removed from the Mexican's sash.

The Kid could feel the man trembling, under the pressing point of the knife. The sudden, strange attack in the darkness had utterly unnerved the Mexican. He was as clay in the puncher's hands.

The Kid drew the unresisting arms behind the Mexican, jerked off the gaudy sash, and bound the swarthy wrists together.

"Todos los santos!" breathed the Mexican faintly. "Todos los santos!"

"I guess the saints ain't worrying any about a lobo-wolf like you, Greaser," grinned the Kid.

The man started.

"El Gringo! El Tejano!"

"Sure!" said the Kid. "It's the Gringo—the Texan feller! And I guess if you let your pardners know I'm here, there'll be a dead Greaser lying around for them to find when they come to look. You get me?"

"Si, senior," breathed the Mexican. The Kid peered into the man's face. A pair of terrified, dilated, black eyes gazed back at him under black brows.

"You're one of the outfit of Jose Velasquez, the alcalde of Pajito," said the Kid. "I sure seen you in the camp when I was around. If you ain't tired of life, Greaser, don't you let out a yalp."

"No, senior."

"I guess the alcalde is still in camp yonder?"

"Si."

"And that lobo wolf, Manderson?"

"Si."

"And the Texas girl—the seniorita Tejana?"

"Si."

"They ain't hitting the home trail for Pajito yet?"

"No."

"And why ain't they?" asked the Kid. "You want to spill what you know, Greaser." He made a motion with the knife, and there was a flash in the dim light of the stars, and the Mexican shuddered. "Them guys came into the desert to get back the seniorita from Alvaro Alvarado. I handed her over to them, safe and sound. Now, why ain't they lit out for home?"

"I do not know, senior," faltered the Mexican. "I know nothing. The senior alcalde is master—he and his Americano friend the senior Manderson. They tell us nothing, senior."

"I guess that's likely enough," agreed the Kid. "There's a gum-game going on in this outfit, but I guess you ain't wise to it. But I'm going to get wise to it, I reckon. Say, any more hombres watching this side of the camp?"

"No, senior. There are four sentries, one on every side." The Mexican

(Continued on opposite page.)

FAMOUS SCOUTS OF THE WAR!



Another great War Scout who has consented to become a member of the Boy Scouts Association is Lord Plumer. Here is a man who will prove a pillar of strength to this wonderful organisation, as he proved a pillar of strength to the Allies during the Great War.

2.—Field-Marshal Lord Plumer, G.C.B., G.B.E., G.C.V.O., G.C.M.G.

ALL Boy Scouts gave three hearty cheers when they heard that Field-Marshal Lord Plumer, one of the greatest heroes of the War, had consented to take an active part in the movement by becoming a member of the Headquarters' Council of the Boy Scouts Association.

Here was a man worthy to lead and worthy to be followed. Here was a man who would prove a pillar of strength to the Scouting Movement, as he had proved a pillar of strength to the Allies during the greatest crisis Britain has ever known.

Lord Plumer has more letters after his name than you can count on the fingers of two hands. Honours and decorations have been showered thickly upon him, and rightly so, for he is one of the finest soldiers this little island has ever produced.

Lord Plumer enlisted in the Army when he was nineteen, and from the first his brilliance as a soldier and a strategist, his level-headed leadership, and his ability to command men, won him a continuous run of success and a rapid ascent of the promotion ladder.

He was on active service in the Soudan and African wars. In the Great War he commanded the Second Army, British Expeditionary Force, in France.

Lord Plumer's narrow escapes from death have been legion, but he has met

every hazard, every adventure, every big event, with the same cool, unruffled demeanour which he displays on the parade ground.

Who can forget how Plumer captured the famous Messines Ridge? Afterwards they said it was the "biggest bang" of the War. They were right! But Plumer pushed ahead and won it for the Allies, as if opposition was non-existent and it was the easiest thing in the whole world.

Lord Plumer has been nicknamed the "Dandy General," because of his immaculate appearance, his customary politeness, and the monocle which is always screwed firmly into his eye. No one has ever seen that monocle anywhere else; it has even been rumoured that its distinguished owner takes it to bed with him.

Plumer is always delightfully polite, and never gives an order without saying "please."

For instance, during the Boer War, while advancing to relieve Sir Robert Baden-Powell, Chief Scout and founder of the Boy Scout Movement, who was besieged at Mafeking, one of Plumer's own gunners fired a shell which fell unaccountably short, and burst near to where the colonel, as he was then, was seated on his charger. The frightened horse immediately reared up on its hind legs, and it was a few moments before Plumer could pacify the animal.

Then he turned to one of his aides-de-camp and said politely:

"Please be good enough to proceed to the officer in charge and ask him to silence that gun!"

Perhaps one of the most curious incidents of his adventurous career occurred when he was in Africa. It was his custom to clean his teeth by the riverside with a few drops of eau-de-Cologne. One day the blacks noticed that the water turned a little white during the process, and, ignorant of the potentialities of the scent in question, imagined that Plumer was poisoning the water with his breath. Luckily, the latter managed to explain away his "witchcraft" to the satisfaction of the natives.

We have mentioned but a few incidents in the adventurous life of the great general, but they serve to show what manner of man he is. Every Scout is glad to acknowledge him as a brother member of the mighty movement which celebrates its twenty-first birthday in a week's time at Arrowe Park, near Birkenhead, where the biggest world jamboree ever held will take place.

It is safe to say that no man will be more pleased than Field-Marshal Lord Plumer to offer his congratulations to Sir Robert Baden-Powell, the Chief Scout and founder, on his magnificent achievement, and to wish all fellow Scouts "Many Happy Returns of the Day."

(Next week: The adventurous career of Field-Marshal Sir William R. Birdwood, Bart., G.C.M.G., G.C.B., K.C.S.I.)



THE KID'S CAPTURE! The Kid drew the unresisting arms behind the Mexican, jerked off the gaudy sash, and bound the swarthy wrists together. "If you make a sound when I leave you," muttered the young outlaw, "there'll be a dead Greaser lying about afterwards!"

(See Chapter 1.)

whispered in Spanish: "No more on this side, señor."

"The other galoots won't worry me any," muttered the Kid. "I guess the rest of the outfit will be sleeping?"

"Si, señor."

"When do they change the sentries?"

"La media noche, señor—"

"I guess it's an hour to midnight. I got time," said the Kid. "I got to get word with that Texas girl, and tell her she's sure got a friend around if she's in need of one—and I guess she surely is. I'm leaving you safe, Greaser, and if I hear a small piece of a sound from you, I'll come back and leave you safer. You get me?"

"Si, señor," faltered the Mexican.

The Kid motioned him to lie on the earth, then, with lengths cut from his serape, he bound his legs, and gagged him securely.

"You move, and I guess you won't move agin this side of Jordan," the Kid whispered in his ear, as he lay.

The Mexican shivered and lay still. Leaving him where he lay, the Kid crept on towards the Mexican camp.

The way was clear to him now.

Silent as a creeping cougar the Kid reached the camp where the alcaide's men lay sleeping, rolled in their thick serapes against the cold of the desert night.

In the midst of the camp stood the tent that sheltered the Texas girl. Moving like a shadow through sleeping forms the Kid approached the tent. From a slit by the flap came a faint gleam of light.

A light was burning in the tent, and the Kid figured that Joan Valence was not yet sleeping.

As he drew closer to the tent there was a murmur of voices from within.

The Kid recognised the voice of Joan,

with the soft tone in it of his native country, and the harsh, nasal tones of Job Manderson. The Texas girl was speaking with her guardian; and until Manderson had left the tent there was nothing for the Kid to do. He dropped into deep shadow by the side of the canvas and waited—and to his ears came low but clear the voices in the tent.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Light at Last!

"IN the morning, Joan—"

"Why wait till morning?"

"I guess the hour's late," said Manderson uneasily. "I was just going to turn into my blankets when you sent for me, Joan."

"Why are we still here?" Manderson did not reply.

A small lamp, hung on the tent-pole, shed a dim light. The Texan girl was seated on a pile of rugs and blankets, her eyes fixed on Manderson.

The lean-featured man, with the face of a fox, did not meet her eyes. He seemed strangely uneasy under her gaze.

"Leave it till morning, Joan," he repeated. "There will be ample time for explanations to-morrow—"

"What are you hiding from me?" Manderson muttered something indistinctly.

"It was at noon that the Texas puncher brought me here," said Joan. "He saved me from the hands of Alvaro Alvarado. He found your trail and followed it, and I am here. I asked him to stay in the camp till we reached Pajito; but he is gone. Why is he gone?"

"He took his horse and went," said

Manderson. "I am not accountable for what the puncher did, Joan."

"He promised to stay with the outfit till we reached Pajito. I asked him, and he gave me his word."

"And forgot it, I guess," said Manderson.

Outside the tent the Kid brought his teeth together hard. But he made no sound.

"Was he forced to go?" asked Joan quietly.

"Who should have forced him?" muttered Manderson uneasily. "He mounted his horse and went. I was not his master."

He glanced furtively at the girl, and dropped his gaze before her clear, accusing eyes.

"I slept after I arrived here—I was worn out," said Joan. "But I was awakened by a shot."

"What of that? One of the Greasers shooting at a coyote—"

"If harm has befallen the Texas cowboy who rescued me and brought me here—"

"No harm has befallen him!" grunted Manderson. "He has hit the trail, and is probably forty miles away by this time."

The Rio Kid smiled in the darkness. "You know that I speak Spanish like a Mexican," said the Texas girl quietly. "I have heard talk among the alcaide's men. Many of them have been out riding till a late hour this night. They were seeking—someone. One of them said that Pedrillo had been killed. Others were speaking of the Tejano—that must be Kid Carfax. What has happened?"

Manderson did not answer.

"And why are we here?" went on Joan. "Why did we not break camp and start for Pajito? If you came into the desert to find me, you have found me now. Why are we not on the trail for home?"

Still Manderson was silent.

"Do we break camp at dawn?"

"No."

"We remain in the desert?"

"Yes!" muttered Manderson.

"And why?"

The foxy-faced man shifted uneasily. He opened his thin, hard lips to speak, and then closed them again.

Joan's eyes never left his face.

"You had better speak frankly," she said in the same quiet tone. "You know that I fear Jose Velasquez, and that for that reason, in the midst of his outfit, I desired the Texan to remain. You have driven him away—I know it!"

THE POPULAR.—No. 551.

He would not have deserted me willingly, after passing his word. He rescued me from Alvaro Alvarado, at the risk of his life; and he would have stood by me, as he promised."

"You have nothing to fear—you are with your legal guardian and under the care of a Mexican alcalde and his alguazils—"

"The alcalde is a man I fear and detest, and his alguazils are the scum of Pajito," said Joan. "And you—what do you mean? Why do you think of keeping me in the desert? Was Alvaro Alvarado, after all, my friend, and not my enemy in taking me away from your house at Pajito?"

Manderson drew a deep breath.

"If you will know, Joan, I will tell you! Ever since you came from Texas to live under my care in the Casa Manderson at Pajito, Don Jose Velasquez has sought you—the fat old fool loves you—"

"Enough of that!"

"He is a fat old fool; but he is the richest man in Sonora," said Manderson. "You are an orphan, Joan, and you have little of your own. Many Mexican senoritas would envy you, if you became the Senora Velasquez, wife of the alcalde of Pajito, mistress of the finest house—"

"Enough, I say! I have given the fat old fool, as you call him, my answer more than once, when he has pestered me!" snapped Joan.

"You must give him another answer," said Manderson sourly.

"Never!"

"I guess I'm going to be frank, Joan," said Manderson. "I am your guardian, and it is my wish. I'm in line to get the biggest oil concession in this part of Mexico—there are millions of dollars in it! Velasquez can help me, or he can stand in my way. If you marry him he will help me—if not, he will see that I never get the concession. I am not going to lose a large fortune for a girl's whims. You will marry Velasquez—a good match for an almost penniless girl—better than that rancher Alvarado—and I shall get the oil concession. It is a settled thing."

"You have settled it?"

"Sure!"

"And you think I will agree?"

"I think you will have to," said Manderson coolly. "It was a stroke of good fortune, Velasquez taking this fancy to you. It has cleared my way of all difficulties. There are others after the oil concession—big interests in the States. With Velasquez on my side I shall beat them. It means millions of dollars—an oil-field bigger than Tampico!" Manderson's little sharp eyes gleamed under his shaggy brows. "Think of it, Joan—"

"So that is the truth?" said Joan. "And that is why Alvaro took me away from the Casa Manderson at Pajito—he knew—"

Manderson shrugged his shoulders.

"He knew—he found out. The young fool was in love with you, and I believe he had a watch on me—I guess he bribed some of the Mexicans in my household—he suspected—"

"He knew you better than I!" said Joan bitterly.

"Did he tell you nothing?" asked Manderson, his eyes furtively on the girl's face for a moment.

"Nothing; only that he was saving me from a danger I knew nothing of. I should not have believed him had he told me this—and he knew it! I should have called it a lie, a slander.

THE POPULAR.—No. 551.

I knew you were a hard man, an unscrupulous man; but this—"

"It is a good match," said Manderson calmly. "You will be the richest senora in this part of Mexico—"

"When I see Don Alvaro once more I will beg his pardon on my knees," said Joan. "He knew of this plot, and he would have saved me. And he could tell me nothing—for I should not have believed. And I shall not again enter the Casa Manderson—I shall go to the convent at Pajito when I return, and they will protect me till I can leave this country, unless—unless—"

"Unless?" said Manderson, watching her.

"Unless Don Alvaro should ask me again to marry him," said Joan calmly.

Manderson laughed harshly.

"You will marry Velasquez—that is the price of the oil concession," he said. "Make up your mind to it, Joan—it is a good thing for you, I guess. We do not break camp till all is settled."

The girl started.

"Then I am a prisoner here?"

"You can call it that—at least, you remain here till you have come to your senses!" said Manderson savagely. "I guess I'm not letting a silly girl's fancies stand in the way of big business!"

"You villain!" said the girl, in a low voice.

"That's enough!"

Manderson swung round, dragged aside the tent-flap, and strode out into the darkness. He crashed into an unseen form, and stumbled, with a startled exclamation:

"What—"

The words died on his lips as the heavy walnut butt of a Colt crashed down, and Manderson, stunned by the terrible blow, fell senseless at the feet of the Rio Kid.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Stampede!

THE Kid had acted swiftly.

Manderson, striding suddenly from the tent, stumbled into the puncher, and in a moment more the alarm would have been given. But a moment had been enough for the wary Kid.

The oil-grafter of Pajito lay senseless, stunned. The Kid bent over him for a moment; then rose and stared about him in the gloom, listening hard. He was in the midst of a swarm of foes; once his presence in the camp was known thirty swarthy ruffians were ready to rise round him, weapons in hand. One cry from Manderson and the boy puncher would have been fighting for his life against overwhelming odds. But Manderson was not likely to utter a cry now.

No sound of alarm came from the sleeping camp. The blow, the fall, had passed unnoticed.

The Kid breathed a quick breath of relief.

Stooping again, he rolled Manderson, senseless as a log, into the deeper shadow beside the tent. Then, stepping to the tent-flap, he shook it slightly, as a sign to the girl within.

"Miss, I guess I'm here if you want me," whispered the Kid.

The Texan girl had remained where her guardian had left her, seated on the pile of rugs, motionless, her face pale and troubled. She started and sprang to her feet as the Kid's whisper reached her ears.

"You!" she breathed.

The Kid slipped into the tent. He

raised his Stetson politely to the staring, amazed girl.

"I guess I've horned in agin, miss," he said, in a low voice. "I figured that you would be wanting help, and I was sure right—I heard all that lobo-wolf was saying to you, miss."

"They will find you! You will be killed!" breathed Joan.

"They sure ain't wise to it that I'm around, miss!" grinned the Kid.

"But my guardian—Mr. Manderson—a moment ago he was here—"

"I guess he's safe enough for a piece, miss," said the Kid. "I sure handed him a sockdolager on his cabeza that will keep him quiet for a whole spell. I reckon!"

"Oh!" panted Joan.

"You don't want to worry about that lobo-wolf, miss," said the Kid. "He sure is pizen. I guess I'd have given him another, and made him quiet for keeps, only I figured perhaps you mightn't like it, miss."

"No, no," breathed Joan. "But if he gives the alarm you are lost—"

The Kid chuckled softly.

"That guy won't talk a lot before dawn, miss," he answered. "Say, I guess you want to beat it out of this hyer. You ain't no hunch to tie up along with that fat guy Velasquez, like Manderson was saying?"

The girl shivered.

"I reckon that galoot Alvarado knowed this gum-game was going on, and that's why he cinched you, miss," said the Kid. "I sure reckoned he was a white man; though I couldn't understand at the time. He sure is a man-sized guy, and I'm powerful glad I never pulled a gun on him! I guess I'll give him the glad hand when I see him agin!"

"Alvaro, he would have saved me from this," the girl said brokenly. "And he could not warn me. I should not have believed—I could not have believed! And you cannot save me now—they are too many!"

"They sure are a big crowd," assented the Kid, "and I got to watch out, a few! Them Greasers is snoozing all round this hyer tent, and I guess I can't snake you out of it, miss; you'd never get through without waking some of them jaspers. But I don't figure on leaving you here with them dagoes! You want to beat it, I reckon?"

"Yes, yes! But—"

"I guess we can work the raffle, miss," said the Kid reassuringly. "You don't want to be scared."

Joan smiled faintly.

"I am not afraid," she said. "But what can we do? Now that I know the truth I would gladly accept Don Alvaro's protection. He would save me from Jose Velasquez—from my guardian. But he is far away—"

"Twenty miles, I reckon, and more," said the Kid. "But once I get you to my cayuse, I guess Side-Kicker will do them twenty miles smilin'! But we got to get out of this bunch without a rookus. They're sure too many for me on my lonesome! But there's a way, miss, if you've got the nerve—"

"You can trust me for that. Anything—anything, to escape from these villains—"

"Leave it to me, then, miss, and put out the light," whispered the Kid. "Let them guys think you're sleeping, if they look this way."

The girl extinguished the lamp.

The Kid's whisper came to her in the blackness:

"I guess I'm going to stampede the cayuses, miss. When them hosses get going I figure that the Greasers will

have their hands full, and they won't be watching out for you. You wait here a piece, and be ready."

"Yes," whispered Joan.
The Kid disappeared from the tent.
He moved silently as a shadow in the sleeping camp. In a few minutes he was among the remuda.

Horses and mules, tethered with trail-ropes, were sleeping. Some of the animals stirred as the Kid glided among them. But the Kid was silent and swift.

He glided among the tethered animals, and the keen edge of the bowie-knife severed the trail-ropes, one after another. It was not new work to the Kid; he had stampeded a remuda before, more than once.

Horses and mules, freed of the tethering-ropes, were loose, and stirring restlessly.

Outside the camp there were still three sentries on the watch; but it was within the camp that their enemy was silently at work. The faintest glimmer of starlight was enough for the Kid.

The animals had been released, and the Kid struck a sharp blow on the flank of a restive broncho. The horse started and plunged and reared; and a second sharp blow sent him careering away.

In a moment more the whole remuda was in confusion. Shadowy forms started up on all sides.

In the midst of the startled animals the Kid stood, lashing round him with a quirt.

Cracking blows fell on backs and flanks, and on all sides the horses and mules plunged and snorted and careered. Three or four of them broke away for the plains, and the rest followed. The stampede had begun.

From the Mexicans, startled by the outbreak, came shouts of alarm. Serapes were flung aside, and the sleepers started up.

"Los caballos!" came a yell.
Tramping, snorting, tossing their shaggy heads, the stampeded remuda careered through the camp, their excitement intensified by the alarmed shouts of the Mexicans.

There was a thunder of galloping hoofs out on the plain.

Some of the Mexicans, knocked down by the stampeding horses, were yelling and cursing; others wildly flung their lazoes, and five or six of the bronchos were roped in. But the greater part of the remuda dashed out on the plain, and scattered in the darkness of the desert.

In the camp all was wild confusion.

The Rio Kid had reached the tent again and slipped inside. He whispered to the Texan girl, and stood listening.

The voice of the alcalde of Pajito could be heard, shouting to his men. The remuda had broken loose on the northern side of the camp, and all attention was concentrated there. The vicinity of the tent was deserted.

"I guess we're beating it now, miss!" whispered the Kid. He seized the girl's arm and led her from the tent.

Swiftly, in the gloom, he led the way. For the moment the way was clear; the stampede occupied the whole attention of the alcalde and his men. In three minutes the Kid was outside the camp on the southern side, his strong arm leading Joan as she stumbled over the rough, stony ground.

He paused to look back.
Flitting shadows in the darkness met his eyes; there was little to be seen, but he could hear the thundering of hoofs, the squealing of the horses, the enraged shouts of the Mexicans.

The Kid chuckled.
"I guess this lets us out, miss," he said. "Them guys are sure too busy to worry us any. Their goose is cooked, if they don't get them horses back, and I reckon they won't get them back in a hurry. Mebbe they won't miss you from the tent till morning. That fat galoot Velasquez will sure sit up and stare when he finds you missing. This-a-way, miss."

"Haste—haste!" breathed the Texas girl.
Swiftly the Kid led her away. To Joan, all was darkness; but the Kid never paused for a moment. A quarter of a mile from the Mexican camp, in a hollow of the plain, Side-Kicker was waiting. The girl was lifted into the saddle, and the Kid led the mustang away. Far in the distance behind them, the noises of confusion in the Mexican camp died away into the silence of the night.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The Home Trail!

DON ALVARO ALVARADO drew in his horse and listened.

The first gleam of dawn was breaking in the eastern sky.

Sitting his horse motionless, Don Alvaro listened to the sound of approaching hoof-beats.

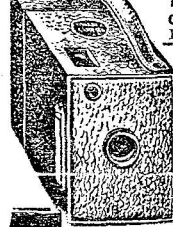
In the timber island in the desert the young ranchero's men were in camp, sleeping, worn out by a long day of riding and trailing on the plains. But for Alvaro there was no rest.

(Continued on next page.)

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The vaqueros had failed to pick up the Rio Kid's trail. He had left little sign for the keenest eye to pick up when he had left the timber island with the Texas girl. The desert had swallowed them up. That it was the Kid who had taken Joan from him the ranchero guessed, though he could not be sure. Of what had happened since he knew nothing, but he could guess that Joan and her rescuer had headed for Pajito. They might have reached the Mexican town by that time. If so, Joan was once more in her guardian's hands, and there was despair in the heart of the young rancher. He could not save her a second time. The plotters of Pajito would be too wary for that. Now she would learn from what he had tried to save her—now that it was too late. Through the night, while his men were sleeping, Don Alvaro lay wakeful; and at the earliest gleam of dawn he had mounted and ridden out to make one more attempt to find a trail. Then, through the deep gloom that lay on the Sonora desert, he heard the sound of a horse, and drew rein to listen.

Some wandering Redskin, as likely as not. He knew that all his own men were in the timber. Don Alvaro dropped his hand to a gun. The gleam of the sun came up over the rim of the desert. Faintly at first, then more clearly, a rider came into his view. Don Alvaro's hand fell from the butt of his gun, and he sat motionless, staring, unable to believe his eyes, believing that the mirage of the desert was deceiving him.

"Donna Juana!"

He muttered the words in wonder.

A moment more and he was spurring his horse madly. And, to his further amazement, the weary girl, drooping in the saddle, straightened up, and rode

to meet him, her eyes shining with gladness. And the Rio Kid, who had been leading the mustang, stood back, and watched her ride, with a faint grin on his sunburnt face.

Even the Rio Kid, her rescuer, was forgotten by Joan at that moment. She had eyes only for Alvaro Alvarado.

"I guess," murmured the Kid, "that I ain't wanted in this hyer scene—I sure reckon I ain't!"

And as the two riders met the Kid turned his back on them, and stood looking away across the desert, as if deeply interested in a clump of cactus that showed up in the distance in the rising sunlight.

"Senorita!" exclaimed Don Alvaro hoarsely, as he dragged in his broncho and leaped down.

The next moment Joan was dismounted. She held out her arms to the young rancher.

"Alvaro!"

Side-Kicker blinked at his late rider, wheeled, and trotted back to the Rio Kid. Side-Kicker was not interested in a lovers' meeting.

"Muchacha mia!" breathed Don Alvaro. Joan had sunk into his arms. "Querida mia, yo te amo!"

But he was still amazed. The girl, who had fled from his camp as from that of an enemy, had returned. The Kid, who had taken her from him, had brought her back; and now evidently it was not as an enemy that she regarded him.

"I did not understand," whispered Joan. "I did not know. But now—I have been with my guardian, with the alcade of Pajito—now I know—now I know all! If you had told me, Alvaro—"

"I could not tell you, querida. You could not have believed that the Senor

Manderson would sell you to Velasquez for his oil concession."

"No, I could not have believed it. But now I know—and now, you will save me from them?"

"There is one way to save you, querida," said Don Alvaro softly. "Your guardian will claim you; the alcade will support him; but if you are the Senora Alvarado they will have no power over you. My wife, at my rancho, will be safe from all the picaros in Mexico. I would have hidden you in the desert to save you; but now you know—now you trust me—there is a better way."

The Rio Kid, at a distance, caressed Side-Kicker, smoothing the mustang's glossy neck. He was willing to wait. He had a hunch that at this moment two was company, and three none at all. But at last there were footsteps near at hand, and he turned his head, to smile at Joan's blushing face and the smiling ranchero. Don Alvaro held out his hand.

"Senor, I owe you much," he said. "We both owe you much! When I found that you had taken the senorita from me I swore vengeance; but if you had not taken her, she would never have learned what she now knows. You have been my best friend, senor! We ride back to my rancho to-day, and you, senor, will ride with us."

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

Of the Alcade of Pajito's outfit nothing was seen as they journeyed through the desert. The Kid figured that, after the stampede of the remuda, most of them were on foot, and a man on foot in the desert was helpless. The desert was left behind at last, and the bunch arrived at the Alvarado Rancho in the Pajito country.

There the Kid remained for a time.

Neither the alcade nor Manderson had returned to Pajito; and the Kid grinned as he thought of the alcade's outfit trudging in the desert. It was days before they returned to the pueblo; but they returned too late for any further attempt to carry out their plot. For by that time the Texas girl was no longer Joan Valence, but the Senora Alvarado.

Manderson did not receive the oil concession for which he had schemed; the disappointed alcade was done with him. Much to the satisfaction of his former ward, he left the Pajito country.

The Rio Kid remained many days at the Rancho Alvarado; but he took his leave at last.

The call of the trail was too strong for him, and one morning he bade his friends farewell, and mounted the black-muzzled mustang, and hit the trail.

And his way lay northward.

Many days the Kid had passed in the sunny land of Mexico, and he had made many good friends there. But the grassy plains and winding rivers of Texas called to him, and it was the home trail that he rode when he left the Rancho Alvarado behind.

THE END.

(And that's the end of the Rio Kid's adventures in Mexico. But what lies over the border for this dare-devil outlaw? He is riding straight into the perilous hills of Texas, perilous for him on account of his many "misdeeds." But adventure is the spice of life for the Kid. He has done with Mexico, and before him is his own country. Is he heading for disaster in returning? Or what— That is for you to discover in next week's roaring long complete tale of the Wild West, entitled: "CACTUS PETE'S CAPTURE!")



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