

MEET THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW, IN THIS FINE WESTERN YARN!



The RIO KID

To the Rio Kid, adventure is the spice of life. But one can have too much of a good thing as the Kid discovers when he rides into Mexico.

THE FIRST CHAPTER. Into the Trap!

SO far as the Rio Kid was aware, nobody at Fanchita knew him from Adam. He had crossed the Rio Grande into Mexico before, more than once, and ridden many mountain trails in Chihuahua, but he had never been anywhere near this little pueblo nesting under a spur of the Sierra Madre. The Kid, in his Stetson hat, and chaps, and silk neck-scarf, looked just a cow-puncher, and a Texas cow-puncher wasn't an uncommon sight on the Mexican side—not uncommon enough to attract a whole heap of attention. Yet, as he rode down the dusty unpaved street of Fanchita, Mexicans stared at him on all sides, and nudged one another, and whispered in the soft liquid Spanish, and a little crowd gathered, and followed him along towards the plaza. The Kid caught the word 'Gringo' uttered many times. Any man from the north side of the border was a 'Gringo,' just as any galoot from the south side was a 'Greaser.' But surely, the puzzled Kid thought, plenty of Gringos must have been in Fanchita before, and there was nothing in the sight of a Gringo to make the whole population of the pueblo 'rubber' at a hombre in this way.

The Kid rode on at a walking pace. It would have been difficult to ride

faster with Mexicans, draped in their cloaks, crowding in the narrow irregular street. The Kid was dusty from a long trail, and he was aiming to find a *posada* on the plaza to put up for the night. The sun was sinking behind the soaring peaks of the Sierra Madre, and the Kid had figured on passing that night under the shelter of a roof in Fanchita. As he found that his arrival had caused so much sensation, he rather regretted that he had not camped out on the mountain. It looked as if there was going to be trouble, and he was badly placed for trouble, in the middle of a crowd of more than a hundred Mexicans.

Yet why trouble should come, he was puzzled to guess—in the belief that he was unknown to any man at Fanchita. And even if he was known, it was no business of these Greasers that he was wanted by sheriffs on the Texas side of the river. The Kid decided to walk his horse on as far as the plaza, and there, in the wider space, to put the big grey mustang to a gallop, and ride out of the pueblo.

But it was not so easy to carry out that plan. The crowd thickened round him, and several horsemen—evidently vaqueros from the ranchos—had joined it, and some of them were armed. Here and there in the crowd was a gleam of steel, as a *cuchillo* was half-drawn. So far from getting his mustang to a gallop in the plaza, the Kid found the mob so thick round him there, that he had to draw rein, and fairly halt. Five or six horsemen barred his way, with a crowd of Mexicans on foot, and on either side of him, the throng thickened. Behind him it was thicker still. The Kid was the centre of a sea of dark

faces, glittering black eyes, and big sombreros. But though many weapons were shown, there was no sign of an attack—indeed, many of the swarthy crowd were grinning. But the Kid saw clearly enough that the attack would come, if he tried to drive his way through by force. He was not honing for a fight with a mob of a couple of hundred Greasers, if he could help it. He sat his mustang, the butts of his guns very near his hands, looked over the swarthy faces nearest to him, and spoke with a cool drawl.

"Say, you gecks, what's this pesky circus, anyhow? Ain't you never seen a white man before?"

There was a buzz of voices, and the word 'Gringo' was repeated many times, and then he heard the words "El Nino del Rio."

The Kid swore softly.

El Nino del Rio was Spanish for the Rio Kid.

So he was known—the name and fame that he had hoped to leave behind him in Texas, had followed him into Mexico. And he wondered whether these Greasers knew that a reward of a thousand dollars was placed on his head in the Lone Star State. Likely they did!

"El Nino del Rio!"

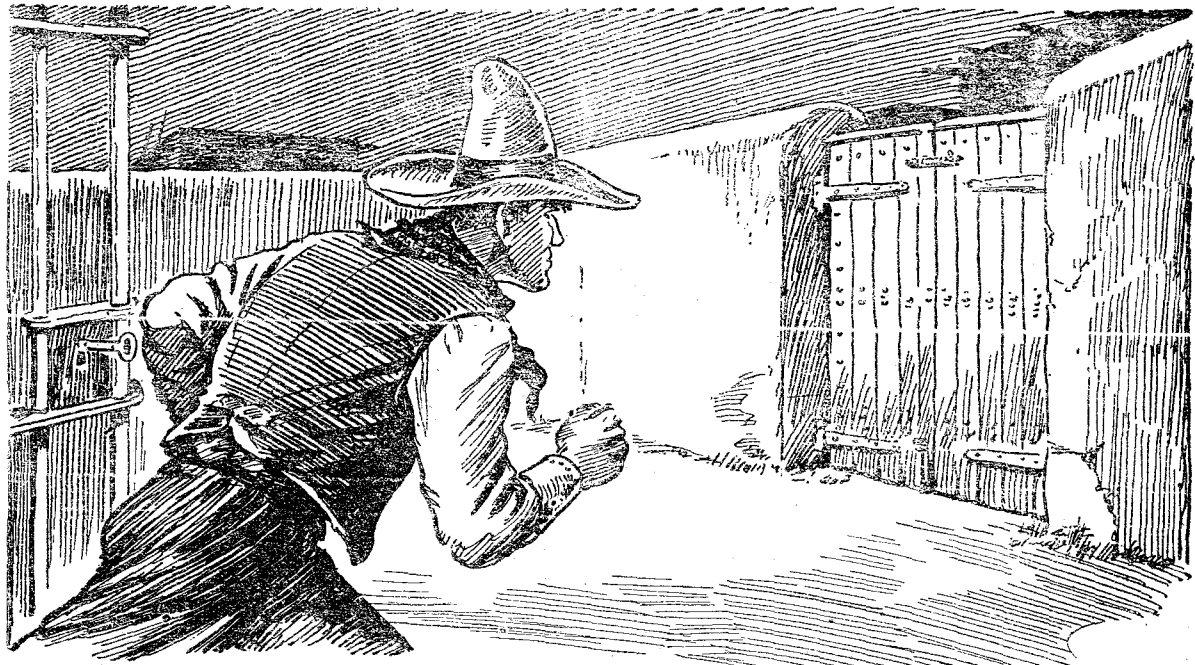
The name was taken up, and buzzed through the crowd.

"El bandolero!"

The Kid flushed.

"Aw, forget it, you'uns," he snapped indignantly. "What you mean calling a galoot a *bandolero*—which I reckon in your dog-goned lingo means a pesky rustler. Cut it out!"

The dark-skinned crowd grinned at him mockingly. They had him where they wanted him; the Kid was trapped,



'n MEXICO! RALPH REDWAY

in the midst of the surging mob. He had ridden right into a trap, when he entered Fanchita for a night's lodging at a posada.

There was a shout across the plaza. "El alcalde!"

The Kid looked round.

"I'll sure be glad to see the town marshal of this hyer burg," he said.

A tall man with a black beard came majestically across the plaza, from a mansion on one side of the square. The mansion was a one-story rambling stone house, no great shakes of a shebang, in the Texas cowboy's opinion, but a mansion in comparison with the shacks and hovels by which it was surrounded. There was only one other building of any pretensions on the plaza, and that was a square-built adobe house, with barred windows, which the Kid guessed to be the calaboose—a building in which, from the way things looked, he was likely to get his lodging that night.

But he lifted his Stetson politely to the tall, black-bearded Mexican, who was evidently the alcalde. With Spanish courtesy, the alcalde lifted his big sombrero in return to the salute.

"Say, bo," said the Kid cheerily, "you speak English? If you can sling my lingo, hombre, put me wise to what this hyer circus means? I guess I seem to have stirred up this burg like a nest of tarantulas."

Don Salvador Iguerez, alcalde of Fanchita, bowed gravely.

"Senor, you are known here," he said.

"Search me!" said the Kid.

"You are El Nino del Rio—the Rio Kid?"

"I guess they called me that, back in Frio," assented the Kid. "Is this

hyer a public welcome to a celebrated character, senor?"

Don Salvador smiled.

"Senor, I regret it a thousand times," he said. "But the orders are to place you in the calabozo."

"Senor, you sure don't regret it half so much as I do," answered the Kid. "So I guess I can put it at two thousand times."

Senor Iguerez looked a little puzzled.

"Don't you reckon you better guess again?" asked the Kid. "I ain't trod on any galoot's toes since I crossed the border. I ain't come into Mexico a-shooting. I'm sure the most peaceable guy in Texas when I'm let alone. If you don't want me in this hyer burg, senor, I allow I'll ride on and look for a camp on the sierra. Say?"

The alcalde shook his head.

"Senor, you were seen on the trail, and the word was passed," he said. "You are well known—an outlaw of Texas—and I have orders to arrest you and keep you in safety till you may be handed over to the Military Commandant at Las Aguas."

"I guess I ain't honing to meet that galoot," said the Kid shaking his head.

"Such are the orders, senor," said the alcalde. "I regret it a thousand times—ten thousand times! You will not be so foolish as to resist. I should be desolated, senor, to give orders to kill you, moreover, the commandant at Las Aguas desires you as a prisoner. Tomorrow, senor, the soldiers will be here to take you. For to-night, I beg you to honour Fanchita with your presence."

"Waal, carry me home to die!" ejaculated the Kid, in disgust.

"You will graciously surrender your

weapons," continued the alcalde. "You will have the overpowering kindness to dismount from your horse, senor."

"Feller," said the Kid, "you sure are the politest lobo-wolf that ever got in a bite on me. There ain't a sheriff in Texas that has a thing on you. Seeing that you're so dog-goned polite, I reckon it would be bad manners for me to say no, senor."

The alcalde of Fanchita smiled gently.

"Muy bien, senor," he said. "Give up your arms."

The Kid took one glance round.

Quietly and coolly he calculated the chances of pulling his guns, spurring his mustang, and fighting his way out of the pueblo. He saw that there was nothing in it. Knives and pistols surrounded him, the throng of Mexicans blocked his way, a score of horsemen were at hand. He was fairly trapped—and the Kid was not the man to butt his head against a stone wall.

He slipped from the saddle, took his guns by the barrels, and presented them to the alcalde of Fanchita.

"You win, feller," he said amiably.

Senor Iguerez accepted the walnut-butted guns gravely.

"I am desolated, senor," he said. "But you savvy—orders are orders! Now I will conduct you to the calabozo. You will find another Gringo there to keep you company—another bandolero, senor, of your own sort, who also is going to Las Aguas to-morrow morning to be shot. Senor, do me the honour to walk with me."

A thronging, grinning crowd marched with the Rio Kid to the calaboose, and an iron-studded door clanged behind him and shut him off from the sight of the pueblo.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Gunman!

"SHUCKS!" growled the Rio Kid. It got the Kid's goat; though he was more angry with himself than with the alcalde and population of Fanchita.

Like a gink, he had ridden into the first Mexican town he came to, figuring that he had left all his foes behind him on the Texas side of the Rio Grande.

Some geek had seen him on the trail and recognised him, and the report had gone ahead of him that a Texas outlaw was riding into Fanchita. That was the cause of the remarkable welcome the Kid had received.

The Kid could have kicked himself, if that had been any use. He had ridden fairly into a trap, and now he was cinched.

No doubt the military commandant at Las Aguas wanted him. That official might have him shot out of hand as a known bandolero, or might hand him over to a sheriff on the Texas side. Neither prospect attracted the Kid.

But it was useless to grouse, or to spill cuss-words. The Kid had been in tight corners before, and he knew how to take trouble philosophically when it came.

He looked round his quarters.

It was a large room with a tiny, barred window high up that let in a glimmer of the setting sun—only a glimmer.

The door was of upright iron bars, rusty with neglect, fastened by an enormous lock.

Outside that door was a little courtyard open to the sky. On the other side of the court was the gaoler's room. And that was all the building. The calaboose of Fanchita was not extensive.

Furniture was sparse. There were a couple of rickety benches and a bundle of dirty straw. They did not give their prisoners luxurious quarters in a Mexican calabozo.

"Shucks!" repeated the Kid.

He was not alone in the dirty, evil-smelling room. A man was seated on one of the benches, leaning back against the wall, smoking a cigarette. He was eyeing the Kid with a cool, searching glance. This was the "other Gringo" that the alcalde had mentioned.

The Kid, looking at him, did not like his looks. The man was a slim, wiry fellow, with a hard, cold face and small, keen eyes that had an ice-cold look in their depths. The Kid knew a gunman when he saw one, and he figured that he had never seen a harder, colder, more ruthless-looking gunman than the companion of his cell.

The Kid was handy with a gun himself; but he was no gunman, and he did not like gunmen. But in his present circumstances the boy puncher of Frio was not disposed to be particular. He had no intention whatever of remaining that night in the calaboose if he could help it; and if the other hombre was game, two heads were better than one in planning escape. So the Kid gave the gunman a nod and a cheery greeting.

"Say, feller, they got us where they want us," he remarked. "You from Texas?"

"Sure!" said the other, watching him keenly, coldly, sharply. "I guess I heard them Greasers yapping suthin' about El Nino del Rio when you was toted in. You the Rio Kid?"

"That's me."

"I guess you're the hombre I want to see, then," said the gunman. THE POPULAR.—No. 534.

"Mebbe you've heard of me—Slick Thayer."

The Kid made a grimace. He had heard of Slick Thayer, though he had never met the man. Thayer was a "killer"; and it was said in Texas that he had killed more men than he had fingers and toes. It was the killer's icy look that the Kid could see in his eyes.

"I guess I've heard of you," said the Kid shortly.

He moved a little back. He hated the sight of a killer like Thayer. But he realised that he was in a tight corner; and Thayer, desperate rascal as he was, was the man for a desperate attempt—more useful in such an emergency than a better man would have been.

Thayer did not fail to note the involuntary repugnance in the Kid's handsome face; and his hard face hardened more, and the icy look in his eyes became intensified. But he, like the Kid, wanted help, and he did not allow a word of anger to escape him.

"I guess we're both cinched," he said. "We want to help one another out of this."

"Sure!" assented the Kid. "What they got you for, Thayer?"

"Holdin' up the alcalde," said the gunman coolly. "That old hombre, Salvador Iguerez, is what these Greasers call a rico hombre; I guess he's plastered with money. I got word from a galoot I can trust that the old Greaser has got the stuff in his adobe shebang—across the plaza here. I had to get out of Texas for a spell—same as you, I reckon. I figured I'd make a raise here."

The Kid set his lips.

The man knew that he was an outlaw, and was speaking as to one of his kidney. It got the Kid's goat.

"I slipped up on it," drawled Thayer. "I got the old galoot under my gun, and I guessed it was jest pie; he lives alone in that shebang 'cept for two peon servants—and I'd watched them clear. But a bunch of vaqueros came in from his ranch and horned in just as I got him fixed—and roped me in like I was a steer." The gunman's cold eyes gleamed. "It was a cinch on me! They put me in here. I guess I'm going to Las Aguas in the morning. These god-darned Greasers leave everything till to-morrow—that's their pesky way! Hasta manana." He grinned. "I guess it lets me out, fur I ain't staying the night in this shebang, Kid?"

The Kid nodded.

"Now there's two of us I reckon we can work the rifle," went on Thayer, lowering his voice. "There's a gaoler—the carcelero they call him—lives in the calaboose; nobody else. That gink will come if you call him; he hands you anything you want if you're heeled. He won't open them bars for love or money; he puts the grub through, and cigarettes—or anything else you can pay for. Have they taken your roll?"

The Kid shook his head.

"Only my guns," he answered. "I'd rather they'd taken the roll. But that old hombre, the alcalde, is sure a polite old cuss."

"They'll get your roll at Las Aguas," drawled Thayer. "Old Iguerez calls himself a caballero; but most of these Greasers would rob their grandmothers of their hair-combs. But we ain't seeing Las Aguas to-morrow, I reckon, if you stand by me."

"Shoot!" said the Kid tersely.

"I'm letting you in on an even break," said Slick Thayer. "I was sure beat to handle this alone, but two's a team."

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

"I reckon we'll be outside this adobe at midnight," said Thayer. "Then we hit old Iguerez's shebang. I guess none of his ranch hands won't be hornin' in at that time o' night. If the peons wake up, I reckon you know how to put them to sleep again—same as I do." He smiled a slow, cold, merciless smile. "We get the old Greaser's roll—and I'll say it ain't less than ten thousand dollars in good United States. You get me? We divvy even and quit."

The Kid's eyes flashed.

"You durned dog-goned rustler!" he exclaimed.

Thayer stared at him, unmoved.

"What's bitin' you, feller?" he asked evenly.

"Don't you know a white man when you see one?" growled the Kid. "You figure that you've got hold of a thief of your heft, Slick Thayer? Forget it!"

The gunman's eyes glittered.

"You won't stand for it?" he asked.

"Sure not. I guess I'll stand for getting outside this shebang; but I ain't touchin' a man's roll, you pesky rustler; and you ain't, neither," said the Kid.

"You're sure mighty particular for an outlaw with a price on his head," drawled the gunman.

"Aw, can it!" said the Kid. "I guess I'd rather take my chance with the Greasers at Las Aguas, Slick Thayer, than work in cahoots with a rustler like you! Quit chewin' the rag!"

The Kid retreated to the further end of the cell, sat down on a bench, and relapsed into silence. Thayer watched him, without speaking again, and lighted another cigarette from the expiring one. There was silence in the dirty, stuffy adobe cell, as the shadows deepened, and the last red ray of the setting sun died, and the soft Mexican night brooded over Fanchita and its adobe calaboose.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Escape!

THE gaoler came out of his room on the opposite side of the little, unpaved courtyard. He stood, a black silhouette, against the glimmer of the smelly oil-lamp behind him. He was an uptidy, bearded Mexican, greasy of skin, smelling of pulque. Slick Thayer, standing at the iron bars that formed the gate of the cell, was calling.

"El agua! El agua, señor el carcelero!"

The gaoler brought a tin pitcher of water from the fountain in the court, and passed it through the tall iron bars.

"Gracias!" said Thayer civilly.

He drank the water to the last drop. It was hot and stuffy in the adobe cell. The Kid would have been glad of a drink, and he came forward from his seat in the dim shadow. Save for the glimmer of the carcelero's lamp, fifteen feet away, there was no light.

Thayer slipped a silver dollar into the gaoler's greasy hand and returned the tin pitcher to him.

"Say, I guess you can hand me a drink, feller," drawled the Kid.

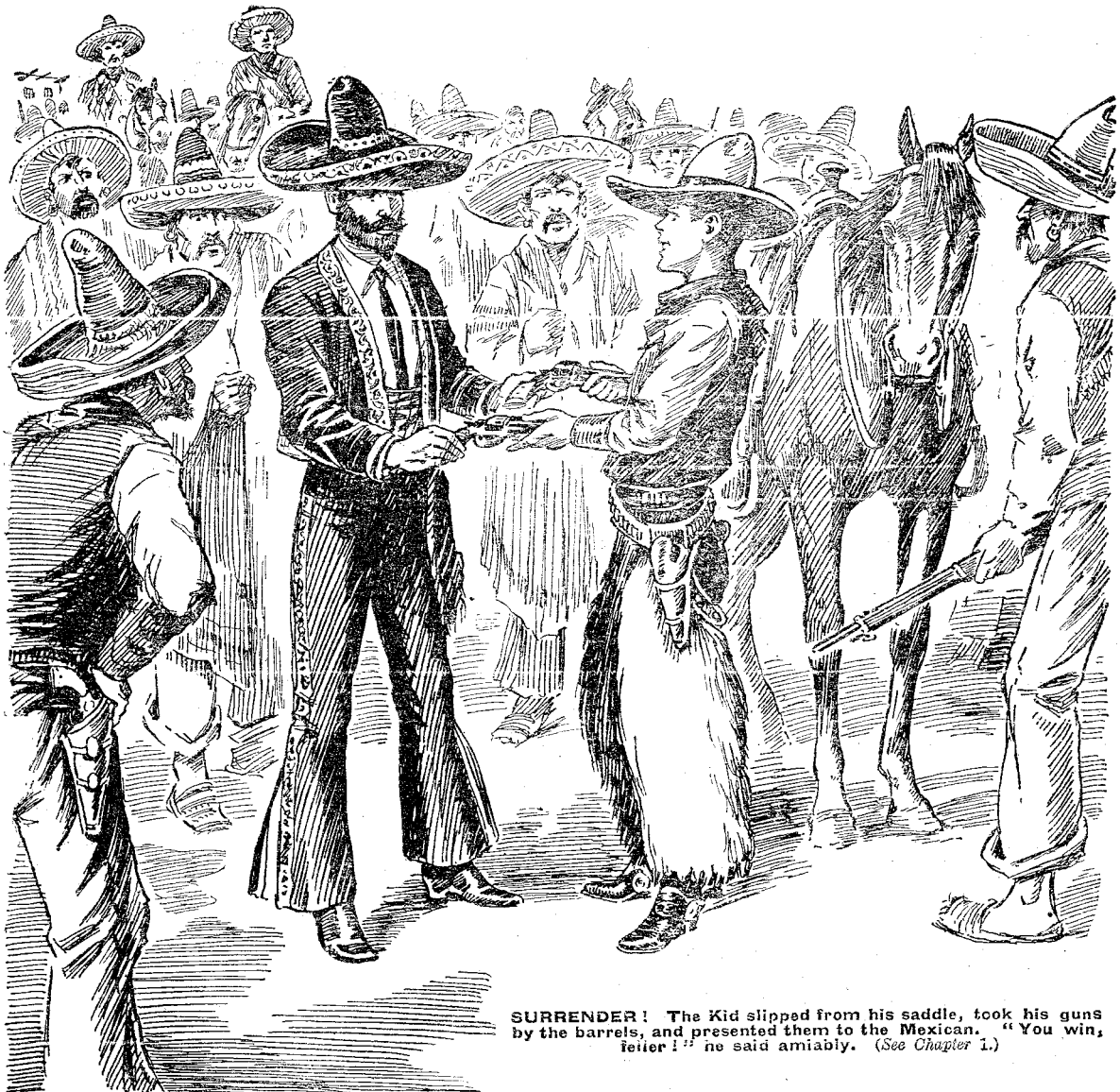
"Que es esto?"

"Agua," said the Kid. "El agua."

"Si, señor."

The carcelero refilled the pitcher, and handed it to the Kid through the bars. And the Kid, like Thayer, passed him a silver dollar. Services were not performed for nothing in the calaboose of Fanchita.

Thayer remained at the bars, speaking to the gaoler in Spanish. The Kid



SURRENDER! The Kid slipped from his saddle, took his guns by the barrels, and presented them to the Mexican. "You win, feiter!" he said amiably. (See Chapter 1.)

went back to his bench at the extremity of the cell. He saw Thayer pass money to the gaoler, and receive a packet of Mexican cigarettes. Then the Mexican went back across the courtyard to his room, closed the door, and all was dark, save for a faint glimmer of starlight over the yard.

The Kid was thinking. A galoot like Thayer got his goat, and he hated to be shut up with him, or to have any dealings with him. But freedom was freedom, and, alone, the Kid saw no way of getting out of this. Thayer had said that he had a plan which the two of them could work together. Apart from the doubtful prospects of the morrow, the Kid hated to spend a night in the filthy Mexican prison. It was dirty and stuffy and in the dirty straw there crawled innumerable insects that were a horror to the cleanly Kid. His objection to acting in concert with the gunman faded a little. He would not speak first; but he resolved that if Thayer opened the subject again, he would give him a patient hearing. And he was assured that Thayer would.

He was right. At a late hour, the gunman came towards the Kid's bench, unseen but audible in the darkness of

the cell. The Kid could see only a black shadow and a glitter of eyes.

"Say, bo," said Thayer, in the same calm, even tones as before. "you don't want to go off on your ear, and land both of us before a firing-party at Las Aguas. Are you going in with me?"

"Spill it," said the Kid briefly.

"That carcelero has the key of the iron gate hung on his belt—"

"I guess I saw it there," said the Kid. "But I reckon he won't unlock them bars for a bribe."

"He sure won't. But he will come across the yard if you call him," answered Thayer. "You ask him for something, and clink one dollar agin another. That'll bring him jumping."

The Kid grinned.

"You get him handing something through the bars," said the gunman softly. "He'll be watching you. He won't be watching me. He'll see the light of my cigarette here, right at the end of the cell. I guess I shall get hold of him through the bars and cinch him. Once he's in my grip I'll see that he doesn't let out a yap. We get the key off him, and let ourselves out and skip."

"How in thunder is he going to see you smoking a cigarette here, if you're a dog-goned ten feet from here?"

"They forgot you when brains was served out, I reckon," remarked Thayer. "Like this."

He stuck his cigarette in a crack of the adobe wall above the bench, at the height of a man's head.

It glowed there; and, seen from across the cell, it looked as if a man sat there smoking. All was blackness about the bench, save for that glowing spot of fire.

"You got that?" drawled Thayer.

"I sure got it," assented the Kid.

"You're a slick hombre, Thayer, same as they call you. I guess it will work. But look here, you fire-bug, if we get out of this, there ain't any hold-up in the programme. I'll say I don't stand for it."

"If you make a point of it, I've got to agree," answered Thayer. "I guess it will be healthier to beat it right out of town, anyhow. I wouldn't care to try it on without a man to help, after slipping up on it last time. You stand by me, and we'll have the old Greaser's roll—"

"Forget it!"

"You're losing a good thing," said Thayer, unmoved. "But if you ain't standing for it, let it drop."

"That goes, then," said the Kid.

And, after the discussion of a few more details, to make all clear, the plan was put into execution. Thayer sat on the bench at the back of the cell, smoking. The Kid went forward to the bars.

He shook the bars and called.
"Say, feller! El carcelero—senor! Say!"

It was some time before the gaoler responded. But he came out of his room at last.

"Senor!"
"El agua," said the Kid.
"Si, senor."

The Mexican filled the tin pitcher, and came back to the bars with it. He was quite wiry, his eyes watchful. But the Kid was full in his view; and across the cell, ten feet away in darkness, glowed a cigarette, showing that the other prisoner sat there, smoking. So the Mexican passed the tin pitcher through the bars, unsuspecting.

A shadow flickered, and a grasp of iron closed on the gaoler's wrist.

"Carambo!"
The tin pitcher clattered to the floor. The gaoler gasped out that one startled word—he had no time for another. He was dragged against the bars, and Thayer's other hand came through and gripped his throat. The Kid horned in instantly, both hands gripping the carcelero. The Mexican made a desperate effort to reach the knife in his belt, but he was held—Thayer had one wrist, the Kid had the other, and all the time the gunman's right hand was gripping his throat and choking his voice.

"Get the sticker and carve him!" breathed Thayer.

With his free hand, the Kid reached through and got the knife from the belt of the carcelero.

He put the point of the knife to the half-choked man's throat, his eyes gleaming over it.

"Kill him!" breathed the gunman.
"Aw, forget it! We've got him fixed," said the Kid. "There ain't going to be any killing here, Slick Thayer."

"You fool!" hissed Thayer.
"That's enough from you!" said the Kid coolly. "The galoot knows he's fixed—get the key off him. Silencio!" he added in Spanish to the gaoler, and the knife pricked the greasy skin.

Thayer freed his hand from the Mexican's throat. The man was close up to the bars, pinned there by the hold on his wrists, and the knife that touched his throat was warning enough for him. He gasped for breath, but uttered no cry.

Thayer reached through the bars with his free hand, and unhooked the long iron key from the Mexican's girdle. A few moments more, and it was in the lock of the iron gate, and turned back. Thayer pushed open one side of the gate and slipped through into the yard, leaving the Kid holding the carcelero to the bars.

"Say, lend me a hand with this hombre," said the Kid. "We got to get him tied safe afore we quit."

Slick Thayer made no answer. He opened the outer gate, slipped through into the plaza, and closed the gate behind him.

The gunman was gone!

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Kid Chips In!

THE Rio Kid swore softly. He might have expected that, or any other treachery from the gunman. He was left holding the carcelero, while Slick Thayer made his escape.

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The carcelero's eyes gleamed at him. The Kid gave him a look.

"You just give one yaup, feller, and you'll never give another," he said, pressing the point of the knife a fraction into the greasy skin.

The Mexican did not understand the words, but he understood the look and the action. He shuddered, and was silent.

With Thayer's help, all would have been easy for the Kid. Alone, it was not easy. To get outside the cell, he had to release the man he was holding through the bars. A thrust of the knife would have made all safe, but the Kid was not the man for that. He put the knife between his teeth, and drew both the Mexican's hands through the bars. Holding them in his left, he tore off the Mexican's neck-scarf with his right, and bound the wrists together. As one arm was passed in on either side of a bar, the carcelero was tied to the grate. Then the Kid whipped out and stood beside the man. With the knife, he cut strips from the carcelero's dirty shirt and gagged him.

"I guess that fixes you, hombre," said the Kid.

The Kid crossed to the outer gate, opened it, and stepped out.

It was close on midnight, and the pueblo of Fanchita slept. The last cantina was closed. There were no street lamps in Fanchita. The only light that burned, gleamed from the adobe building where lived the alcalde. Don Salvador Iguerez, apparently, was not yet gone to bed. The Kid scowled at the light.

He was free, but the Kid had no idea of quitting Fanchita without his horse. A man on foot was not likely to keep his freedom long, even had the Kid been willing to part with his faithful mustang. The powerful mustang had been taken to the alcalde's house—he had seen it led there, as he was taken to the calaboose. The Kid had hoped to see the alcalde's house in darkness. But whether the Mexican official slept or waked, the Kid intended to get his horse.

He stepped quietly across the plaza.

The house of Iguerez was shut for the night. The Kid circled round it. Behind the building were stables; the Kid figured that the mustang would be there. From a porch at the back of the adobe, came a glimmer of light, and the Kid realised angrily that a door was open.

He listened intently.

But all was silent and still. Then he started, and listened more keenly. From the silence came a faint sound—a low, faint, gurgling sound, like that of a man throttling. The sound came from the house—faint, low only audible because all was deathly still. It sent a shiver creeping through the Kid.

Then in a flash he knew.

"That coyote Thayer!"

The Kid gave no further thought to his horse, or to his escape. With a blaze in his eyes, he ran in at the open door. A dim long passage was before him, faintly lighted by lamplight that streamed from the open doorway of a room. From that room came the faint, horrible, gurgling sound.

The Kid reached the doorway.

On the floor of that room, on his back, lay Don Salvador Iguerez, his face black, his eyes starting. Kneeling on him was Slick Thayer, his hands gripping the Mexican's throat, slowly, steadily, ruthlessly choking out life.

Thayer had lied to the Kid. He had not intended to go without the alcalde's roll. The Kid knew that now. And he knew that he was barely in time, and he

did not waste a second. One swift spring carried him to the scene, and his clenched fist, hard as iron, struck the killer behind the ear with the force of a mule's kick.

There was a faint grunt from the gunman, as he rolled on his victim.

The Kid hardly glanced at him. He knew that Thayer was stunned. He dropped on his knees beside the choked alcalde.

"All O.K., I guess, hombre," said the Kid pleasantly. "But it sure was a close call, I'm telling you."

The alcalde gasped and choked and spattered.

"Ei agua!" he moaned.

"You bet!" said the Kid.

He rushed from the room, and found water. He placed the jar to the lips of the fainting man.

The alcalde drank. He sat up, the Kid supporting him. But in a few minutes he staggered to his feet, with the Kid's aid, and sank into a chair.

"You don't want to call your peons, senor," said the Kid. "I'd sure be sorry to handle you, seeing as you've been so durned polite to me. But I ain't letting you raise a rookus. You get me, senor? I'm plumb tired of that calaboose. You say you'll keep quiet while I beat it, and I'll trust you. Say!"

The alcalde rubbed his podgy neck, and gasped.

"Senor Nino del Rio, you have saved me the life!" he said. "That dog of a Gringo"—he paused to spit at the unconscious Thayer—"a bandolero—un hombre del cuchillo—carambo! Senor, gracias! Gracias! Muchisimas gracias! You save me the life!"

"I guess that's the size of it," assented the Kid.

"That hombre—he come to kill—to rob! Carambo! But you—"

"I guess I cam for my hoss, when I heard you doing your song and dance," grinned the Kid.

"Senor, I am a thousand times grateful. I am your servant, senor!" The alcalde rose painfully from the chair, gasping for breath and crossed the room to a cabinet. The Kid watched him curiously. Don Salvador opened the cabinet, and took out a pair of leathery holsters with the Kid's walnut-budded guns and a cartridge-belt.

With a low, grave Spanish bow, the alcalde of Fanchita, presented the belt and the guns to the boy puncher.

"Senor, follow me. Your cavallo—your horse!"

"I should smile!" said the Kid.

He followed the alcalde from the house. A few minutes and the Kid's mustang was nuzzling his muzzle under his master's arm.

"Senor, I am loth to bid you depart," said Don Salvador, with grave courtesy. "But to linger is not safe. Otherwise, my humble house is yours, and all it contains. But if the morning finds you here—"

"I guess the morning will find me hitting the horizon, senor," grinned the Kid. "Adios, amigo!"

"Adios, amigo!"

The alcalde bowed. The Kid raised his hat and rode into the darkness. Don Salvador Iguerez listened anxiously to the beat of the horse's hoofs as they died away in the night, and when all was silent he breathed a deep breath of relief, and went back into his house, and called his sleeping peons to deal with the gunman.

THE END.

(Now, boys! Don't miss next week's gripping story of the Rio Kid, entitled: "CORNERED BY BRIGANDS!" It's full of thrills!)



CORNERED by BRIGANDS!

by RALPH REDWAY

The Rio Kid little realises, when he saves the life of a stranger in the mountains of Mexico, that soon afterwards the positions are to be reversed!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Kid Horns In!

"DOG-GONE all Greasers!" was the Rio Kid's remark, as he sighted the Mexican soldiers in the canyon.

He checked his mustang.

At the first glance, it looked as if he was riding into a trap. Within a hundred yards of him, as he came cantering round the bend in the winding canyon, in the Sierra Madre of Mexico, the Mexicans swarmed. Not fewer than sixty or seventy of the dog-goned Greasers, the Kid figured at a glance, and the canyon was one of the loneliest in the sierra. The Rio Kid did not think much of soldados Mexicanos, or of Greasers generally, but if he had to fight his way through that crowd, he guessed that he had struck a stiff proposition. In that solitary spot the military could only be there for some special purpose, and the Kid reckoned that they were honing to meet a Texas outlaw, who was known to have crossed the border into Mexico—the Kid himself!

But at the second glance the Kid doubted.

Not a glance was turned towards him, though he was in full view of the

soldiers, if they looked his way. They seemed to be busily occupied with their own concerns. Excited exclamations in Spanish reached his ears from the distance. Something was going on, and the Kid wondered what it was. Anyhow, he had no hunch to ride back the way he had come, and flee from a danger that was, perhaps, non-existent. Only for a moment he checked the black-muzzled mustang. Then he rode on again up the canyon, with the walnut butt of a gun very near his hand, ready if it should be wanted. Some of the soldiers looked at him, as they heard the clatter of the mustang's hoofs on the hard rock, and the word "Gringo" reached his ears, and another word, "vaquero." The Kid smiled. In his Stetson hat and chaps and spurs and neck-scarf he looked a cowpuncher, and a Texan cowpuncher was not an uncommon sight on the Mexican side of the border. If they took him for a vaquero, as they called it in their lingo, so much the better. After all, the Rio Kid was likely enough not the game they were after. He rode on cheerily towards the spot where the excited crowd of Mexicans, in tattered uniforms, were gathered.

At that point the trail up the canyon followed a rocky ledge, not more than a dozen feet wide. On the right the

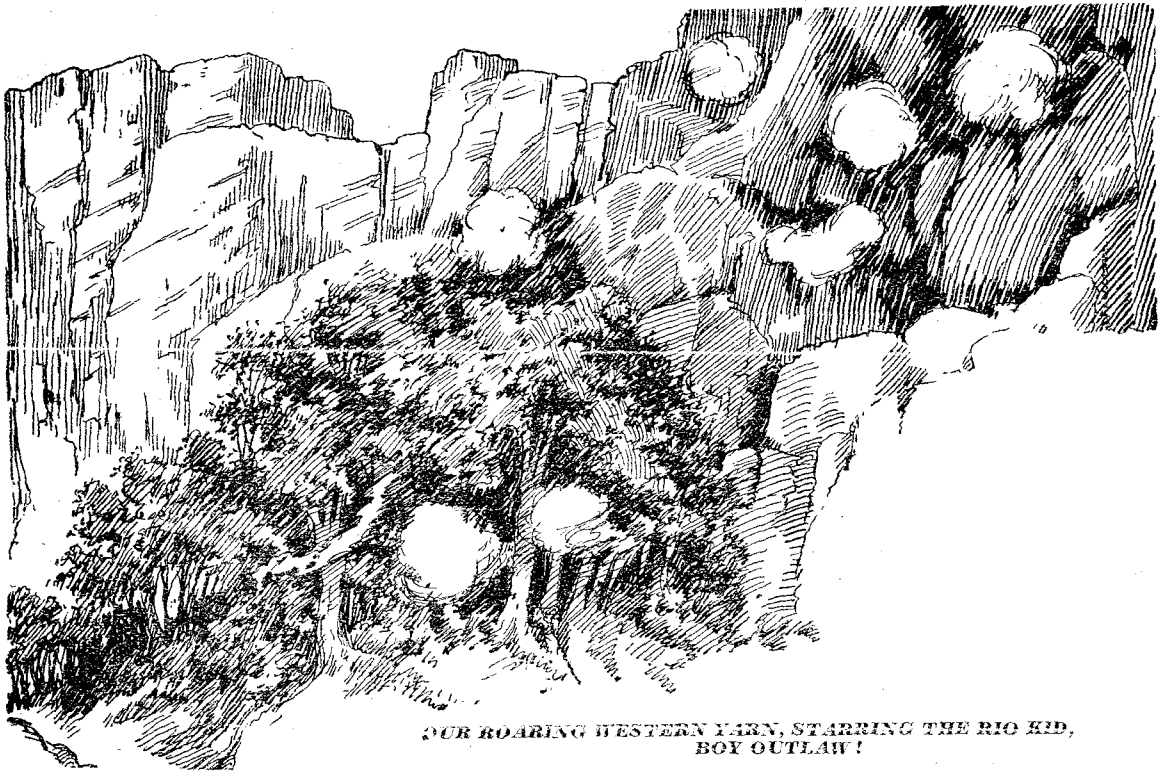
diff rose like the wall of a building. On the left the ledge fell away precipitously, dropping to an abyss a hundred feet deep. Such perilous trails were common enough in the Mexican sierras. A score of the soldiers were kneeling or lying on the edge of the precipice, staring down into the depths. The Kid figured that something was going on below, and surmised that perhaps one of the party had fallen over the edge. If so, there was not likely to be much left of him, except for the buzzards, after he had crashed on the rocks at the bottom of the gulf.

All the Mexicans were dismounted, their horses backed to the cliff. The Kid reached the spot and pulled in his mustang. There was no sign of hostility from the soldiers. To their eyes he was simply what he looked, a cowpuncher from over the border.

"Say, fellers, what's the rockus?" asked the Kid amicably. "Some galoot in this bunch gone over the barranca?"

Three or four voices answered him in Spanish. The Kid gathered that El Capitán Don Porfirio Ximenes y Toredos had fallen over the cliff. The galoot with the name as long as a trail-ropo was apparently the officer in command of the detachment.

The Kid slipped from his saddle, dropped to the ground, and crawled to



OUR ROARING WESTERN YARN, STARRING THE RIO KID,
BOY OUTLAW!

the edge of the cliff. Don Porfirio, it appeared, was still alive, though how he could live after his horse had thrown him over that fearful precipice was a puzzle to the Kid, until he looked. But it was obvious that the soldados had no hunch to rescue him, and the Kid was prepared to lend a hand, if there was anything to be done. Looking down from the ledge, and babbling in excited Spanish, seemed to be all that the Mexicans were prepared to do for their leader.

As he looked over the dizzy verge the Kid saw what had happened. Thirty feet below, a slanting tree jutted out from the rocky wall, growing from a crevice in the rocks. From that sagging, slender trunk hung a young man in a handsome uniform. His dark, handsome Spanish face was turned upward, white under its dusky complexion. He hung to the sagging tree with both arms, his spurred boots swinging down below, and his weight was dragging the tree from its roots. It was but a slender peccan, with a precarious hold in the crevice, and the capitano's weight had already pulled it down to a horizontal position. The roots could be seen starting from the cliff, and fragments of earth and stones fell, rattling down the perpendicular wall.

"Shucks!" murmured the Kid.

Evidently the Mexican as he fell had struck the slanting tree and caught hold. He clung to it with the instinct of self-preservation, but, it seemed, only to delay his inevitable fate. Seventy feet below him lay the rocks on which he must fall when his strength failed, and the fixed, drawn look on his face showed that it was failing fast. To climb the cliff was impossible, and it was equally impossible for anyone to descend from above to his aid. There was no foothold for a goat, no handhold for a monkey. And even if the man's strength held up, the sagging tree was failing him; it was being slowly but surely dragged down by his weight.

The Kid took it all in at a glance. The Kid had a steady head, and the dizzy height from which he looked had

no effect on him. But the Mexicans who were peering over the verge held on almost convulsively to points of rock, and most of them were keeping back from the edge. A Mexican vaquero or montero would have looked down as carelessly as the Kid.

The eyes of the man below, turned up in agony, met those of the Rio Kid. Leaning over the edge, the Kid waved a hand to him.

"Hold on!" he shouted.

He saw the young man's lips move, but heard no reply. He could see that Captain Don Porfirio was very nearly exhausted.

The Kid stepped back to his mustang. With a rapid hand, he uncoiled the forty-foot rope that was hooked to his saddle.

"El lazo!" exclaimed two or three of the Mexicans.

Leaning over the edge of the rock, the Kid lowered the looped end of the lasso till it swung by the Mexican captain. To rope him in was impossible, as he hung below the slanting peccan. But the rope was within his reach, if he could work his way a couple of feet back. But he could not. His arms were clasped round the slender trunk, and to unloose that clasp for a single moment would have been fatal. Help had come too late.

"Sho!" murmured the Kid.

He turned back, and secured the end of the riata to the black-muzzled mustang's saddle. A word to the horse was enough. The mustang, with his nose towards the cliff, planted his forefeet firmly on the rock, to take the tug of the rope, as he was accustomed to do when his master lassoed a careering steer. And a dozen of the soldiers, divining the Kid's intention, laid hold of the rope and held on to it, to help the mustang take the weight it was to bear. The Kid nodded approval.

"Tenga cuidado!" he said.

"Si, senor."

And the Kid swung himself down the rope, over the edge of the yawning gulf.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Between Life and Death!

"NO se mueva usted!" called out the Kid.

The man below did not answer, but he understood. He held on desperately to the sagging peccan, without attempting to stir.

Hand-below-hand, the Kid went down the strong rope. The riata, woven to take the strain of a tugging steer, easily bore his weight.

Round the Kid, as he swung down, was yawning space. With a cool and steady head, and a sure hand, he swung down the rope, and in a few moments he was down thirty feet, and reached the sagging peccan.

To the yawning space below him, and the five or six scared faces that gazed from above, the Kid paid no heed.

Holding on to the rope, he guided himself along the sagging trunk, and reached the Mexican capitano.

The Mexicans above gasped as they watched him.

To see a man swinging by one hand, over that terrible depth, was enough to take a watcher's breath away.

By one hand the Kid swung, while with the other he looped the noose of the lasso round the hanging man, pulled it under his armpits, and pulled it taut.

Don Porfirio was safe now.

Even if he lost his hold, even if the stunted tree pulled out from its roots, he would only swing at the end of the lasso.

It was only just in time.

The aching, exhausted arms were slipping from their hold.

Half-unconscious, with the strain on muscle and nerve, the capitano hung on the lasso, releasing the tree.

It was the Kid now who was holding on to the tree.

Likely enough, the stout rope might have stood the strain of two men upon it, but the Kid was not taking such a chance.

He shouted one word:

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"Pronto!"

There was an answering shout from above, and the Mexican soldiers began to haul up the rope.

The Kid was left clinging to the slanting peccan.

It was the only way to save the helpless man, and the Kid was the galoot to take long chances, if there was no other way.

But as he swung over space, in the place of the man he had saved, and looked up, watching the Mexican captain as his men hauled him up the cliff, the Kid grinned mockingly at himself.

"Kid Carfax, you sure are the durndest, all-firedest gink ever!" was his reflection.

But he did not utter the words aloud. He needed all his breath to save his life.

The Kid was slimmer, a lighter weight, than the Mexican captain. That was so much to the good. But the tree had yielded far; and the torn roots were giving fast.

The Kid, as he hung, felt it yielding. Slowly, slowly the Mexican captain was drawn up the cliff to the ledge.

The Kid reflected bitterly that a bunch of Texas cowboys would have had him up in two shakes of a coyote's tail. These dog-goned Greasers—

But he was over the verge at last, drawn out of sight of the Rio Kid.

Crack!

The tree was going.

"Hasta manana!" thought the Kid savagely. "I guess they're taking their time about letting down that god-darned riatá! Dog-gone all Greasers!"

But the rope came slithering down the cliff again.

The loop of the lasso brushed by the Kid's sunburnt cheek as if fell, and he released a hand to grasp it.

The next moment the other hand was grasping, and the Kid swung against the cliff.

It was time; for the tree, hardly more than a bush, was sagging down, and the roots had almost pulled out of the crevice.

The Kid felt a tug on the rope. Holding fast with both hands, he helped his ascent with his feet against the cliff.

But it seemed an age before he reached the top.

"Prontamente!" he heard a voice calling from above, the voice of Don Porfirio urging his men to haste.

The Kid, with a breath of relief, grasped the edge of rock, and drew himself to his feet, breathing hard and deep.

"Viva, viva, el Gringo!" the soldiers were shouting.

They pressed round the Kid in excited admiration.

"Viva nothing!" grunted the Kid, but he grinned.

"Senor!" Don Porfirio was sitting on a pile of horse blankets against the cliff at the back of the rocky ledge, pale and exhausted, but with a smile on his face. "Senor el Gringo, gracias! Gracias muchisimas! You save me the life!"

"No es nada, senor," said the Kid politely.

"You risk your life to save me, senor, a stranger to you!" said Don Porfirio. "Caballero, you are one bravest man I ever meet. I happy I speak your language, so that I thank you, senor."

The Kid smiled.

"Senor, it is a privilege to be of service to a gallant soldier and Hidalgo," said the Kid, not to be outdone in politeness. They liked the courtesy laid on thick in Mexico, he

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remembered; and the Kid was cheerily prepared to fall in with the customs of the country. "I am glad, senor, that I have had the happiness to serve you."

Don Porfirio picked himself up.

The Kid figured that he was going to shake hands. But the Mexican embraced him.

The Kid submitted patiently. He had not come to Mexico to teach the natives new customs.

"Senor, I am ever in your debt," said Don Porfirio. "You save me one life, you risk your own so-much-valuable life to save a stranger! Senor, my unworthy name is Porfirio Ximenas y Toredos, captain in the Mexican army, and ever your servant."

"Mine's Carfax," drawled the Kid. "Shorter if not so sweet!"

"Senor Carfax, I am eternally your debtor."

"Senor, you are too good," said the Kid solemnly. "I guess I'll be hitting the trail, now this here little circus is over. I reckon I want to get out of this sierra before dark."

"Senor, there are bandoleros in the sierra," said the Mexican captain. "If you care to ride under escort, you have only to say one word."

The Kid shook his head.

"I guess I can look after myself, Senor el capitan," he answered. "You here after the brigands?"

"Si, senor; Rafael Gonzago and his band," answered Don Porfirio.

The Kid smiled. He had heard of Gonzago, the Mexican brigand of the Sierra Madre. The military detachment was not hunting for a Texan outlaw, after all; likely enough they had never heard of the Rio Kid.

"I guess I'm wishing you luck, senor," said the Kid. "That galoot Gonzago is some firebug, from what I've heard. Adios, senor."

"Adios, amigo!"

The Kid remounted the black-muzzled mustang, and rode on his way. A loud "Viva!" from the Mexican soldiers followed him.

But in a few minutes the winding of the canyon hid the soldiers from his sight, and the Kid was riding in a deep solitude again. The episode passed from the Kid's mind, as he rode on deeper and deeper into the mountains.

THE THIRD CHAPTER,

Among the Brigands!

THE first shot missed the Kid by a foot or more, and knocked over the tin billy. The second shot missed him by yards; for the Kid was in cover by that time. His gun was in his hand, and his eyes gleaming, as a spattering of bullets chipped the rocks round about him.

"Dog-gone their greasy hides!" murmured the Kid.

In the heat of the sub-tropical day the Kid had camped in the canyon. He had left the Mexican troop five miles behind, and forgotten them. The wild, rocky canyon, winding away into the heart of the sierra, seemed endless. And it seemed utterly solitary, even to the keen, wary eyes of the Rio Kid, when he camped.

The shooting had started suddenly. It had started without warning. Whoever was pot-shooting at the Kid, wanted to make sure of him. He thought of the brigands at once, as he leaped for cover. He had no doubt that he had fallen in with the bandoleros of the Sierra Madre.

He had camped by a little spring, leaving his horse to graze on the scant herbage, untethered. It was not necessary to tether Side-Kicker; the mustang

never wandered, and always came at a call.

Side-Kicker was at a little distance from the Kid's camp now, nosing for provender. Twenty yards away from the spring was a belt of chaparral along the canyon side, and it was from the chaparral that the sudden shooting came.

The Kid did not think much of Mexicans in general, and still less of Mexican brigands in particular; but he had to admit that it looked as if they had got him cinched now. And they were not looking for a prisoner. They were going to wipe him out, for his horse, his guns, and his roll, if they could do it; and it rather looked as if they could.

One leap had taken the Kid into cover behind a heap of rocks near the canyon wall, where the little spring bubbled close at hand. The bullets came from the chaparral across the canyon, sixty feet away. They cracked and chipped all round the Kid's cover, and crashed on the rocky wall behind him.

For the moment, the Kid was safe from fire. The pile of rocks in front of him was good cover, and the Kid knew how to make the most of even a little cover. But the firing was fast and close, and the Kid could not show himself. Listening to the shooting, the Kid calculated that the chaparral sixty feet away, hid twenty foes or more—a hefty crowd for one man to face, even if they were only Greaser brigands, the scum of the sierra. Numerous as they were, they seemed to have no hunch to get to closer quarters.

"Dog-gone the greasy ginks!" growled the Kid.

He would have been glad to hear them coming. Once they were out in the open the walnut-butted guns would have taken a heavy toll, even if they got him at the finish.

The Kid realised that he had been careless. He ought not to have been cornered like this. But he was cornered, and he did not see a way out. For a time, he was in cover, and he believed that his guns would stop a rush when it came. But he was cut off from the spring, which lay in the open, and he could not reach water without stopping a bullet. And the sun at the zenith blazed down with burning rays into the canyon. If they kept him penned there all through the hot afternoon—

But he shook his head.

From where he crouched, between the canyon wall and the stack of rocks, the Kid could see down the canyon. In the distance, the powerful mustang was standing, gazing about him. At a call, the horse would have come trotting to the Kid, but the Kid did not call. The brigands would not shoot the horse if they could help it—it was a valuable part of their expected plunder—but a chance bullet might do the mischief. The Kid was glad to see Side-Kicker at a safe distance. He half-expected to see some Mexican creeping down the canyon to rope in the mustang. If any man left the chaparral for that purpose, the Kid's gun was ready to drop him. But, for the present, no such move was made; the sierra thieves, as well as the Kid, observed that the mustang was not disposed to quit the spot. Once the Kid was killed, they would rope the horse in easily enough.

"You god-darned gink!" said the Kid to himself, "to let a gang of greasy dagoas corner you like this! You sure are the prize boob!"

The firing across the canyon ceased suddenly, and a voice shouted in English:

"Gringo! Dog of a Gringo!"

"Hallo, you 'uns!" called back the Kid cheerily. "You dirty Greasers looking for hot lead? You want to come this way, you yellow skunks!"

With a gun in either hand, the Kid waited for the sound of the coming rush. But it did not yet come.

"Carambo! You Gringo pig, come out of hiding!" roared the voice. "It is Gonzago who gives the order!"

The Kid chuckled. The name of Rafael Gonzago was a name of terror in the Sierra Madre. But if the mountain thief expected it to carry terror to the heart of the Texas puncher, he was missing his guess.

"You dog-goned greasy polcat!" shouted back the Kid. "I'd sure come across and boot you, only I guess I've too much respect for Texas leather to soil it on your unclean carcass."

A yell of rage answered him.

"I guess," murmured the Rio Kid, "that that guy Gonzago figures he's some big chief, and that sort of back-chat will sure get his goat. I guess that hombre will sure get mad, and hop out into the open."

The Kid was right.

For a full ten minutes, the rifles from across the canyon blazed and roared, and bullets crashed on the rocks in front of the Kid, and glanced from them right and left. More than one ball struck the rocks behind him and glanced off, and one of them grazed his ear as it flew from the rock. Then, all of a sudden the firing ceased, and there was a rush of feet as a crew of dusky ruffians emerged from the chaparral, and raced across the canyon for the Kid's position.

It was what the Kid wanted.

A few seconds would have been enough to hurl upon him a crowd of savage foes, but a few seconds were more than enough for the Kid. He peered round the rugged edge of the rocks and handled his guns. The whole savage crew were full in his sight, and the Rio Kid could plant his lead just where he wanted it.

Crack, crack, crack!

Thrice, in as many seconds, the Kid fired, with rapid but unerring hand, and at each shot a dusky brigand rolled yelling on the canyon floor.

Before the charging crew were a dozen feet on their way, three of them



HIS LAST HOPE! "Old hoss," murmured the Kid, as the gray muzzle of his horse nestled under his arm, "old cayuse, I guess you can work the rifle for this Kid, if you know how. You've just got to beat it back, and bring those Mexican soldier boys. It's my only hope!" (See Chapter 4.)

lay writhing on the earth, and the rest, with a suddenness that was almost comic, broke off the rush, and scuttled back to the cover of the chaparral they had rashly left. And, as they went, the Kid's guns picked off another man, and he dropped, yelling.

The bullets began to rain from the chaparral again, and the Kid hugged cover.

"Gringo!" The voice of Rafael Gonzago yelled across the canyon. "Gringo, you shall die by torture for this!"

The Kid laughed.

"I guess if I'd known you among your gang, Gonzago, I'd have given you yours!" he answered. "Come out again, you cowardly skunk!"

But Gonzago did not come out again, neither did his men. The brigands contented themselves with watching from the chaparral, and loosing off bullets at intervals. And the Kid, too, settled down to wait and watch, with a grim face.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Life for a Life!

"GEE!" ejaculated the Rio Kid. The Kid had lain in his cover for more than an hour since he had driven back the rush of the brigands. Now and then a

shot came from the chaparral, but for the most part the Greasers seemed content to wait and watch. The Kid, lying in cover, was watching his horse at a little distance down the canyon. The big grey mustang, left to himself, was still nosing for the scanty herbage. And as he watched his steed, an idea flashed into the mind of the Kid.

He had already been thinking of Capitano Don Porfirio Ximenes y Toredos and his soldiers. The detachment was in search of the very crew of brigands who had the Kid cornered here. Gonzago could not have known that pursuers were anywhere near at hand, the Kid figured, or he would not have been blazing away rifle-fire so recklessly. The Kid had left the Mexican soldiers five miles down the canyon. But if they came up, deeper into the mountains, they would hear the firing. The brigands had come up from the canyon, and the Kid reckoned that they knew nothing of the soldiers five miles down the mountain.

The Kid thought it over.

Don Porfirio had been genuinely grateful for the service the boy puncher had rendered. And he was after this gang of brigands; it would be a feather in his cap to lay Rafael Gonzago by the

heels. Two good reasons why he should come to the Kid's rescue—if he learned how matters stood. And if the Kid's riderless horse galloped back to the spot, would not Captain Don Porfirio guess that something had happened to the Texas puncher who had saved his life? Could he fail to guess that much—and would not a desire to repay so great a service lead him to search, even if he did not surmise that the puncher had fallen foul of the brigands?

A long, low whistle came from the Kid's lips, and the black-muzzled mustang tossed up his head and instantly came trotting to the Kid's cover.

The desultory firing from across the canyon ceased. Evidently the brigands did not want to risk shooting the horse that was a valuable part of their coming plunder.

"Old hoss," murmured the Kid, as the grey muzzle nuzzled under his arm. "Old cayuse, I guess you can work the rifle for this kid if you know how. And there sure ain't a cayuse in Texas knows as much as you do."

He stroked the glossy muzzle.

"Old cayuse, you got to beat it back to them Mexican soldier boys, and put them wise," said the Kid. "They ain't much in the way of soldiers, I guess; but they sure could put it across them pesky ginks yonder. And that captain hombré with a name as long as my riata, is sure a white man, and I guess he would play up like a little man if he figured how I was fixed! You got to put him wise, old hoss."

The mustang's intelligent eyes gleamed at him. What the Kid wanted of his horse was nothing new to him. A word and a gesture were enough for Side-Kicker. The Kid's hand was raised, pointing down the canyon, and he gave the mustang the word to go. For a moment the horse eyed him questioningly, and the Kid pointed again, and gave him a slight flick on the flank. The mustang swung away, and went down the canyon at a trot. Why he was sent the mustang did not know; but he knew he was sent, and that was enough for him. The Kid gave a shout, anxious lest the brigands should suspect something and fire on the horse. Side-Kicker knew what that shout meant, and he broke into a gallop and dashed away down the canyon at a rattling speed. In a few moments he was lost to sight in the winding canyon, and his hoof-beats echoed faintly back and died away.

The Kid heard a shout from the chaparral. Across the canyon a horseman pushed out of cover, evidently to gallop after the mustang and capture him. He started at a furious gallop, and a few seconds would have taken him out of danger from the Kid's gun. But those few seconds were not granted him.

Crack!

A yell came from the rider, and he pitched heavily from his saddle. The riderless horse went thundering on, the way the black-muzzled mustang had gone.

Bang, bang, bang! came a roar of fire from the brigands. Bullets crashed and smashed round the Kid.

But no further attempt was made to follow the mustang. Gonzago and his gang had to be content to let the animal escape. Probably they thought the Kid sending his horse away was a sign of despair. Unmounted, he could not hope to escape. He had saved his horse from their grasp by sending him loose into the mountains, but he could not save himself. That they never dreamed that the black-muzzled mustang had gone for help was clear, from the fact that they

remained in the canyon, blazing away bullets at the Kid.

The hoof-beats died away into silence.

The Kid waited.

"Gee!" whispered the Kid, as a bullet tore through the brim of his Stetson and smashed on the rock beside him.

That bullet came from above. What he had looked for had come at last. Looking over the rocks before him, the Kid scanned the rising wall of the canyon opposite, sixty or seventy feet away. The rugged rocks, patched with trailing creepers and bunches of bush, gave ample hold and ample cover for a climber. One of the brigands had crawled up the steep side of the canyon from the chaparral, and was firing on the Kid from a high angle, dropping his bullets behind the rocks that sheltered the boy puncher.

With a fierce gleam in his eyes, the Kid watched, crouching as close as he could. Another bullet came over the rock and grazed his shoulder; another, that lashed his arm and drew blood. But by that time the Kid had placed the sniper, and picked out the bush—fifty feet up the cliff—that covered him and his rifle. Taking careful aim, the Kid loosed off his six-gun, spraying rapid bullets on the bush.

Six shots sprayed the high bush in as many seconds. There was a fearful yell, and a figure came crashing out of the bush, to roll down the rugged cliff.

It was in sight for a few seconds, rolling and clutching, till it crashed into the chaparral below, and vanished.

The Kid smiled grimly.

The fall of the sniper was followed by a roar of rage and a burst of fierce fire from the brigands. The Kid looked for a rush, but it did not come. Gonzago and his crew had learned to respect the shooting of the puncher from Texas.

"I guess that will hold up that game for a spell!" the Kid murmured, as he shoved fresh cartridges into his six-gun.

The Kid was right. For more than an hour there was no movement from the Mexicans, save sniping shots from the chaparral, which did the Kid no harm.

But Gonzago was not leaving the finish till night. The Kid's keen eyes picked up, at last, a stirring on the canyon wall opposite—a movement in the creepers and bushes that told of wary climbers. He fired over the rocks again and again. But the rugged cliff was riven by narrow gullies that gave the climbers cover from his fire. They had learned enough of his shooting, by this time, to be careful. The Kid shrugged his shoulders. It was going to be hot now, he reckoned.

And it was! From four or five different points on the high cliff, seventy feet away, bullets began to search out the Kid, fired at a high angle that rendered his cover almost useless. A puff of smoke guided a bullet from the Kid, and he had the satisfaction of seeing one more enemy roll down the cliff and crash. But the other snipers lay in cover, and their shots came uncomfortably close. Five or six bullet-holes showed in the Kid's hat, his neck-scarf was pierced twice, a bullet grazed his shoulder. He hugged cover as close as he could, and his return fire kept the snipers from taking chances; and their shooting, at its best, was nothing like the Kid's. But the bullets were searching closer, and the game, the Kid reckoned, was nearly up.

He debated in his mind whether to break cover and make a dash for it. But there were plenty of the rascals watching from the chaparral, waiting for such a move, ready to riddle him if he tried it. A hoarse shout came across from Rafael Gonzago:

"Tasde o temprano, Gringo!"

The Kid gritted his teeth.

"If I could get that dog-goned coyote. I reckon I'd go up better pleased!" he muttered.

But there was no chance of getting Gonzago. The bandolero hugged the chaparral, watching for the Kid to break cover, and all the time the sniping bullets from above came searching out the puncher. Hope of help was faint now—almost gone; for the fleeing mustang had had ample time to arrive at the spot, five miles down the canyon, where the Kid had left Captain Don Porfirio, and the soldiers ample time to ride up the canyon if they were coming at all. The Kid cursed all Greasers and their lazy ways. They might be coming, at the usual Mexican snail's pace, to arrive too late.

"Dog-gone all durned Greasers!" growled the Kid, as a bullet drew blood from his cheek; and scarcely had the words left his lips when there was a thunder of horses' hoofs on the rocks.

Round the bend of the canyon below came a bunch of riders, Captain Don Porfirio riding ahead sword in hand. The sunlight gleamed on uniforms and carbines. Led by a trooper, the black-muzzled mustang followed.

From the chaparral came one loud yell of dismay and terror, followed by a wild scrambling of horses.

The snipers high up the canyon wall came scrambling down in frantic haste, to get back to their horses below, and ride.

Not a shot was fired by the brigands; they were thinking only of flight. But at the sight of them, fleeing frantically from the chaparral and riding up the canyon, the soldiers opened fire, carbines rattling out rapid bullets. And the Rio Kid, leaping up from cover with a six-gun in either hand, added his quota.

The brigands, howling with terror, fled for their lives, but six or seven of them dropped under the fire. At a shout from the captain, the troopers galloped on up the canyon in pursuit of the fugitives.

"Amigo mio!" beamed Don Porfirio.

"I guess I never was so gol-darned glad to see a Mex before, senior!" grinned the Kid. "You sure was wanted here, a few!"

"Eso mi agrada muchisimo!" beamed Don Porfirio. "Que feliz soy, senior. You save me one life, and I save you one life, is it not?"

"Sure!" said the Kid. "I guess you ain't been long washing out that leetle matter, senior. I figured if you spotted my cayuse you'd be wise to it that there was trouble up here."

"Si, senior, si!" smiled Don Porfirio. "De un golpe, senior! I see your cavallo, senior—I see he come wizout a rider. I sav to myself, my friend—mi amigo—he fall from his horse—he lose one horse—he is hurt—he shall need his amigo to whom he save one life. I come, senior! Zen I hear fring—bang, bang!—and I sav 'bandoleros!' Zen I give one word, 'Charge!' And we are here, and the life of my amigo he is save."

"Be sure is!" grinned the Kid. "And I guess if you want to hand out one more favour, you'll let me ride with your bunch to help wipe out that gang of carrion crows. I sure want to talk to Rafael Gonzago a piece."

"Si, senior, si! Venga usted!" exclaimed Don Porfirio, vaulting on his horse.

And the Rio Kid, with a bright face, mounted the grey mustang and rode by the side of the Mexican captain in pursuit of the brigands.

THE END.

(Next week's roaring Western 'garn of the Rio Kid is full of thrills, boys!)

THRILLS GALORE BELOW!

The Rio Kid rides to an inn in the heart of the Mexican mountains in search of a night's rest. But instead of rest he falls head first into another fearful peril that almost costs him his life!

A NIGHT OF PERIL!

by RALPH REDWAY



**OUR ROARING WESTERN TALE,
STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY
OUTLAW!**

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Inn in the Mountains!

THE posada stood back from the trail, backed by the wooded hillside that shut in the canada on the north. The road that the

Rio Kid had been following was called a camino in Mexico; but like many of the rural caminos, it was little more than a track. There was no mistaking the way, however, for it ran direct along the level bottom of the canada, with wooded slopes rising on either side. Ahead of the Kid was the setting sun, burning red through the opening of the hills before him; and somewhere under the sunset lay the pueblo of Los Pinos—which the Kid had given up the hope of reaching that night. At the sight of the posada he drew rein, and looked at the building dubiously. For several nights the Kid had camped out in the sierra, and he liked the idea of sleeping with a roof over his head, and eating a meal that he had not had to cook over a camp-fire. The lonely inn by the trail did not look inviting; but the Kid did not expect much of a posada in the Mexican mountains.

"I guess we locate here for the night, old hoss!" the Kid said to the black-muzzled mustang. "We sure ain't going to hit Los Pinos; and I guess I can eat a tortilla as a change from flap-jacks."

And the Kid turned his horse from the trail, and rode up to the posada.

The building presented a blank wall of adobe to his eyes, broken only by the arched entrance. In the Spanish-American style, it was built in a square, with all the windows looking on the courtyard in the centre. Through the wide-open doorway the Kid could see into the patio, where an upturned cart, several bundles of straw, some pigs and fowls, and uncountable heaps of evil-smelling refuse, met his gaze. No human being was in sight, and the Kid, halting under the arch of sun-baked bricks, rapped loudly on the open door with the butt of his quirt.

"I guess they don't see a lot of pilgrims on this here trail, old hoss,"

he remarked. "They sure don't seem to be looking for a rush of custom. But I reckon I'll make somebody hear."

And he crashed the quirt again on the door.

From among the refuse heaps in the patio, a boy emerged into sight, and came towards the entrance. He was a lad of about sixteen, with a dark, handsome, dirty face, and tousled thick black hair. He stared at the Kid as if in surprise.

"Gringo!" he ejaculated. The Kid grinned. His Stetson, his chaps, his fair complexion, all told the Mexican nino that he came from the northern side of the border, though he was a good distance from Texas now.

"Sure kid!" he answered amicably. "Gringo—as that's what you call a white man in this here country. Say, you ain't the boss of this shebang, I reckon."

The boy stared. "No contiendo, senior."

"You don't savvy?" smiled the Kid, and he made an effort and collected his best Spanish. "Hay alguien en este lugar que hable ingles?"

The boy shook his head. Apparently there was no one in the place who spoke English. But the Kid had enough Spanish to ask for what he wanted, and enough savvy to see that he got it.

"If you don't speak my lingo, bo, I reckon I'll sling yours," said the Kid good-humouredly. "Hook out the posadero."

"Padre, posadero," said the boy, and he turned away and began to call: "Padre, padre, un Gringo!"

The Kid pushed his horse on into the patio.

Rooms, with wooden galleries in front, cracking and crazy and sorely in want of paint, opened on either side of the patio. The further end was occupied by stables, dark and gloomy and of evil odour. The whole place looked gloomy and forbidding; but the Kid was glad to see the sunset gleaming down on a spring that bubbled into a cracked stone fountain in the centre of

the court. There was clean water at all events—and in Mexican posadas a traveller had to be careful how he drank the water, if he valued the well-being of his inside. The Kid filled a pannikin and drank, and gave his horse to drink, while he waited for the innkeeper to appear. The boy was still calling; but the posadero seemed in no hurry to show himself.

It looked as if they seldom expected guests at the lonely inn in the mountains. Likely enough, it had been built in the old Spanish days, when a camino real ran through the canada to Los Pinos, and there was plenty of traffic on it. Under the glorious Republic the road had dwindled to a track, and the traffic to nothing. No doubt at times vaqueros came in from the ranches and peons from the aldeas of the vicinity. On this especial evening, there was no vaquero or aldeano to be seen; the Kid had the posada all to himself, except for the innkeeper and his son, so far as he could see. What kind of accommodation he was likely to get at such a deserted, dismal place, the Kid wondered; but anyhow there was fresh water and a roof, and at least there would be saladura, and the fowls that cackled round his horse showed that he could expect a tortilla de huevos. So the Kid waited cheerfully for the innkeeper to appear.

A brawny, black-bearded, tousled man in velveteen trousers, a dirty shirt, and a belt, came out of one of the rooms beside the entrance-way. He stared at the Kid under bent shaggy brows; and the Kid figured that he had never seen a more evil-disposed face since he had crossed the Rio Grande into Mexico—dark, evil, sodden with excessive pulque and aguardiente.

"Shucks!" murmured the Kid. "Some hotel-keeper, I'll tell the world!"

But he raised his Stetson politely to the Mexican, remembering that he was in a country where the tradition of Spanish courtesy lingered.

But Spanish courtesy seemed to have been left out of the composition of this particular Mexican.

He stared evilly at the Gringo.

"Que pregunto usted?" he grunted. And he did not trouble to touch the ragged sombrero that covered his shaggy head.

The Kid's eyes glinted.

"In the first place, I'm asking for civility, hombre," he said. "In the second, I want food and shelter for self and cayuse. Savvy?"

If the Mexican did not speak English, he understood it when he heard it. He nodded slowly.

"Si, senior!"

"Say, you don't seem a whole heap pleased to see a visitor arrive in this shcbang," said the Kid, more good-humouredly. "I guess I can pay my way, hombre; I ain't holding you up for a supper."

The Mexican's black eyes were scanning him. At the first sight, the Kid looked a cow-puncher, as he was; but at the second glance, a keen eye could see that he was probably better heeled than most cow-punchers. The Kid did not display his roll for all the world to see; but since he had made his lucky strike in the gold-mines of Arizona, he had fixed himself up in what the old bunch on the Double-Bar ranch would have called a dandy way. There was nothing showy about the Kid; but his riding-boots were of the finest leather, his neck-scarf of the purest silk, the band of silver nuggets that adorned his hat was worth many dollars; and the Kid allowed himself the luxury of silver spurs. The grim ugliness of the posadero's face relaxed as his scintillating eyes took in all these details, and he realised that this rider who looked like a cow-puncher from a Texas ranch, was probably a rico hombre.

"Senior, you are welcome," said the posadero, in Spanish. "My house is poor, but all that it contains is at your service." It was Spanish courtesy at last, though evidently only evoked by the silver nuggets and the silver spurs. "We see few strangers on this camino, senior! Travellers are fearful of the brigands in the sierra. A light, senior, I beg you, and I shall be honoured to serve you."

The Kid dismounted.

"I guess I've seen something of the pesky bandoleros," he remarked. "They ain't got me scared any, Feller. I guess I've rode hard all day, and I'm sure hungry. What's going?"

"Saladura, pollo, tortillas, y tortillas de huevos, senior—"

"Muy bien!" said the Kid cheerily.

"Luis!" shouted the posadero.

The tattered boy came up, eyeing the stranger as evilly as his padre. But at the posadero's order, he took the mustang and led it away. The Kid followed. He always had a careful eye on his horse, especially in Mexico. The boy Luis led the mustang into a vacant stall, and stared and grunted when the Kid demanded clean straw, and with his own eyes saw clean water brought. Not till the mustang was cared for did the Kid think of himself, and by that time he was more than ready for the meat that the posadero had prepared in the comedor. And the Kid did not, as was usual, take off his gun-belt when he sat down to that comida. In his present surroundings, the Rio Kid preferred to keep his pair of notched, walnut-butted guns within easy reach of his hands.

The POPULAR.—No. 536.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Kid Watches Out!

"VAYA!" said the voice of the posadero, in a husky whisper, and the sound of clattering hoofs in the falling darkness followed.

The Rio Kid ate slowly, with a good appetite, and he was thinking the while.

The eating-room, or comedor, was dusky and dusty; its window, that looked on the patio, was dirty and cobwebby and cracked and patched. An odorous oil-lamp swung from the blackened low ceiling, shedding a dim light. The door was on the patio, and the Kid had left it wide open for the air. There were too many foul smells in the posada to please the cleanly Kid; but that was not his only reason. The Kid wanted to see as much as he could of his surroundings.

The sun was almost gone now, the darkness falling on the Sierra Madre. The patio was deep in shadow; the cart, the refuse, the heaps and bundles, a collection of strange shadows. The air from the unswept, dirty patio was perhaps one degree more wholesome than the stuffy atmosphere of the comedor. Through the gloom outside the Kid had seen, as he ate his meal, the tattered Luis leading a shaggy Mexican pony across from the stables to the entrance-way, and as he passed out of sight under the arch, the Kid left his comida, stepped to the door, and put his head out. The doorway of the comedor was very near the archway, which was the only entrance and exit of the building; and under the gloomy arch the hoofs of the shaggy pony rattled and echoed. And a murmuring, husky voice told that the posadero was there, speaking to his son; and the Kid, listening intently, caught the word "Vaya" clearly, and the clatter of hoofs that followed.

He returned to his meal more thoughtful than before.

The Kid did not like the place in which he found himself. He was thinking that he might have done more wisely to camp on the mountains than to seek shelter in that lonely and desolate posada. The evil looks of the patron had struck him first of all, and the wild and lawless face of the nino, he had not seen even one peon servant; it seemed as if only the posadero and his son inhabited the place. Clearly the posada did little business in the way of an inn, though probably the cantina was busy enough at times. In the wineshop by the entrance-way were innumerable bottles and flasks, and the cantina, the Kid figured, was the favourite haunt of the landlord, and the place from which his son's call had roused him out when the Kid arrived. No doubt he was his own best customer. He looked it.

The man, as the Kid figured, made a living selling wine to the peons and peasants of the mountain villages, and by cultivating the fields in the canada—a lazy and unskilled cultivation natural to the place. But the Kid was wondering, too, whether the rare travellers who came by that remnant of the old Camino Real contributed to his support; not wholly in the way of the cuenta—the bill. Mexicans had plenty of reason to hate their northern neighbour, who had defeated them in war and seized upon half their country. And that national feeling, the Kid guessed, was quite strongly developed in the landlord of this mountain inn, to judge by his looks.

The Rio Kid had no hunch to finish that night with six inches of a keen cuchillo buried in his heart, or a bullet from some rusty old escopette in the back of his head.

So he was wary.

Why had the posadero sent his son galloping away into the night? There might be an innocent reason for that; and it might mean that the innkeeper was sending word to certain acquaintances in the mountains that a rich Gringo was under his roof—one of the hated race, who could afford to wear spurs of silver and a band of nuggets round his hat, and who rode a horse that in itself was worth a small fortune to a poverty-stricken innkeeper in a country impoverished by incessant revolutions and civil wars. Indeed, it was unlikely that an innkeeper in such a spot could keep his throat uncut unless he was on friendly terms with the neighbouring brigands.

The Kid smiled grimly over his omelette. The posadero had cooked him quite a good tortilla de huevos, and the Kid ate it with relish. But he drank nothing at his meal, with uneasy suspicious working in his mind. He was half-disposed to mount and ride when his supper was over, and take his chance on the dark trails. But he would not allow a mere suspicion to change his plans; and it was dubious whether there would be less danger in the darkness of an unknown trail than in the posada, if, indeed, there was danger within its adobe walls. He resolved to be on his guard, and to keep his guns handy. After the clatter of hoofs had died away in the falling darkness, the posadero came into the comedor to inquire whether his guest desired anything more. The Kid noticed that the black eyes went at once to the untouched wine-flask on the table. The Mexican noted that the Kid had not tasted the wine.

There was a forced civility in the posadero's manner, but his wild and savage nature looked out through it all the while. If the man had not been a brigand in his time, the Kid reckoned that his looks did him an injustice.

"You get much trouble from the bandoleros in these parts?" the Kid asked casually.

The posadero shrugged his shoulders. "I am a poor man, senior," he answered in his own tongue. "The bandoleros would not be likely to trouble me. What have I? Nothing. All that I had was taken last time the soldiers passed this way, in the revolution."

The Kid nodded. He was aware that Mexico, like most Latin-American countries, suffered from an excess of soldiery, and still more severely from an excess of ambitious generals. They could not defend their country from grasping neighbours, but they were generally ready to fight one another. And wherever a mob of revolutionary soldiers passed, they had something of the effect of a flight of locusts.

"You've heard of Rafael Gonzago?" asked the Kid.

The posadero started, and his black eyes glinted at the Kid with a startled look. But he recovered his composure instantly.

"Who has not heard of that celebrated brigand, senior?" he answered.

"You ever seen him about this-away?"

"I have never seen him, senior. I do not think Gonzago is in this part of the sierra." The posadero broke off. "You do not drink your wine, senior."

"I guess I never do," answered the Kid, with a smile. "Me for the water-waggon, hombre."

The patron of the posada smiled contemptuously. But the look passed from his face when he caught the Kid's

cool, clear eye on him. He shifted uneasily.

"If there is nothing more, *senor*—"
 "Not a thing," drawled the Kid. "I reckon you can show me where I sleep, feller."

"Have the graciousness to follow me, *senor*."

The *posadero* slouched out of the *comedor*, and the Kid had the graciousness to follow him.

From the patio, rickety wooden steps led to the wooden gallery on which the rooms opened. The *posadero* opened a door and carried an oil-lamp into a room. It was a low, dark room, with a window and a door looking on the gallery; the walls of thick adobe. The furniture was of the barest; the bed a mere *trastle*, without coverings. But the Kid did not expect bedding, neither did he want it. In a Mexican *posada* bedding was likely to have too many

"I guess," murmured the Rio Kid, "that that *hombre* is looking for trouble to-night; and he sure don't expect to have the trouble of calling me in the morning. I reckon he figures on my sleeping sound—with six inches of *cuchillo* to help me. If he ain't sent that young scallywag of his'n to fetch a bunch of cut-throats I miss my guess. I reckon I'd have slept sounder out on the *sierra*."

The Kid blew out the lamp.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Foes of the Night!

THE Kid was tired from a long trail, and he would have been glad to stretch himself on the bedstead in his blanket, and sleep. But he did not think of doing so. Sleep, he reckoned, was likely to be a lone one, and terribly sound, if he

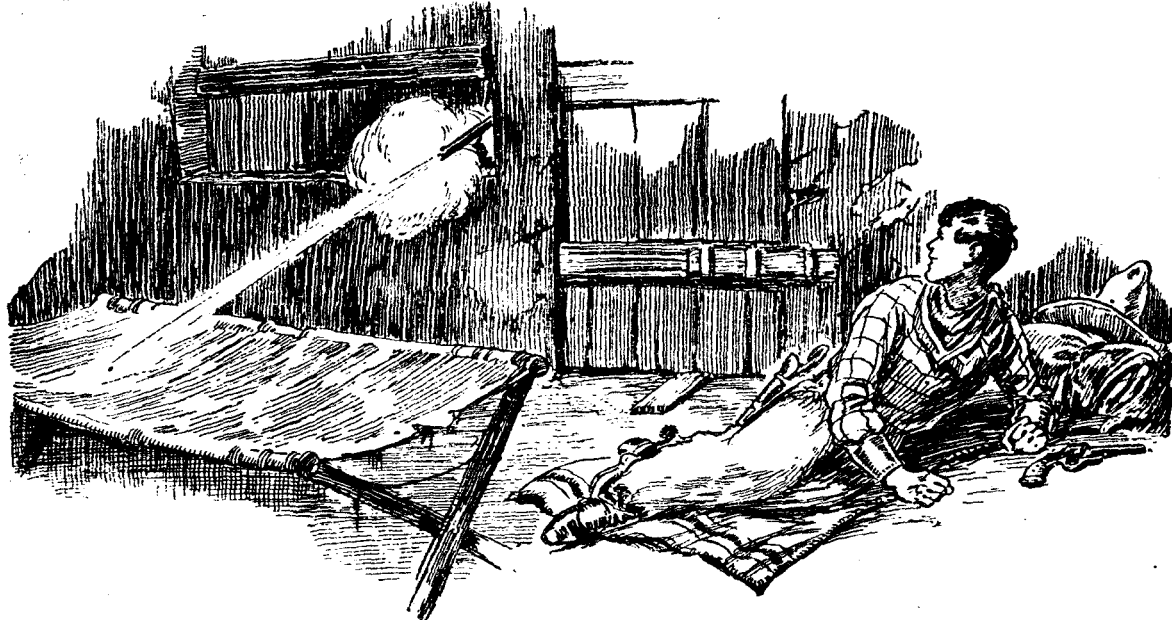
the Kid, with a smile. "That feller sure thinks he's got hold of some soft jasper—he sure does."

Next the Kid examined the door. There was no lock; but it was fitted with strong wooden bars, which he had only to drop into the rusty iron sockets on either side. The bars were stout enough; but the iron sockets were old and loose, and a hefty push from without would have sent the door flying in, bars and sockets and all.

The Kid smiled again, and bared his bowie-knife. With the keen blade, he whittled down one end of a wooden bar, making a wedge of it. The sharp end of the wedge he thrust under the door.

It would need the strength of several men to drive the door open against that obstacle.

Just inside the door the Kid rolled himself in his blanket and lay down on the floor.



ENEMIES AT HAND! The Kid, lying on his blanket on the floor, silent and still, watched with cool amusement the rifle-barrel appear through the crack. Bang! The roar of the rifle broke the silence with a sound that seemed like thunder, and the heavy bullet crashed through the bed, just where the Kid had been lying. (See Chapter 3.)

tiny inhabitants to please the Kid. He had his own blanket, and that was enough for him.

"A poor place, *senor*, but all I have," said the *posadero*. "We have few guests here, *senor*. Few travellers follow the old camino."

"You've said it," agreed the Kid. "But I trust you will sleep soundly, *senor*," said the *posadero*, and the Kid's keen ear detected a sardonic inflection in the voice.

"Feller," said the Kid cheerily, "I've had a long trail, and I guess I could sleep sound on a heap of donkeys out on the *sierra*. I want to be called at sun-up!"

In the glimmer of the smoky lamp the Mexican's eyes glistened. There was mockery in the black eyes.

"Si, *senor*!" he answered. "Buenas noches, *senor*!"

"Buenas noches, *hombre*!" The *posadero* left, and the Kid shut the door carefully after him. The window, unglazed, was shuttered with wood. The Rio Kid was alone, standing in the glimmer of the smoky lamp with a grim smile on his face. No doubt the *posadero* had expected the fool of a Gringo to observe nothing; but there was little that escaped the keen eye of the Kid.

was caught napping that night under the roof of the mountain inn. He stood in the darkness, thinking.

Outside, in the patio, there was a glimmer of starlight. The soft, starry night of Mexico hung like a velvet pall over the mountains, spangled with stars. More and more stars came out in the deep, dark blue. Inside the Kid's room, with door shut and window shuttered, all was black. But from a crack in the crazy shutter a bar of soft starlight dropped in. The Kid examined that crack in the shutter intently. It was in a direct line with the bed. A man standing in the gallery outside, and knowing where the bed stood, could have fired through the crack directly at a sleeper. The Kid felt over the crack with a searching finger. The unpainted wood had split in the hot sun of tropical days; but the edges, as the Kid felt them, told that the crack had been widened by the gashing of a knife. The Kid figured that that was one of the preparations the *posadero* had made to insure that his guest would sleep soundly, and would not need calling in the morning. The rift in the shutter had not been wide enough for easy shooting from without till it was cut wider.

"So that's the lay out!" murmured

There he was, out of the line of fire at the window, unless the shutter was broken away, and that could not have been done without awakening a heavier sleeper than the Rio Kid.

With head pillowed on his rolled slicker, the boy puncher from Texas stretched himself at ease.

It was possible that his suspicions were unfounded, in which case the night would pass without trouble. But if he had judged the *posadero* well there was going to be trouble.

In the meantime he was tired from the trail, and he had slept soundly in more dangerous quarters than this.

He listened for some minutes after he had lain down. All was silent in the *posada*. The fowls in the patio had gone to roost. From somewhere in the night came the braying of a burro. It died away, and all was still again.

The Kid closed his eyes.

Sure of awakening if danger came, the Kid slept peacefully; and he was fast asleep a few seconds after his eyelids drooped.

The starry hours passed. The Kid slept soundly.

But little was needed to awaken the Kid, accustomed to the perils of the llano and the *sierra*.

It was midnight when his eyes opened at a creak of the crazy wooden gallery outside his room.

He did not stir.

Lying silent and motionless, and smiling in the dark, the Rio Kid listened.

Soft and stealthy footsteps were moving on the rickety planking of the gallery outside. Certainly, those footsteps were not of other guests going to their rooms; the Kid was the only guest at the posada. The stealthy sounds ceased outside his room.

The bar of starlight that dropped through the slit in the shutter was darkened by a figure without.

The Kid smiled and waited. He had had three hours of refreshing sleep, and awakened as fresh as a daisy, cool as ice, with nerves of iron. There was a low whisper in Spanish.

"The Gringo dog is sleeping."

"Silencio!" came another whisper.

There was faint, low whispering—three or four Mexicans, the Kid figured, were gathered on the gallery. A soft, grating sound was audible at

the cracked shutter. Something hard had touched it gently; it was a metal tube that was pushed through. The muzzle of a gun was thrusting into the room, bearing full upon the bed opposite the window.

"Tenga cuidado, Pacheco!" said a whispering voice, in Spanish. "If you aiss, the Gringo wakes."

The savage whisper of the posadero answered.

"Do I not know where he lies, hombre? Have I not placed all with my own hands?"

"Muy bien!"

Slowly, carefully, the posadero was aiming the rifle. The muzzle came a few inches into the room through the hink in the shutter, and the scoundrel without was calculating carefully to get it in an exact line with a sleeper on the bedstead. He could not afford to waste a shot. If the first bullet did not strike, the bunch of cut-throats had an armed and desperate man to deal with. Long minutes passed, while the posadero still fumbled at the window. The Kid, lying on his blanket on the

floor, silent and still, watched, with as much cool amusement as if he had been watching a play. There was a surprise coming for these hombres later. For the present the Kid was giving them rope.

Bang!

The roar of the rifle broke the silence with a sound that seemed like thunder, in the stillness of the night.

The heavy bullet crashed through the bed. Had the Kid been lying there he would have waked only to utter his last cry.

But the cut-throats without were not to be denied hearing the cry, for which they listened! as the report of the rifle echoed and boomed through the posada.

The Rio Kid uttered a loud, ringing yell. He was prompt to take his cue.

Loud and sharp that yell rang from the Kid's room. And he followed it with a deep groan.

Then—silence.

There was a sound of chuckling outside. The hitherto stealthy figures gathered there moved without restraint now, and the subdued voices spoke in loud tones.

"Todos los Santos! He is gone, Pacheco."

"Muy bien!"

"Listen! No sound—"

"Carambo! He is dead!" said Pacheco. "I did not need you, amigos. But you can never be sure with these Gringo pigs. He is armed, and would have been dangerous had the shot failed."

"The danger is past, Pacheco," chuckled another voice.

The Kid grinned. There was more danger for the bandoleros in that room than they figured. The Kid was on his feet now, silent as ever, with a six-gun in his hand.

"Force open the door," said the posadero. "He is dead—he utters no sound; but carambo, if he lingers yet, a cuchillo will end him. Force the door."

"Nuestra senora! I am curious to see the Gringo," came one of the voices. "From the description Luis gave, it is the same Tejano who fought with us in the sierra, and whose death Rafael Gonzago has sworn. If this be the same hombre, it will be welcome news for the chief."

The Kid was conscious of a little disappointment. He understood the words in Spanish; and he knew that these hombres belonged to the gang of Rafael Gonzago, the gang the Kid had helped to cut to pieces in the mountains a few days ago. The Kid had hoped that Gonzago himself was on the scene; he wanted badly to get a bead on the chief of the bandoleros. But no doubt this stealthy treachery was beneath the chief, and he had left it to a bunch of his followers.

Hands fumbled over the door, and it creaked under a push. But it stood fast.

"Carambo! It does not open, Pacheco."

"Bah! The fastenings will not hold— exert yourself, idler!" snapped the posadero.

The door creaked again. Four or five men were driving at it with hands and shoulders, and the bars would not have held. But the wedge the Kid had driven under the door held it fast enough. He heard the posadero panting and then cursing.

"The accursed Gringo has secured it somehow! He suspected, perhaps, Ramon."

"He did not suspect the chink in the window, Pacheco," chuckled Ramon.

"Carambo! Not! The door will not move, but the shutter is easy. Espora!" growled Pacheco.

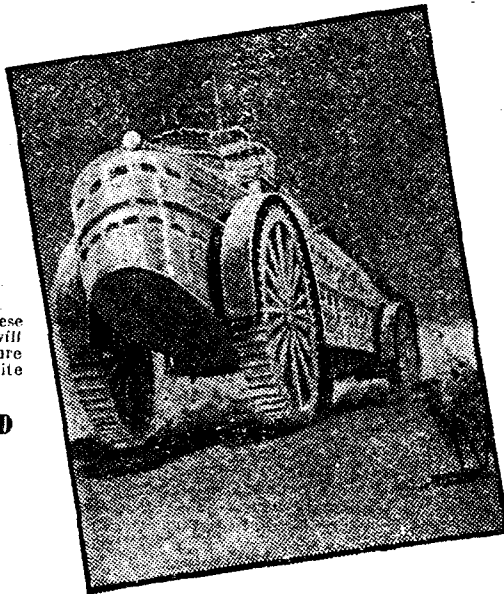
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There was a beating and wrenching, and the wooden shutter was torn away from the ventana.

Soft starlight glimmered into the room.

"Enter, Ramon."
A dark head and brawny shoulders came in at the small window-space. For a moment, scintillating black eyes stared into the darkness of the room. Then the brigand crambered through the window and dropped inside, breathing heavily. The next moment the heavy butt of a Colt crashed on the dark head, and Ramon dropped on the floor, stunned and senseless.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

At Close Quarters!

MADRE de Dios!"
"Que significa eso?"
"Carambo!"
"Por todos los santos!"

There was a startled muttering of voices without. Close round the window gathered dark forms and swarthy faces, blotting the dim starlight in the gallery. "Ramon!" hissed the posadero. "Ramon!"

But no word came from Ramon, lying stunned on the floor in the darkness. Only dimly the ruffians at the window could see the stretched figure. The Kid they could not see at all.

"The fool has fallen," said Pacheco at last. "Madro de Dios! What ails him? Ramon, speak."

But Ramon was not likely to speak for many hours to come.

"The Gringo—" whispered a startled voice.

"You are a fool, Ricardo—the Gringo is dead. Enter and open the door, son of a fool."

Another dark head came in at the window. Searching, glittering eyes watched the interior of the room. But only at the window the patch of starlight fell; the unoccupied bed and the Kid at the door were wrapped in darkness. Slowly Ricardo climbed in at the window, and dropped on his feet beside the still form of Ramon. He bent over the senseless brigand; and as he bent the Kid made one stride, and the heavy revolver-butt crashed on the back of the Mexican's head. One faint gasp the ruffian gave, and he fell across Ramon.

"Ricardo!" yelled the posadero.

But Ricardo could not reply. "The Gringo!" shouted another voice. "You are a fool and a mule, Pacheco; the Gringo is not slain! Your bullet missed—"

"Ramon! Ricardo! They are silent—mule of a posadero, the Gringo lives and has struck them down!"

"Fire into the room—fire!"

The Kid stood back against the door. Three or four shots rang out, and the bullets crashed across the room, dashing fragments from the adobe of the opposite wall. Then a hand came in at the window, with a revolver in it, to spray bullets round the shadowed room; but the finger never pressed the trigger. A shot rang in the darkness, there was a fearful cry, the pistol dropped with a crash, and the hand was withdrawn, streaming with blood, with shattered fingers.

There was a roar of rage. The voice of the posadero rose above the rest, yelling to Luis to bring an axe. Crashing blows fell on the door; the axe, wielded by the posadero, and three or four machetes in the grasp of the brigands, crashed and smashed, and the door swiftly yielded.

The Kid stepped back to the end of the room. He threw the bedstead in the middle in front of him, and threw across it the senseless bodies of Ramon

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- April 8th, 1919.
- March 1st, 1913.
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- October 9th, 1910.
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and Ricardo, as carelessly as though they were sacks of alfalfa. That was enough to stop the first rush, and the Rio Kid had a six-gun in either hand now and was ready for the climax. He reckoned that there were still five or six of the bunch for him to handle, and the door was falling in splinters.

It crashed down at last, and, with a yell, the Mexicans rushed in, cuchillo or machete in hand, like a pack of wolves. But one dropped in the doorway as the rush started, another as they entered, and four yelling ruffians crashed into the bed and stumbled over it, roaring with rage. And still came the spitting of fire from the Kid's unerring six-guns as he sprayed them with bullets.

Only one of the Mexicans reached the Kid, and only to fall under a crashing barrel. Two wounded men were running along the gallery; two more groaned on the floor. But the rest were silent.

"I reckon it's time to beat it out of this shebang," murmured the Kid. "I guess there'll be more of these hombres fooling around before dawn, when the word goes to Gonzago that his bunch have been shot up this-a-way."

The Kid coolly picked up his blanket and his slicker pack, and with a re-loaded six-gun in his right hand stepped

out into the gallery over the sprawling bandoleros, dead or wounded. With wary eyes about him in the starlight he trod to the stable, saddled and packed his mustang, and led him out into the patio, across to the entrance-way. There, under the adobe arch, dim in the star-glimmer, lay the posadero, wounded, where he had sunk down. He glared up at the Kid like a wild beast, and spat out a curse.

"Forget it, feller," said the Kid. "I guess what you want is a bullet through your cabeza, you sure do; but you ain't worth it. Next time you send the nino to Rafael Gonzago, tell him that I'm sure hoping to see him, and that if he wants my scalp he'll find me at Los Pinos."

And the boy puncher led his mustang past the groaning man. Outside the posada, the starlight glimmered on the wooded sides of the canada, and on the hoof-beaten trail that had once been the camino real. The Rio Kid mounted and rode down the trail under the stars.

THE END.

("THE BANDOLERO" is the title of next Tuesday's Wild West thriller. Don't miss it, boys!)

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The BANDOLERO! by RALPH REDWAY



THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Between Two Foes!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

The Kid nodded.

"You've said it," he agreed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sure!" yawned the Kid.

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

"And you!" said the Kid coolly.

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

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

He was listening.

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Kid's Way!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Captain Alvaro uttered an exclamation.

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

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

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

"Sure!"

"And I let him go!"

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

The Kid watched him with a rather amused smile.

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

Alvaro gritted his teeth.

"Carambo! If I had known! It is of that brigand that I am in pursuit, Senior el Tajano. I have fifty men camped now in a canada in the sierra. We have been hunting that lepero for weeks. But he eludes us like a coyote. And I have seen him—and let him go!" The Mexican captain cursed in Spanish for some moments, the Kid listening with a cheery grin. "You are sure that it was Gonzago, senior?"

"You bet!"

The Mexican swore again.

"But, after all, I have seen him now, and I shall know his villain face again," he said. "Now I must be content with the Rio Kid as a prisoner. Despues de todo, that is something." He smiled. "I had left my men to ride to a mountain aldea to pick up information concerning that brigand, senior, when I sighted you on the camino real, and followed you. I did not dream that you would lead me to Rafael Gonzago, and that I—carambo!—would let that vil-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a smile on his face.

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

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

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

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

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

The Kid laughed.

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

"You jest, senior!"

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

"Carambo!"

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

Crack!

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

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Upper Hand!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You shot me down!" gasped the Mexican.

The Kid laughed.

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

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

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

"Don't!" warned the Kid.

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

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

Bang!

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

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

The Mexican stood trembling with rage.

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

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

"Shoot!" hissed the Mexican.

The Kid shook his head.

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

Alvaro gritted his teeth.

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

The Kid laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. The Kid Chips In!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Clatter, clatter, clatter!

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Kid heard the brigand's mocking laugh.

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

Crack!

It was another shot.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Carambo!"

Rafael Gonzago spun round.

"El Tejano!" he said between his teeth. "You—"

He threw up the revolver to fire.

Bang!

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

Rafael Gonzago staggered back.

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

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

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

"*Senor!*" he gasped.

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

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

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

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

The Kid smiled.

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

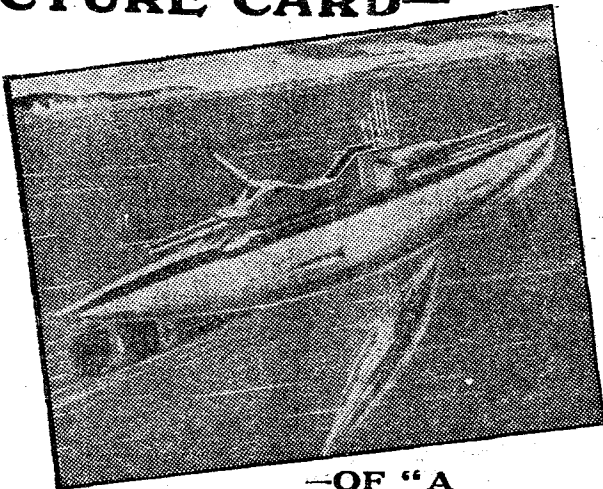
"*Senor*, you are an outlaw," said the Mexican slowly. "It was my duty to take you. But you are not known in this country, and if I am silent you may ride free and safe. *Senor*, when I leave you, I shall forget that I have ever seen the Rio Kid."

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

THE END.

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

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THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Foes of the Dark!

BY uncertain glimpses of the moon, when it peered from the clouds, the Rio Kid sighted the dark-cloaked figures. Two of them, at least, were at one end of the shadowed street; two or three, he reckoned, at the other.

Once or twice, through the deep silence of the night, he caught a faint, stealthy footfall. Black midnight lay on the Mexican town of Los Pinos; only at rare intervals the moon glimmered through dark clouds, and dropped an uncertain gleam into the street between high adobe walls, lined with shady trees. So far as the Kid could see, there was not a door or a window in the whole street's length—it was shut in by garden walls, high, and guarded at the summit by spikes or broken bottles. In deep recesses in the adobe walls, here and there, thick, iron-barred gates were set—closed and locked for the night. The Kid, as he moved slowly and warily, his eyes watchful, called himself a laced gink for roaming alone into such a quarter, and without his guns. He had walked out of the fonda to have a look at the town by night, and in that dark, lonely street he had realized that he was being tracked—and surrounded; and he guessed that some of the bravos of Los Pinos had seen him take out his roll when he paid the landlord of the fonda. Whoever they were, they were tracking him, quietly, stealthily, in the gloom, and at any moment there might come a rush, and half a dozen long cuchillos might be glittering round him.

In the sierra, or on the llano, the Kid would not have been so imperilled. With his walnut-butted guns in his

hands, he would not have cared a continental red cent had he run into all the bravos in the pueblo. But in the streets of Los Pinos men did not pack guns; and the Kid had left his hardware at the fonda, while he took his stroll through calle and plaza to see Los Pinos by the light of the moon. Now the moon was hiding her light, and in the darkness his half-seen, half-heard shadowers were tracking him down.

The Kid stopped at last, and listened. Faintly through the night came a soft footfall, soft almost as the slinking tread of a coyote.

The street was narrow—a mere passage between high garden walls. Tall trees that grew behind the walls shadowed it, the branches mostly meeting overhead in a foliaged arch. The Kid reflected that he had wandered into exactly the spot where the bravos wanted him for their purpose. High, inaccessible walls shut him in, and at either end of the ally, stealthy footsteps told of creeping foes. It looked as if the sunrise, when it came, would reveal the gushed body of a Gringo, robbed and murdered—a discovery that would probably not cause much excitement in Los Pinos.

Strangers from the northern side of the border were not popular in Los Pinos, or in any other town in Mexico. But the Rio Kid had a very natural objection to being found in such a state in the morning, and he called himself a gink for moseying around a Mexican town without a gun. But it was too late to think of that; he was beset, and so soon as he attempted to get out of that shadowy alley, knives would be gleaming. And to wait there, watching, was only to wait till the bravos closed in on him. In the heart of a town,

where there were telegraphs and telephones, alcaide and police, and the whole bag of tricks, the Kid was in danger more dire than he had been in among the brigands of the Sierra Madre.

But the boy puncher from Frio was perfectly cool. Those leperos guessed that they had him cinched; but the Kid was not a dead Gringo yet, not by long chalks.

Under the thick shadow of a tree, the Kid backed into a deep recess of a high adobe wall, where there was a gate. The gate, obviously, gave on the garden of some mansion, standing in wide grounds; and the Kid nourished a faint hope that he might find it unfastened. It was not likely; he was in a country of locks and bolts and bars; a country where locks and bolts and bars were very necessary, and were seldom neglected. Anyhow, in that narrow recess, the bravos would not find it easy to rush him in a body, and that was something. So the Kid groped into the black porch, and felt over the solid wooden gate, that was barred with iron clamps.

And, to his joy and amazement, he found it yield to his touch.

The Kid whistled softly under his breath.

Likely enough, it was the only gate in Los Pinos that was left unsecured. He surely was in luck.

The Kid grinned as he thought of the rage and disappointment of the ruffians who were tracking him through the shadows, when they found that he had vanished, like a bird in the air. The gate was unfastened now, but it would be fastened, pronto, when the Kid had passed into the garden. The stealthy, cloaked figures would close in, and find

him gone, and even if they guessed how he had gone, they could not follow.

True, it was no light matter to trespass upon private grounds at that hour of the night—he might be seen, taken for one of the innumerable thieves of Los Pinos, fired on, perhaps. But that risk was nothing, compared with the danger of a struggle, unarmed, against a gang of bravos, knife in hand. The Rio Kid pushed the gate open softly, and it moved without a sound on well-oiled hinges.

That circumstance struck the Kid; in Mexico, where everything was left till the morrow, hinges usually creaked for want of oil. But the gate made no sound as the Kid opened it; and when he stepped in and closed it behind him, it closed soundlessly. He groped on the inner side, found a bolt, and pushed it home, and the bolt, too, was noiseless.

The Kid stood in silence and darkness under the thick branches. The moon was hidden again, all was black. He listened, and from the alley without a stealthy footstep passed. The Mexican bravos were seeking him along the shadowed street, not knowing where he had gone. And the Kid smiled in the darkness.

Then suddenly, without a sound, hands were laid on him from behind.

The Kid started convulsively.

The garden had been silent as the grave; to all appearance the house to which it belonged was shut for the night. Within the adobe walls the Kid had not looked for foes; at least, until he began to seek a way out by another quarter. But the dark, silent garden was, it seemed, far from solitary, for three pairs of hands had been laid on the Kid. Each of his arms was pinioned in a muscular grip, and an arm was thrown round his neck from behind. Before he fully knew what was happening, he was dragged over, a hopeless prisoner in the grasp of three assailants.

The Kid did not resist.

It was useless to resist three foes, each as powerful as himself, and likely only to draw forth the thrust of a knife. These men, whoever they were, were not of the gang who had been tracking him; it seemed certain that they belonged to the mansion surrounded by the adobe garden wall—night-watchmen, the Kid supposed, or something of the sort.

If they took him for a midnight marauder, as they might well do in the circumstances, it was natural for them to seize him, though there was something strange, almost eerie, in their silence and stealth. It seemed as if they had been lurking in the darkness there, watching and waiting for someone to enter by the gate that was left unbolted, which was strange enough.

They fastened on the Kid with a silent, ruthless determination. He was lifted from his feet, and carried away up a dark garden path. He submitted to his fate with cool philosophy. If they took him for a midnight prowler, he would be handed over to the alcalde and his alguacils, which at all events was better than a thrust from a bravo's cuchillo in the dark. But he could explain, when he saw the master of the mansion, or when he was taken to the alcalde. In the meantime, as a struggle availed nothing, the Kid took it quietly.

From behind a dark bank of clouds the moon peered for a moment or two. The Kid had a glimpse of a large garden, planted with tropical flowers, shaded by great trees, and a white-walled mansion standing high and stately. He had a glimpse of the man who held him—three

dusky peons, plainly the servants of a rich Mexican household. In the glimmer of the moon they also saw the man they bore, and from one of them, the first word that had been uttered, came an ejaculation of surprise:

"Un Gringo!"

Then the moon vanished again, and all was dark.

"You've said it, feller!" drawled the Kid coolly. "I guess I'm from Texas, lumbres; what you galoots call a Tejano in your lingo."

There was no reply from his captors. The Kid felt himself carried through a doorway, and along passages, and at last he was set down, in the darkness, in a room—but he was still held by two pairs of brawny hands. The third man had released him, and gone—to call the boss, the Kid figured. Well, the Kid was anxious himself to see the boss, and to explain how he came to be in the garden at that suspicious hour of the night; and he hoped to see some courteous Mexican Don who would take his word on the subject, and order him to be released—by a safer way out than by the alley under the high garden walls.

The Kid waited with cool equanimity. A light gleamed.

The peon came back into the room, carrying a lamp. He set the lamp on a table, and its light shone brightly in the room. Following the peon, a man entered, and the Kid's eyes turned on him curiously. This, he reckoned, would be the boss of the shebang, the galoot he wanted to see. And the Kid called up his best Spanish to explain.

THE SECOND CHAPTER

Chance!

"UN Gringo! De veras!"

It was an exclamation of surprise, in a harsh, croaking voice.

The Kid fixed his eyes on the speaker. He saw a little old man, dressed in black velvet, with a skull-cap of the same material. From his dress, his look, his manner, it was plain that he was a rich hidalgo, the master of the mansion, or the boss of the shebang, as the Kid expressed it to himself. But there was little encouragement to be drawn from his looks. His old dark, wrinkled face, his little, black, beady eyes, his thin, hard lips, gave the Kid an impression of cold, hard, relentless evil, that caused a chill to run through him. For sheer, dark wickedness, he had never seen a face to equal that of the wrinkled Mexican who was now staring at him. Still, that was nothing to the Kid; he had only to explain how he came there, and at the worst he would be sent to the carcel for the remainder of the night. So, at least, he figured.

For several long moments the black, beady eyes were fixed on him with a strange, glowering look the Kid did not understand. It might have been supposed that the old man was gazing upon an enemy he had long desired to get into his power; yet the Kid had never seen the man before, and outside the forda where he had put up, he had not spoken to a soul in Los Pinos.

"Bind his hands!" said the old man in Spanish, and one of the peons took a cord, the Kid's hands were pulled behind him, and secured.

He was allowed to sit on a bench, facing the old Don. The latter made a gesture, and the three peons quitted the room, leaving the Kid alone with the master of the house.

"So you are an Americano?" said the old Mexican, speaking in English.

"Texan, senor," said the Kid cheerily. "I guess I hail from the Rio country, in Texas."

"Carambol! From your dress, a rancher!" said the Mexican, eyeing the Kid's Stetson and chaparejos and spurs.

"Right in once," assented the Kid.

"Carambol!" repeated the old hidalgo.

"And it is for a Texan, an Americano, an enemy of our country, that Donna Carlotta has forgotten her obedience."

The Kid opened his eyes wide.

"I guess you've got me beat, senor," he said. "Perhaps you'll let me explain how I came into your garden—"

"Believe me, senor, I know perfectly well," said the old Mexican, with a smile that was tigerish. "I am well acquainted with the whole affair, senor. It is not the first time you have entered by the garden gate that Donna Carlotta so cleverly left unbolted for you. You, senor, are a stranger to me, but Donna Carlotta has been watched—as you find I have the pleasure of making your acquaintance, senor, on the night of your death!"

"I guess I ain't dead yet, senor!" remonstrated the Kid. "You're sure making some sort of a mistake—"

"Your name?"

"Kid Carfax."

"Alino, I need not say, as you know it so well, Senor Carfax," grinned the old Mexican.

The Kid shook his head.

"You've got it wrong, senor," he said. "I guess I've never seen you before, and I sure don't know you from Adam. I ain't the slightest notion what house I'm in, or who you are, or what you're chinning about."

"I should not have expected Donna Carlotta's lover to lie, had he been a Mexican, and worthy of her," said the old man. "But the Gringos—they are all liars and thieves. You say that you do not know me, dog that you are—you do not know that I am Don Balbazar Iquique, the richest man in Los Pinos, and the guardian of Donna Carlotta de Soto. You do not seek to rob me of my ward and a fortune? No?"

"I guess not," said the Kid. "You're sure talking in riddles, Don Balbazar, if that's your name. I've never heard of Donna Carlotta, and never heard of you. I guess you're taking me for some other hombre. I got into your garden to-night by chance—"

"Oh, senor, what is the use of lies so palpable?" asked Don Balbazar. "A Gringo should be able to lie more cunningly."

The Kid's eyes gleamed.

"I guess you're too old for me to handle, even if my hands were loose," he remarked. "So you sure can shoot off your mouth as much as you like, you dog-goned Greaser. I tell you I found the gate unfastened, and—"

The old man raised a thin hand.

"Bustante, senor! I do not choose to listen to your lies," he said. "This tale might impose on a child. Do I look a simple child to be deceived by so clumsy a lie?"

"I guess you look the hardest case I've ever struck," said the Kid. "But I'm giving you the straight goods—"

"Enough! Listen to me," said the old man. "You know, for Donna Carlotta must have told you, that it does not please me for my ward to marry—"

I will be frank with you, senor, as you have but an hour to live, or less. It does not suit me to lose my ward's fortune. She suspects it, or knows it, and I have no doubt that she has told her lover. Until Donna Carlotta is of age, senor, her fortune will remain in

my hands—and even then”—the old man grinned hideously—“even then, senor, there are convents—there are ways and means—I shall not lose so large a fortune easily, senor, when my own has gone on the gambling-tables. Why should I not be frank, when I speak to a man who is already dead—within the hour? Fool! You thought to rob me of a fortune—and you fancied that I was blind, old, foolish—you were mistaken, senor. And if I had any compunction, it would be gone now, now that I find that Donna Carlotta has chosen a Gringo! A Gringo!” The old man spat, with contempt. “By all the saints! Even if it suited me for my ward to marry, senor, I would not permit her to wed with an enemy of my country.”

The Kid watched his old wicked, wrinkled face curiously.

taken care that Carlotta should convey no warning to her lover. Dios! She will not even tell me his name, lest a bravo's knife should let out his life! But I know that you would come again, senor, where you have come before—I was content to wait! Now you have come, to fall into my hands!” He chuckled like some croaking raven. “Fool! Your grave is being dug in the garden in these moments while I speak to you.”

The Kid felt a chill.

“You durned, gol-darned murdering Greaser!” he said savagely. “I keep on telling you that you've roped in the wrong cayuse.”

“Save your breath, senor!” grinned Don Balthazar. “Save your breath—I am not a child to believe lies. Every night, senor, since I learned the truth, the gate has stood unfastened, ready for

The unfastened gate had been a death-trap—intended for another, but into which the Kid fell. And there was no chance of convincing Balthazar Iquique that he was not the man for whom the snare had been laid. The Don would not even listen to his story, and would not have believed it had he listened. The trap had been laid for Donna Carlotta's unknown lover to walk into—the Kid had walked into it, and all was said. If it was any solace to the Kid, he had



MISTAKEN IDENTITY! The girl entered the room and the little wizened figure in black stood back in the doorway, watching her. As the girl saw the Kid she gave a sudden cry. “This is not Don Guzman!” “I guess not, miss,” said the Rio Kid brightly. “Sorry, if you wanted to see a galoot of that name!” (See Chapter 8.)

He comprehended now the mistake that the old man was making.

The unfastened gate, the well-oiled lock and hinges, were explained now; and the serving-men who had been waiting, silent, within, to seize an intruder when he came.

Sheer chance, in seeking an escape from the bravos, had brought the Kid there—where another was expected!

And the other, obviously, was some man who was the lover of this old villain's ward. The Kid had walked into the trap laid for some unknown Mexican of Los Pinos.

The old Don, who looked wickedness incarnate, false to the core himself, was not likely to believe a tale of such a chance. He believed that he had his ward's lover in his hands, and that anything the Kid might say to the contrary was a lie to save his life.

It was a strange, unexpected outcome of the Kid's midnight adventure in Los Pinos.

Don Balthazar was grinning, with the gloating triumph of some evil gnomie. He croaked out a gloating chuckle.

“Tell me no more lies, senor,” he said. “Fool! For three nights, since I discovered the truth, my servants have watched by the garden gate. I have

you—and at last you have come. You came to a love meeting, as you believed, senor—but in truth you came to your death! But I am not cruel!” He grinned like a tiger. “You shall say adios to Donna Carlotta before you die! You shall see her and say farewell. Dios! It will be a warning to her what fate will befall another lover, should she think of taking one to escape from my hands. Wait, senor—I go to call Donna Carlotta!”

The old Mexican backed from the room; the door closed, and a key turned. The Rio Kid was left alone.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Embrace of Donna Carlotta!

“SHUCKS!” murmured the Rio Kid. He was in a tight corner, and he realized it very clearly.

He had escaped the bravos who had been tracking him in the shadowed alley between the garden walls. Probably they had, by this time, given up the search for him, enraged and wondering at his escape. But escape from the cuchillos of the bravos of Los Pinos was little to the good if he was to be butchered in this house of mystery and crime,

probably saved the life of the Mexican lover, who, if he came, would find the garden gate in the adobe porch fastened against him. The Kid was glad of it, so far as that went; but his chief concern was not for an unknown Mexican, but for Kid Cartax of Frio. And it looked as if Kid Cartax had reached the end of his adventurous trail at last.

He waited. The peons had bound his wrists fast behind his back; he had no chance of getting loose. He wondered whether the coming of Donna Carlotta would give him a chance. At least, she would announce that he was not the man her guardian believed him to be. But would that wrinkled old fiend believe her, any more than he believed the Kid? Would he not be assured that it was a falsehood to save her lover? Even if he believed, would he spare a man who now knew his secrets, a member of the race he, like all Mexicans, hated? It was not likely.

Still, the Kid was cool, and he rose politely to his feet as the door opened to admit a graceful figure in a cloak and mantilla. The girl was speaking in Spanish as the door opened—a low, sweet, trembled voice that was pleasant

to the car. The black lace mantilla half hid her face, but the Kid could see that the face was beautiful, though pale and sad.

"You will spare him, Don Balthazar! You could not be so wicked—so cruel to—"

"Querida, I am not cruel—I allow you to say adios to your Gringo!" croaked the old Don.

"He is not a Gringo, I swear I have never spoken to a Gringo—"

"Peace!"

The girl entered, the little wizened figure in black velvet standing in the doorway, watching her.

Dark, sorrowful eyes turned on the Kid; and the girl gave a sudden cry.

"It is not Don Guzman!"

"I guess not, miss," said the Kid. "Sorry if you wanted to see a galoot of that name."

The girl's face brightened.

"It is not he—it is not he!" she exclaimed. "Don Balthazar, you have deceived me—you have terrified me for nothing—it is not he!"

The old man croaked out a laugh. "Nombre de Dios! You should have been an actress, Carlotta! Well done—well done! But you cannot deceive me!"

"I tell you, this is not the *hidalgo* you believe!" she exclaimed. "This caballero—I have never seen him before."

"Come, come!" grinned the old Don. "You waste time with this trifling, Carlotta. The man dies within the hour—"

if you would bid him farewell, lose no time. I leave you—but remember that an eye remains on you, and if you seek to release the caballero, the interview ends at once. I trust to your good sense, querida."

He drew the heavy door shut.

The girl remained standing, looking at the Kid, and the brightness was still in her face. The Kid grinned rather sourly. He understood how relieved the Mexican girl was to find that it was not her lover who had fallen into the merciles hands of the guardian who sought to keep her fortune. In her relief, she forgot that a stranger's life was to pay for the old man's mistake.

She approached him at last, and spoke in Spanish.

"Who are you, señor? Speak in your own tongue—I understand."

"A puncher from Texas, miss," answered the Kid. "Kid Carfax, from Frisco."

"But how came you here—my guardian has said that Don Guzman was caught in his snare—though he did not know the name. And you—"

The Kid explained.

"Ah, señor, I pity you!" murmured Donna Carlotta. "Praise be to the saints, who have watched over him, that Don Guzman Saltillo did not come to the garden this night!"

"I guess," said the Kid, "that the saints was so darned busy looking after Don Guzman, that they clean forgot this kid. They sure did. That old hombre won't believe he's roped in the wrong

boss, miss, and I'm sure booked for the other side of Jordan."

The girl clasped her hands.

"If I could help you, señor! But I cannot—I cannot! You heard what Don Balthazar said—I am watched! Oh, señor, I am the most unhappy of women in Mexico! My guardian will believe that he has killed the man who loves me, and who would protect me from him; but afterwards he will learn the truth, and Don Guzman may yet fall into the trap."

Evidently the señorita's concern was still chiefly for Don Guzman, though it was the hapless Texan who was in immediate danger of death.

The Kid made a grimace.

"I guess, miss, that if I got out of this hyer ciuch, I'd sure look for that hombre Don Guzman, and put him wise," he said.

Her eyes glosed.

"Oh, señor, if you only could! If by some chance, señor, or mercy of the holy saints, you escape from this peril, seek Don Guzman Saltillo at the Hacienda Saltillo, and warn him of his peril. Say that the secret is known, that he must not come again, because assassins lurk in the garden to seize him. Tell him he cannot hope to see me more, but that I will be true to him in spite of my guardian's threats. Tell him—"

She broke off. "But you will never escape, señor—your doom is sealed. And I, alas, am the cause of your death."

The tears ran down the olive cheeks of the Mexican girl.

"I guess I ain't a dead hombre yet, miss," said the Kid stoutly, "and if I beat it out of this, I'll sure see that galoot Don Guzman and give him the office. Say, that guardian of yours seems to be some lobo wolf, he sure does!"

"He is cruel—wicked—remorseless!" sighed Donna Carlotta. "He has lost all his own great fortune at the gaming tables, and I believe that he has lost much of mine, and he dare not account for it, as he must do if I marry. He has kept me almost a prisoner—it was by chance that I saw Don Guzman—he would never have permitted, had he known. Oh, señor, Don Guzman loved me, and he would have saved me from this house of misery and despair. I knew Don Guzman as a child, señor, but since my father died and left me in the care of Don Balthazar, I have not seen him—till by chance at the church, one day—"

She broke off, colouring.

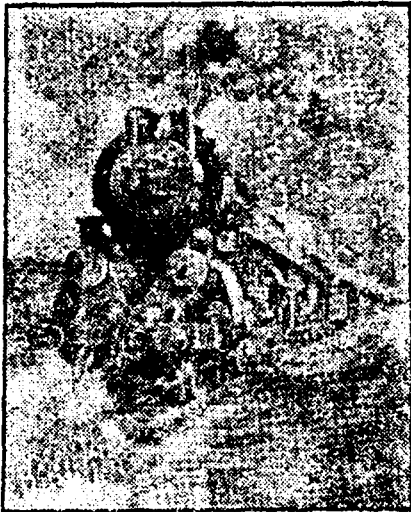
The Kid nodded sympathetically.

He guessed that a ward in the care of a guardian like Don Balthazar Iquique would welcome any chance of escaping from his hands, and more especially if that chance came in the romantic guise of a lover.

He could picture the stolen glances from under the shawl of the mantilla, the notes carried by some devoted servant, the secret meetings—the gate left unfastened for the lover to enter the garden—

"Sonn, señor, Don Guzman would have saved me from this," the girl was speaking again. "That is what my guardian feared—and so he laid his plans. I would not tell him the name, for all his threats—he would have hired bravos to stab Don Guzman some dark night. But his servants must have watched me—they found that Don Guzman visited the garden at night—and so—so I have been kept locked in my room, that I could not give warning, while this ambuscado was laid—but by the mercy of the saints Don Guzman has not fallen into it!"

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"Only this kid!" said the boy puncher, with a rather wry smile.

"Ah, believe me, senor, I pity you!" murmured Donna Carlotta. "I cannot help but rejoice that Don Guzman is safe—but from my heart, senor, I pity your hard fate."

"I guess that makes it easier, senorita," said the Kid gravely. "But it would sure make it easier still if I could wring the wizened neck of that old lobo wolf before I'm rubbed out."

The door opened a few inches, and the grinning, gnomish face of Don Balthazar Iquique peered in.

"Are you finished, querida?" he asked mockingly. "Time presses. Senor the Gringo, all is ready for you in the garden."

The girl turned.

"Don Balthazar, I tell you, he is not the man—"

"You may tell me so ten thousand times, nina, and I shall not believe you," grinned Don Balthazar. "I give you a few minutes more. But haste—haste—let the farewells be said—time presses, querida!"

The door softly closed again.

"They watch us, senor," breathed the girl. "I cannot aid you! May the saints have pity on you. If it is a comfort to you, senor, you may reflect that this mischance has saved the life of Don Guzman Saltillo."

That reflection did not bring so much comfort to the Kid as Donna Carlotta may have supposed.

"Senorita," whispered the Kid, "I guess they're watching through some spyhole, and if you try to untie my hands they'll be on us in two shakes of a beaver's tail. That's a cinch, I guess. But there's a knife in my pocket, miss, and if you could get it, and give a cut at the rope round my wrists—"

"Senor! They will see—"

"I guess, senorita, that taking me for your lover, they'll not be surprised to see you embrace me a few, seeing that I'm going to be wiped out and buried in the garden," murmured the Kid.

Donna Carlotta flushed crimson.

"Senor!"

"I guess it's asking a lot, but it's to save my life, senorita," said the Kid; "and if I get loose, I'll sure take a warning to that feller Guzman, and mebba save his life, too."

"It is true!"

"Jest put on some hefty grief, and weep a few, and embrace me, and fool in the breast-pocket for the knife," breathed the Kid. "I guess there ain't much time to lose, senorita."

"Senor, I will do what I can," whispered Donna Carlotta, "and if you escape, you will convey a warning—"

"You bet!"

Don Balthazar had said that his ward should have been an actress, and the Kid, during the next few moments, was prepared to endorse the statement. For the Mexican girl played her part well. There was a wild burst of sobbing, and Carlotta flung her arms round the Kid, as if embracing her lover for the last time.

The black, beady eyes were watching from the spyhole at the door; but they saw nothing to alarm the old Don. To untie the cords on the Kid's wrists would have taken long minutes. But while she clung to the Kid, apparently in a passion of grief and despair, Carlotta's slim



THE ESCAPE! The Kid heard shouting voices, and wild firing, as he climbed the wall. With scarcely a glance back, he swung himself over and dropped into the street beyond. (See Chapter 4.)

fingers glided into the pocket where the knife was, and her hand closed on it. She let go the Kid, and pressed both hands to her heart, as if overcome with grief; but the admiring Kid noted that that was to get her hands together, so that she could open the knife.

The Kid figured that Don Balthazar's ward surely had her wits about her. With the laspknife concealed in the long black lace of her sleeve, the senorita flung her arms round the Kid, as if clasping him in a passionata embrace. And the Kid felt the edge of the knife sawing at the cord on his wrists behind him.

His heart was beating fast, his throat was dry. Any galoot, the Kid reflected afterwards, might have felt joyful at being embraced by so lovely a senorita as Donna Carlotta de Soto; but at the moment the Kid was thinking of anything but that. On moments now his life depended. Donna Carlotta's arms were round him, and her head was on his shoulder, and she was sobbing and weeping—but all the tiroo the edge of the knife was sawing on the cords—gashing the Kid's wrists as well as it slipped, but he cared nothing for that. He felt the cord giving, when the door opened,

and Don Balthazar strode in, with two peons at his heels. Perhaps the old Don suspected that Carlotta was fumbling with the cords as she embraced her supposed lover.

"Bastante!" rapped out the old Don. "Take him!"

The two peons advanced on the Kid, and Donna Carlotta released him, the knife concealed in the lace of her sleeve. The peons gripped the Kid by either arm, and marched him from the room. Down the dark passage they led him, and as he went he heard the voice of Don Balthazar, speaking to the Mexican girl in tones of sardonic consolation. The croaking voice died away, as the Kid was led under an adobe arch into the dark garden.

But his heart was light, and his eyes burned fiercely. The knife had not been given time to saw through the rope, but many strands were cut, and the Kid knew that a powerful wrench would break his hands loose. And when his hands were loose, these jaspers, he reckoned, would find that they had a whole mouthful to chew, in the Rio Kid.

(Continued on page 28.)

The House of Don Balthazar!

(Continued from page 11.)

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

By His Own Hand!

THE moon had sailed out from behind the clouds, and silvery light fell into the scented Mexican garden. By shadowed paths the two peons led the Kid, till they stopped at last under a grove of trees, where the moonlight filtered through the foliage, tracing strange patterns on the grass. Amid the trees was a deep excavation in the earth, dug to a depth of six feet, the displaced earth piled by the side of it.

In the heap of loose earth, three spades and a pick were stuck, and a peon was standing near. The three men had evidently been hard at work, preparing the grave for Donna Carlotta's lover, while the girl was bidding her lover adios. By the side of the deep pit, the Kid was brought to a halt, still held by the peons, and in a few minutes quick, tripping steps announced that Don Balthazar was approaching. The old Mexican came up, and stopped under the trees, gleams of moonlight falling through the branches on his wizened, cruel, wicked old face. He grinned at the Kid like a glowering demon.

The Kid smiled back grimly. His hands would be loose as soon as he wanted them loose, and then there was going to be a surprise for these Greasers. "Now it is adios, senior," said Don Balthazar, with sardonic mockery. "You are ready?"

"I guess I'm ready, you dog-goned lobo wolf," said the Kid.

"Muy bien! You, Jose, strike him dead with your machete!" said Don Balthazar.

The peon laid a hand on the keen-edged machete at his side. Don Balthazar quique looked on, grinning.

The Kid made a wrench, and the half-covered strands of the cord parted. Before the Mexicans knew what was happening, he had grasped the handle of the nearest spade and torn it from the earth. The flat of the spade crashed on

Jose's head as he bared the machete, and the peon fell to the earth stunned.

The other peons leaped back in wild alarm from the spade as it swung round the Kid's head. From Don Balthazar burst a scream of rage and fury. He tore a pompadour from his side, and sprang at the Kid like a tiger. The Kid released a hand from his side, and struck him with his fist full in the face. The old Mexican staggered on the brink of the pit, lost his footing, and crashed down into the excavation. From the pit, as he cranked to the bottom, came one fearful scream, and then there was silence.

"Now, you dog-goned ginks!" roared the Kid, rushing at his peons with the spade whirling in the air.

They fled like rabbits before his rush.

The Kid burst into a laugh, and threw down the spade. From the pit, where Don Balthazar had fallen, came no sound; and the Kid stepped to it and looked down. The moonlight, filtering through the foliage overhead, shone on a white, fixed, wicked face that stared upward unseeing.

The Kid drew a hard breath.

"Search me!" he muttered. It was the face of a dead man that glimmered below in the moonlight. The Mexican, pitching headlong into the pit, had fallen on his own pompadour, and the blade was through his body. By his own hand the ruthless old Don had ended his own wicked life.

"Shucks!" murmured the Rio Kid. "I guess that dog-goned galoot has sure got his! And I reckon I want to beat it out of this afore they bring a hull cious round me."

The Kid vaulted among the trees. He heard shouting voices, and wild firing as he climbed a distant wall. He dropped from the wall into a street, and ran. Half an hour later he was knocking at the door of his fonda, and at sunrise the Rio Kid was riding out of Los Pinos in the saddle of the black-muzzled mustang.

The Rio Kid reckoned that the sooner he hit the horizon, after what had happened at the house of Don Balthazar, the better it would be for his health.

What story the peons would tell, he did not know; but it was likely enough that the alcalde and his alguazils would soon be looking for the Tejano who had been in the garden when the old Mexican met his death. And the Kid had no funds to sample the justice that might be handed out to a Gringo. So he lost no time in hitting the trail. But ere he rode away to the West, he learned where the Hacienda Salallo lay, and in the early morning he rode up to the hacienda and asked for Don Guzman. A handsome young Mexican listened in astonishment to the story the Kid had to tell him.

"Mudro de Dios!" he said, when the Kid had finished. "Last night, senior, I approached the gate of Don Balthazar's garden, but there were cloaked bravos watching the street, and I suspected that they were assassins in the pay of that old picaro. And I did not seek to enter, for that reason. Vaya! If I had entered—"

"I guess they was the galoots that was after my roll," grinned the Kid. "I reckon you was lucky they was there, Senior Don Guzman. You sure would have nicked up with a surprise-party if you'd gone into that garden. But say! You dropped in to put your wig, be cause, I guess, that the senorita would be powerful glad to see you, and know you're safe—and there's sure a clear run for you now that that old hombre has cooked his own goose. I guess you'll be hitting the road for that casa, sir, muy pronto, and I guess I'd like you to take my best respects to that young lady, and my thanks to her for having saved my life."

"Si, senior, si!" And Don Guzman called for his horse, and was riding for the house of Don Balthazar, while the Rio Kid rode out of Los Pinos and took the trail to the West.

TITLE END.

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THE FIRST CHAPTER.

A Meeting on the Sierra.

EL OJO DEL ORO was spread out like a map under the eyes of the Rio Kid, as he rode down the slanting path on the hillside into the valley. Across the valley, on the opposite slope, were the mine workings, and the noise of busy machinery was wafted on the wind to the Kid's ears. Nearer was the river, gleaming golden in the afternoon sun, with adobe houses, jacals, and shacks bunched on the banks, joined by a wooden plank bridge. Figures, tiny in the distance, in serapes and sombreros, moved in the street and the plaza of the little Mexican aldea. The Kid rode the powerful grey mustang at a walk, for the path down the hillside was a perilous one and he had to pick his way. It followed a rocky ledge not more than six feet wide, with a steep cliff rising on the right, and a sheer drop of hundreds of feet into the valley on the left.

The Kid was far from Texas now.

Strangers from the northern side of the Rio Grande were few and far between, in that remote Mexican sierra. For days, as he rode on his way westward, the Kid had seen only dusky Mexican faces. Often he was saluted politely as a stranger; sometimes scowled at as a "Gringo"; and, in either case, the Kid rode cheerily on his way, unperturbed. The Kid was finding it rather agreeable to ride in a country where no one had heard of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande, and where,

if a hand was lifted against him, it was at all events a lawless one. Texas sheriffs were far away, and Mexican alcaldes were not interested in him.

The Kid had no special business at El Ojo del Oro. But he had heard that the mine there was managed by an American, and he had a hunch to hear English spoken again. Coldouter, the manager of the mine, would surely be glad to see a man from Texas, as he lived wholly among Mexicans, and would surely be hospitable to a pilgrim from afar. anyhow, there was a posada at El Ojo, if the Kid did not find the mine manager to his liking. And the Kid's time was his own. He was looking for some sort of an opening in Mexico for a galoot who was tired of riding an outlaw trail in Texas; but he was in no hurry, and he was not likely to stop long anywhere until he reached cow country. The Kid, as he rode down the mountain trail, the broad brim of his Stetson shading his face from the glare of the sinking sun, was thinking chiefly of food and rest after a long ride, when he was startled by the sound of a crash ahead of him on the trail.

"Gee!" ejaculated the Kid.

From a little distance ahead, round a curve of the winding ledge, came the sound of a voice swearing in fluent Anglo-Saxon. The Kid grinned. For long days he had heard only Spanish, and it did him good to hear English again, especially as the voice had the low, slow drawl that told of his own country of Texas.

He rode on round the bend, and came

in sight of the pilgrim, who was addressing space in emphatic tones and terms.

A young man stood on the rocky ledge, staring down into the gulf that yawned beside the trail. He was booted and spurred, and had evidently been riding, but there was no horse to be seen.

He looked round quickly at the Kid. "What's the trouble, feller?" asked the Kid good-naturedly.

"Oh, search me!" exclaimed the stranger savagely. "I guess my cayuse missed his footing and went over."

"You sure was lucky not to go over with him," remarked the Kid.

"I guess I hopped off in time; and I've nigh sprained my ankle on these pesky donicks," growled the other. "Say, what's a galoot to do without a hoss, with a game leg?"

"You can search me," answered the Kid.

"You wise to it how far it is to El Ojo now?"

"Half a mile, the way your critter's gone," answered the Kid, with a grin.

"Five or six if you follow the trail. She sure winds a lot."

The young man uttered a few remarks, such as are heard at rodeos, and places where they swear. Then he eyed the Kid's mustang.

"Say, you want to sell that hoss?" he asked.

"Not any," answered the Kid.

"Five or six miles on a rocky trail like this with a game laig. Say, are you going to El Ojo?"

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"Sure."
"I guess I'll sit on a rock here, then, and nurse my laig, if you'll ask them to send up a cayuse here."

The Kid nodded. He was more than willing to do that good turn for a fellow-countryman in distress.

"Who'll I ask?" he inquired.

"Ever heard of a galoot named Coldcutter?"

"Yep. He manages the mine down yonder for the owner, a Texas man at San Antonio, so I've heard," said the Kid.

"You've got it right," said the young Texan, with a grin. "You see, I'm the Texas man at San Antonio."

"You?" exclaimed the Kid.

"Just that. It belonged to my uncle, and he left it to me," explained the Texan. "I'm Charley Calhoun, and I guess Coldcutter will know that name. I've never seen him, but he will know the name, as he's expecting me at the mine to-day. You see, I'm going to El Ojo to take over managing the mine on my own. You know him?"

"Not yet," grinned the Kid. "But I

sure aim to know him, as I guessed I'd hit him for a night's lodging."

"That's all right; you'll get your night's lodgings, and as many more as you want," said Calhoun. "I guess you're from Texas?"

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

"Cow country?" said Calhoun, with a glance at the Kid's goatskin chaps.

"Yep. Frio country. Name's Carfax."

"I guess I'm glad to meet up with you, Mr. Carfax," said the young owner of the El Ojo mine. "I'll sure be glad to see you around, specially as there's only Greasers in the place, excepting Coldcutter, and I ain't banking on Coldcutter being glad to see me."

"Nope?" said the Kid.

"He's managed the mine for ten years, and I guess he ain't going to do a song and dance when I come to take over," said Calhoun. "But it sure does want looking into; it's paid every year worse for five or six years now. And I guess I want that mine to carry me; I ain't aiming to carry the mine. I ain't expecting Coldcutter to enthuse a whole

lot over seeing me here. Say, you won't be losing a lot of time on the trail down, Mr. Carfax?"

"I guess I'll beat it lively," said the Kid. "I'll hit straight for the mine, and see Coldcutter, and tell him how you're fixed."

"Good enough."

Calhoun sat on a boulder, his bruised leg stretched out, and lighted a cigarette, as the Rio Kid rode down the winding trail. In a few minutes he lost sight of the Kid.

The mustang, sure-footed as a mountain goat, trotted, rugged and dizzy as the trail was. In a direct line it was hardly half a mile to the Mexican aldea, but the trail wound like a corkscrew down the steep side of the mountain. A mile passed under the rattling hoofs of the mustang, and another mile.

And then even the sure-footed cowpony slowed down, on a three-foot ledge that sloped to the abyss, winding round a steep cliff. The Kid had to proceed at a walk again. But, dangerous as the ledge was, all of a sudden, as a loose stone fell on his Stetson hat, the Kid

(Continued on opposite page.)

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Take every care that the DATE OF BIRTH which you give on your registration coupon is absolutely correct in every particular, for this date, once it is accepted for registration, can in no circumstances be altered afterwards.

Please remember that the only method of joining our Birthday Club is by filling up one of the printed registration coupons published in this paper. No other form of registration can be recognised.

The Editor's decision upon all points arising out of this scheme must be accepted as final and legally binding. This is an express condition of registration.

Only ONE registration coupon need be filled in, and sent to the given address. This should be received on or before the date stated on the registration coupon.

READERS OVERSEAS!

All Overseas readers are eligible to participate in our Free Birthday Gift Club, as special time extensions are allowed in the case of readers living elsewhere than in the British Isles.

This week's list of birthday dates, and special claims coupon appear on page 18.

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I declare that I am a reader of "THE POPULAR" and and purchase BOTH THESE PAPERS regularly from my newsagent. I have carefully read the rules of your Birthday Club Scheme, and I agree to abide by them in every particular. Will you please enrol me as a member of your FREE BIRTHDAY GIFT CLUB.

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POPULAR. **MAY 25th, 1929.**

spurred his mustang and dashed on at a gallop.

The startled mustang leaped forward, clattering, slipping, scrambling on the dangerous footing; and a few seconds later, behind the Kid, sounded the crash of a great rock that rolled down the cliff and thundered on the rocky path.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
A Close Call!

“**GEE-WHIZ!**”

The Rio Kid breathed hard. He slowed down his mustang, and drew rein, and looked round.

He had escaped the crash of the rolling rock by a few seconds, and only because of the falling stone that gave him warning of the landslide that was coming. Stones and earth had been loosened from their place as the huge rock got into motion. Promptness had saved the Kid and his horse from being crushed under the rock.

So swift had been his rush to escape that he was a score of yards from the spot before he could pull in his mustang, and look round.

The great rock had smashed down on the path, rebounded from it, and plunged over the edge into the deep abyss. Echoes of its crashing through pine branches far down the mountain, floated up to his ears.

The Kid's face was grim.

Landslides and falling rocks were not uncommon in the sierra, and a rider on a mountain path had to keep his eyes and ears peeled for such happenings. But the Kid did not believe that the fall, in this instance, was an accidental occurrence. He had heard vague sounds on the hillside over the path, with the rushing of the rolling mass, which hinted of human presence there; and the fall of the rock had been timed exactly for the moment when any horseman must have slowed down to a walk.

It looked to the Kid as if that rock must have been unloosed from its bed on the sloping face of the cliff, on purpose to fall on the passing horseman, which meant that the Kid had ridden into an ambush. And the Kid wanted to know. Nobody who knew him and had a grouch against him, could have been laying for him there. Nobody had known of his coming.

The Kid could only surmise that some Greaser, with too strong an allowance of the national hatred for Gringos, had seen the opportunity of springing this surprise on him, and taken advantage of it. And if that was the case, the Kid intended to interview that Greaser, and make it plain to him that he did not stand for attentions of this sort.

He dismounted, and, leaving the mustang against the cliff, stepped back along the ledge, his revolver in his hand, and a glint in his eyes.

His gaze swept the upward, sloping face of the cliff above the path, and fixed on two dusky Mexicans in gaudy sashes and big sombreros, who were looking down from a point about twenty yards up. One of them had a miner's

pick in his hand; the implement, evidently, with which the big boulder had been levered from its bed and sent thundering down just as the Kid passed below. The Mexicans were staring at the spot on the ledge where the rock had struck before it plunged over the edge into the gulf. But their startled eyes turned on the Kid as he came running back along the path.

“El Gringo!” came a shout from both of them.

The Kid's hand swept up, the six-gun in it, and his eyes gleamed over the



A MIRACULOUS ESCAPE! As the Kid reached the narrowest part of the track, there came a thunderous sound, and looking up he caught a swift glimpse of a huge falling rock. With a shout the young outlaw spurred his horse to a mad gallop, and a second later the great rock crashed a few feet in his rear.
(See Chapter 1.)

gun. There was no doubt now. The two Greasers, stranger to him, had sent that rock hurtling down to destroy him, and he had had one of the closest calls in his life. The Kid began shooting while the Mexicans were still staring.

One of the Mexican snatched a revolver from his sash, and the Kid's first bullet struck him as he was lifting it. There was a yell from the bravo, and he came rolling down the cliff, crashing on the path where the rock had crashed, and pitching over the edge into space. The other bravo scrambled away up the cliff with a yell of terror, the Kid's Colt spraying bullets after him as he scrambled. The Kid saw the ruffian clap a hand to his cheek, where a bullet had gone close and gashed deep. But the man disappeared the next moment among rugged rocks, and the Kid's bullets spattered round him in vain.

“You dog-goned cuss!” roared the Kid. “You pesky scallywag, I guess

it's you for the long jump, if you show your buzzard's face!”

But the bravo did not show his face. He crouched low among rugged rocks, in safe cover, while bullets spattered round him.

The Kid stared up savagely.

Climbing the steep cliff to get at the Mexican, twenty yards or more above, did not appeal to him. The slope was so steep that a climber must have used both hands and feet, and would have been at the mercy of the man above. The Kid gave it up, and walked back to his horse. One of the bravos had gone to his account, and the other had the mark of the Kid's bullet on his face, and the Kid reckoned he would let it go at that. He remounted the black-muzzled mustang, and rode on down the trail, his eye well about him now, watchful for new dangers.

He had left the spot more than a mile
THE POPULAR.—No. 539.

behind, and was riding down into a canyon that led into the valley, when the sound of hoof-beats came echoing from the silence of the sierra.

From a higher path over the mountain, a horseman rode down into the canyon, and a few minutes after the Kid heard the hoof-strokes the rider came in sight.

It was a Mexican, mounted on a wiry broncho, and his face was bound up in his sash, used as a bandage.

"Great snakes!" ejaculated the Kid.

The bandaged face was enough to tell him that this was the man whose cheek he had gashed with a bullet. Evidently the bravos had had horses hidden somewhere on the mountain above, and the one who had survived was riding back to El Ojo.

The Kid reached for a gun.

The Mexican sighted him at the same moment, and dragged in his broncho, whirled the animal round, and dashed back the way he had come.

The Kid fired twice after him, not, however, with the intention of bringing him down. He was content to scare him. And in that he succeeded; the horseman was yelling with terror as he pounded away, and disappeared up the canyon.

The Kid laughed, and rode on his way.

But his face became more serious as he cantered down the canyon into the valley, where the Mexican town lay by the river.

If these two bravos were specimens of the inhabitants of El Ojo del Oro, it looked as if the puncher from Texas was riding into a hornets' nest. And that they belonged to the aldea was clear from the fact that the bandaged man had been riding down to it when the Kid intercepted him. The Kid looked carefully to his guns, and his sunburnt face was grim, his eyes watchful, as he rode out of the canyon into a road across the valley.

He was more wary than ever as he passed a group of Mexican peons. But they saluted him civilly as he passed, and the Kid returned the salute. Not all the inhabitants of the valley, evidently, were of the same calibre as the two bravos he had encountered on the mountain. And when he rode into the aldea, and drew rein before the fonda that stood facing the plaza, a fat and greasy, good-tempered Mexican landlord greeted him with bowing politeness, plainly pleased to welcome a Gringo to his inn.

The Kid was relieved, for he certainly had not come to El Ojo looking for trouble, and he was only too glad to leave the walnut-butted guns in their holsters. He stayed at the fonda, however, only for a cooling drink, and to inquire his way to the house of the mine-manager.

The landlord pointed across the river with a greasy finger to a 'doby house at half a mile's distance, which he said was the Casa Coldcutter. And the Kid, anxious to deliver Calhoun's message to the mine-manager, rode on across the bridge, and galloped towards the mine.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

A Startling Reception!

WORK at the mine was over for the day as the Rio Kid rode up from the aldea. Fifty or sixty dusky Mexican workmen were leaving the mine, and all of them stared curiously at the Kid as they passed him on the road, and several times he heard the word "Gringo"; but

that was natural enough in a part of Mexico where Gringos seldom penetrated. The Kid stopped one of them, to ask whether the *Senor Coldcutter* was at home. And the man pointed out the mine office, close by the shaft, at a distance from the adobe house.

The Kid rode on to the mine office, and as his mustang hoofs clattered towards it, a man appeared at the open window.

The Kid glanced at him. He knew that this must be Coldcutter, as it was not a Mexican. It was a hard, tanned, lean face that he saw, with sharp nose, thin, tight lips, and close-set eyes under knitted brows. It was not a face that the Kid liked; but what struck him most was the expression on it—a strange mingling of astonishment and rage, as if the sight of the Kid riding up to the office both startled and infuriated the mine manager. The Kid had never seen the man before, and the man had certainly never seen him; but it was the face of an enemy that glared at him from the window, and what the Kid read in the cold, hard, ruthless eyes was more than enough to put him on his guard.

"Shucks!" ejaculated the Kid, as he reached for a gun.

He knew what was coming. More than once had the Kid owed his life to the accuracy with which he had read an enemy's intentions in his eyes. The man at the mine office window, after that one stare of amazement and fury, tore a revolver from his hip, and threw it up to shoot, but the Kid's shot came first.

Bang!

The revolver was smashed from the mine manager's hand and went flying before he could pull trigger. There was a howl of agony from Coldcutter, as he clasped his numbed right hand with his left. The Kid leaped from his horse, dashed round to the door, and strode into the office, gun in hand. He levelled the Colt at the infuriated man, who was still claspng his numbed hand.

"Say, what's this kinder game?" drawled the Kid.

"Dog-gone you!" gasped Coldcutter. His left hand dropped to his belt, and the Kid's eyes sparkled over his six-gun. "Don't!" he said.

And the mine manager, reading death in the eyes that gleamed over the gun, lifted his hand again.

"Dog-gone you!" he repeated, in a voice thick with fury. "You've made the grade after all, durn you."

The Kid smiled.

"I guess you've got me beat, Mr. Coldcutter," he said, "I'm sure a stranger here, and I've no grouch agin you, and if you've got one agin me, you've got it mighty sudden. What the thunder d'you want to pull a gun on me for?"

Coldcutter cursed savagely.

"I guess you're wise to it!" he snarled.

"You can search me," answered the Kid. "I guess you've mistook me for some other galoot. If I reckoned you'd pulled a gun to let daylight through a galoot you'd never seen before, I'd have to figure you was plumb loco. Who'd you take me for, hombre?"

"Aw, cut it out!" snarled Coldcutter. "You've got the drop, durn you, and that's enough."

"I've sure got the drop, and I'm keeping it unless you want to talk turkey," smiled the Kid. "You've taken me for some other hombre, feller. I guess you don't make a habit of shooting up a stranger who moseys in with a message from your boss."

"What?" stammered the mine manager.

"Don't I speak plain?" asked the Kid. "I guess I got a message from your boss, a galoot named Calhoun."

Coldcutter stared at him blankly. The amazement in his face perplexed the Kid.

"What you giving me?" demanded the mine manager, at last, hoarsely. "Who are you, if you ain't—I mean, who are you?"

"Kid Carfax, when I'm at home," said the Kid cheerily.

"Carfax?" repeated the mine manager. "Your name's Carfax?"

"Sure!"

"Thunder! What you doing here in El Ojo, then? Nobody from the States ever comes to El Ojo? I thought—I mean, what the thunder are you doing here?"

"Jest moseying along," answered the Kid pleasantly. "Say, was you gunning for a galoot named Carfax?"

"Of course not," growled the mine manager. "I've never heard of you before. You can put up your gun, it was all a mistake! I guess I took you for a gun-man; this mine has been held up more'n once, and I figured that you was at the game again."

"Do I look like a gun-man?" demanded the Kid indignantly.

"I ain't saying you do," answered Coldcutter more civilly, "but I tell you there ain't no galoot except Mexicans within a hundred miles of El Ojo, except that gunman I've mentioned, and so I made a mistake. I'll say I'm sorry." He rubbed his numbed hand. "I guess I'm real sorry I pulled on you, but it was a mistake; and I'm glad you beat me to it, Mr. Carfax. Come to that, I'm glad to see you here, or any man from the other side of the Rio Grande. But what was you saying about a message from my boss?"

"Young Calhoun," answered the Kid, "he's lost his horse on the trail, five or six miles back; the critter slipped and went over the edge. He's bruised his leg too bad to walk the distance, and he wants you to send him a hoss. That's the message."

"Carry me home to die!" ejaculated Coldcutter.

The Kid returned his gun to his holster, though he kept a wary eye open. He believed that the mine manager had mistaken him for someone else when he pulled; yet he did not quite believe the story of a gunman in the vicinity. There was something in this that the Kid did not understand, and he was very much on his guard. Even had the mine manager mistaken him for a dangerous gunman, the attempted shooting had been treacherous enough, and the Kid had no hesitation in setting down Mr. Coldcutter as one of the hardest cases he had ever struck.

"How fur off you say you left Mr. Calhoun?" asked the mine manager. There was no hostility in his manner now, and whether his story of a dreaded gunman was true or false, there was no doubt that he had mistaken the Kid for some entirely different person.

"Five or six miles," answered the Kid.

"Sho! You meet up with anybody on the trail after you left him?"

"I sure did," answered the Kid. "Two durned dagoes heaved a big rock down on me on the narrowest part of the path, and I guess it was a close call for this infant."

"They don't like Gringoes in these parts," remarked Coldcutter. "They're used to me—I've been here years—but strangers are apt to get into a rookus."

"I guess most of the hombres I've

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
On Time!

THUNDER!" The Rio Kid almost shouted. The black-muzzled mustang started at his voice, and looked round. The Kid had been combing the glossy hide of the mustang, and thinking. He was puzzled, he was perplexed, and it got his goat. And suddenly it flashed into his mind.

nest, while he reported a constant falling off of output to his employer, saw his whole game spoiled by the arrival of the mine owner. Coldcutter had posted the two Mexican bravos on the mountain to watch for him, and huri him to death under the falling rock—a matter to be explained easily as an accident. And seeing the Kid arrive, and taking him for Calhoun as the bravos had done, Coldcutter had

seen seem civil enough," said the Kid, "but them two on the sierra. was sure pizen. I guess one of them won't never heave a rock agin; he's got his ticket for soup. And the other has sure got my brand on him. But we're losing time, Mr. Coldcutter— Young Calhoun is waiting for that boss."

"I guess I'll take him a cayuse, pronto," said Coldcutter. "And I reckon he's offered me to bed down in the house," said the Kid. "Any objections so far as you're concerned, feller? I guess you've been master here so long that I ain't keen on hornin in if you don't like the idea."

"If the galoot you met was really Mr. Calhoun, I guess he's a right to ask you," said Coldcutter. "You sure he was the goods?" The Kid laughed.

"Well, he said so, that's all I'm wise to, but he sure looked straight."

"I guess I'll go and see him, anyhow!"

"I'll ride back with you, if you like," said the Kid. "You can't miss him; but if you like—"

"Not necessary; I know that trail like a book. You're sure welcome to the house," said Coldcutter. "Come with me, and I'll tell the peons to look after you and your horse while I'm gone for Mr. Calhoun."

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

Coldcutter locked up the office and walked across to the house, the Kid following, his reins over his arm. He turned the mustang into the corral, and followed the mine manager into the house. There, with a civility that rather surprised the Kid, Coldcutter gave instructions to the peon servants to look after the guest, excused himself, and hurried away. A minute later, the Kid heard the clatter of a horse's hoofs departing.

The Kid, who had no intention of leaving his mustang to the care of the peons, went out to the corral to tend the horse himself. But he paused at the corral gate and stood looking after Coldcutter, with a puzzled frown on his brow.

The mine manager had already reached the wooden bridge, and he rode over it, and galloped on through the aldea, evidently heading for the path up the mountain-side, where Calhoun had been left.

But he was riding alone, and he was leading no horse. There were seven or eight horses in the corral, yet the mine manager had not taken one for the man from Texas. The Kid was puzzled. Coldcutter could not be intending to ride his own horse double-loaded down that steep mountain path, when he found Charley Calhoun. It was not the Kid's business. He had delivered the message of the San Antone man, and the rest was up to Coldcutter. But he watched the mine manager with a puzzled frown. He lost sight of him in the village, and surmised that Coldcutter intended to pick up a horse there, to lead with him. But the Kid continued to watch, and presently he saw the horseman emerge on the opposite side of the aldea, spurring away towards the mountain—still alone, still with no led horse. The Kid's eyes, keen as an eagle's, followed the mine manager into the far distance, till the spurring horseman vanished at last into the canyon that led up to the mountain trail.

"Search me!" the Kid muttered; and quite puzzled and perplexed, he went into the corral to tend the mustang.



FOUL PLAY! The Kid rounded the last bend of the cliff, and came suddenly upon the mine manager. Coldcutter, standing close to the rocky wall, had a revolver in his hand, and was taking aim. The Texan was leaning on the cliff a few yards away, unconscious of his deadly peril. (See Chapter 4.)

"You dog-goned gink!" hooted the Kid angrily. He was addressing himself. "You loosed boob, you!"

He had not seen—till this moment—what was clear as daylight. Clear as the sun at noon it seemed now—now that he had thought of it.

That ambush on the dangerous path on the hill, it had puzzled him; but it did not puzzle him now. The inexplicable attack Coldcutter had made on him at sight, that had perplexed him; but now it did not perplex him. He understood. By sheer chance the Kid had ridden into El Ojo del Oro that day, a place where Gringos seldom or never came. But that day a Gringo was expected—Charley Calhoun, the owner of the mine, who was coming to take over, after Coldcutter had been in charge for long years during his uncle's lifetime. Calhoun was the Gringo for whom the two bravos had been watching on the mountain-side, and it was Calhoun for whom the mine manager had taken the Kid when he pulled on him at the office window.

The Kid could have kicked himself for not seeing it all sooner. Coldcutter, so long master of the mine, likely enough, from his looks, feathering his

resorted to his gun. In that lonely recess of the Mexican sierra, the mine manager would have got away with it had he succeeded in killing Calhoun. He had managed the mine for years, and who was to guess that the dead man was the mine owner—for obviously Coldcutter had said no word of his expected arrival.

The Kid's eyes blazed. But for the accident to Calhoun's horse, he would have ridden into the death-trap prepared for him; and had he escaped it, he would have fallen under the mine manager's gun. And because Calhoun had been left behind on the trail, the Kid had ridden into the trap in his place, and only his quickness on the draw had saved him from Coldcutter's revolver. He knew now why the mine manager had taken no horse with him for the Texan waiting on the mountain path. He did not need a mount for the dismounted man. It was not help, but death that he intended for the man from San Antone.

Hurriedly the Kid saddled up and led the mustang out of the corral. He knew, as clearly as if he could read the man's thoughts, what Coldcutter intended; what he aimed to do

as soon as he met up with Charley Calhoun on the mountain trail. Calhoun would have no suspicion; he would be taken completely off his guard, never dreaming that the mine manager sought his life, and he would be shot down as ruthlessly as Coldcutter had sought to shoot down the Rio Kid from the mine office window.

The Kid rode away at a breakneck speed. Mexicans on the road stared at him, and scattered out of his way as he stretched the mustang to a furious gallop. If there was time to overtake the mine manager before he reached Calhoun, the man from Texas would yet be saved. But he well knew that there was not a minute to be lost. Coldcutter had a long start, and was not likely to linger on the way.

The Rio Kid seldom used the spurs; but he spurred the mustang now, and the road raced under his feet. He clattered over the bridge, and through the Mexican aldea, amid startled exclamations from lounging Greasers, while frightened dogs and chickens scuttled out of the way of the galloping hoofs. Shouts and Spanish oaths followed him, but the Kid did not heed. He dashed furiously through the aldea and burst out of the village on the other

side, still riding his hardest. On the rough trail beyond, the mustang fairly flew.

Clatter, clatter, clatter! rang the beating hoofs into the rocky canyon, and up the steep way that led to the mountain path. Miles yet to the spot where he had left Calhoun, and the assassin far ahead on his way! And one of the most perilous trails in Mexico to ride!

But the Kid was the man to ride it at speed, and the mustang was the steed to carry him faithfully and fast. By sloping ledges, zigzag turns, rugged windings, the Kid rode on and on, up and up.

At a turn of the winding path the Kid came suddenly on a horse tethered to a rock. It was the mine manager's horse, and evidently Coldcutter had dismounted at that point, and gone forward on foot. The Kid pictured him stalking the man from San Antone, coming on him silently, with no warning hoof-beat to put the intended victim on his guard. With glinting eyes, the Kid slid from the saddle, his gun in his hand, and ran on, swiftly and almost silently. He figured that he was close on the mine manager now. He knew that he was near the spot where he had left the Texan. He rounded the last bend of

the cliff, and came suddenly on the two of them.

Coldcutter, standing close to the cliff, had a revolver in his hand, and was taking aim. The Texan was leaning against the cliff, a dozen yards away, rolling a cigarette, and evidently he had not heard the mine manager's approach, for he did not look up from his idle occupation. Coldcutter was taking a slow and deliberate aim, dwelling upon it, and even as the Kid lifted his gun to intervene, Calhoun finished rolling the cigarette, and looked up and saw the mine manager's gun levelled to shoot him down.

Bang!
It was the Kid's gun that roared. The bullet struck Coldcutter in the shoulder, and he gave a wild yell, his gun-arm sagging down, his bullet, as he pulled trigger, spattering on the rock at his feet.

He staggered on the narrow path. "Look out!" yelled the Kid. The mine manager was staggering on the ledge, where it was only a few feet wide. Next instant he reeled on the verge of the precipice and plunged over. A shriek floated up from space, followed by the crashing of a body in the pine branches far below.

The Kid shrugged his shoulders and holstered his gun. The mine manager of El Ojo del Oro had gone to his account, and the Kid had little pity to waste on him.

He walked on to where Calhoun stood, staring, his face pale.

"Say, I reckon you chipped in on time, Carfax!" said the Texan, and he held out his hand to the Kid.

"That's a cinch, I guess."
"I reckon I was surprised some, when I saw that galoot drawing a bead on me. Who was he?"

The Kid smiled grimly.
"You've met your mine manager now," he answered.

"Not Coldcutter?" ejaculated the man from San Antone.

"Sure!"
"Search me!" ejaculated Calhoun.

"He left his cayuse a piece back, on the path," drawled the Kid. "I guess you can ride him down to El Ojo, feller. That galoot sure won't never want him again."

"Search me!" repeated Calhoun, dazedly. "I reckoned Coldcutter wouldn't be mighty pleased by my horning in to look at things here, but I never reckoned on this. I sure suspected him of rustling some of the gold from the mine, and I guess there ain't much doubt about it now. You've saved my life."

"I'll say I have," agreed the Kid, with a smile, "and I guess I rode hell-for-leather to do it, after I got wise to that pizen covote's game. Say, you want to hit the trail. This here path ain't as easy as pie after dark."

"Sure!" agreed Calhoun.
The Kid led the way to the horses, and in the last light of the setting sun they rode down into El Ojo del Oro, and on to the mine.

"Say," remarked Calhoun, as they turned their horses into the corral, "it sure was lucky for me that you rode this trail to-day, Carfax, and I guess I ain't anxious for you to ride on. I want you to stop around a piece. Jest as long as you can fix it."

The Kid nodded.
"I'll sure stop around a piece," he agreed.

And the "piece" proved to be longer than the Rio Kid anticipated.

THE END.
(*"THE GRAFTER!"* is the title of next week's rousing yarn of the Rio Kid. It's the goods!)

THIS WEEK'S LIST OF BIRTHDAY DATES!

Readers who were registered in the POPULAR Birthday Gift Club before May 18th, 1929, may claim one of the following gifts:

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- Hobby Annual.
- Holiday Annual.

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

Jan. 2nd, 1915.	August 30th, 1919.
April 26th, 1917.	July 3rd, 1912.
Dec. 12th, 1914.	June 6th, 1917.
March 5th, 1914.	Oct. 5th, 1915.
May 8th, 1913.	Dec. 4th, 1915.
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August 19th, 1911.	Sept. 18th, 1916.
April 4th, 1915.	Oct. 13th, 1912.
May 4th, 1908.	Nov. 23rd, 1910.
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July 31st, 1909.	Feb. 12th, 1918.

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

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

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The GRAFTER!

By Ralph Redway.

The Rio Kid knows little about "high finance," but he does know how to pull a gun and play the straight game. This knowledge he passes on to John B. Irons, financier—with surprising results!

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Kid Scents Trouble!

THE Rio Kid turned his mustang into the corral, and from the gate stood looking over the smiling valley of El Ojo del Oro. It was a pleasant enough view that met the Kid's eyes—a wide-sweeping valley, fertile, fruitful, enclosed by steep mountains that shut off the outer world of Mexico. Only bridle-paths and mule-tracks led over those rugged hills from the secluded valleys; and every ounce of gold that was carried from the mine, every stick of machinery that was brought to it, had to be borne on mule-back. The valley was smiling, fertile; its pastoral peace and beauty scarred only in one place, where the mine-shaft opened and the mine buildings stood.

It was sunset now, and work at the mine had stopped. Mexican workmen—dusky, good-tempered, far from energetic—loafed away towards the little aldea grouped around the wooden bridge over the stream that intersected the valley. The Kid watched them jolly as they went. The boy puncher from Texas had no great liking for "Greasers"; but since he had sojourned in their country he had come to understand the Mexicans a little better than before, and he was losing some of his prejudices.

For two or three weeks now the Kid had been hanging on at El Ojo del Oro, a guest in the Casa Calhoun. He liked Charley Calhoun, the young owner of the mine, and a spell of rest in this secluded spot, after his wanderings, suited him. But the Kid was beginning to feel restless again. The mining country had no great attractions for him; it was the cow country in the west for which he had been heading when he had fallen in with Calhoun. And the Kid, as he stood at the gate of the corral, looking over the verdant valley, was thinking that it was about time that he hit the trail again. In fact, it was only one consideration that had kept him so long at El Ojo. From beyond the barrier of mountains that

circled the valley rumours came from the outer world of revolutionary disturbances—common enough in Mexico. If the trouble came near to El Ojo, it was likely enough that the mine-owner might need the help of a galoot like the Kid; and so he lingered.

From the distant hillside a horseman came riding down into the valley—tiny in the distance—heading for the aldea. The Kid's eyes fell curiously upon him. Even at the distance he saw that the new comer was not a Mexican; and "Gringos" were extremely uncommon in that remote spot in the heart of the Mexican mountains. It was hot; and the horseman, as he rode, had taken off his hat, and was fanning himself with it; and the sun shone on a bald head that reflected the light in a way that made the Kid smile. The horseman rode on to the village at a quick trot, passed through it, crossed the wooden bridge, and came riding on towards the mine. Evidently he was coming to Calhoun's house—a man from the States calling on Calhoun, the Kid figured. The Kid, loafing by the corral, still watched him as he came nearer and nearer. He had replaced his hat now; and under its brim the Kid saw a hard, lean, brown face, with a sharp nose and a square jaw—not a face that the Kid liked.

The horseman sighted the Kid by the corral, swerved a little, and rode towards him. He pulled in his horse, and fixed his eyes—small and hard, of a flinty grey—on the tanned face of the boy puncher from Frio.

"You Calhoun?" he asked, in a rasping voice.

"Guess again!" answered the Kid.

The man eyed him sharply.

"I reckoned there was only one American here," he said. "If you're not Calhoun, who are you?"

Before the Kid could answer, he went on:

"From what I've heard, Coldcutter, the mine manager, has gone over the range. He ain't here?"

"Not any," agreed the Kid. "That guy, he's gone over a thousand-foot bluff, and must have struck pesky hard

when he got to the bottom. No, he sure ain't here."

"Well, who are you?"

"You can call me Kid Carfax, if you want."

"Friend of Calhoun?"

"Yep."

"What are you doing here?"

"Jest at this minute," drawled the Kid, "I'm listening to a whole heap of pesky questions from a guy I've never seen before, and don't know."

"That's soon remedied," said the horseman. "You're talking to John B. Irons."

"Sho!" said the Kid.

The horseman spoke his name, as if he expected it to be familiar to the Kid, and, indeed, to anyone who heard it. But it was quite new to the puncher from Frio. He had never heard of John B. Irons.

"You don't know that name?" asked the rider.

"Not a small piece!" drawled the Kid.

"I guess Calhoun will know it!" said John B. Irons, rather grumpy. "Is he at the house?"

"I reckon so."

Mr. Irons rode on towards the Casa Calhoun, the Kid staring after him. He had not liked the man's looks at a distant view; he liked them still less at a close view. He could not help having a hunch that Irons' visit boded trouble, though in what way he could not guess. Trouble had been expected, more or less, from the revolutionists, if the rumours of disturbance that filtered across the mountain passes were well-founded. But John B. Irons, the Kid figured, was a more dangerous guy than any tartered Mexican patriot. The Kid had not travelled in Mexico so long without learning that many of the internal upheavals in that country were worked by Americans for commercial purposes; and he reckoned that John B. Irons was one of those guys who fished in troubled waters.

The Kid walked slowly towards the house.

He found Mr. Irons' horse tied up;

and Mr. Irons himself in the veranda, with Calhoun. He was seated in a cane chair, disposing of a long drink, while Charley Calhoun waited politely for him to state his business. Calhoun smiled to the Kid, and beckoned to him to come in. The Kid came in and sat on the rail.

Irons glanced at him sharply, and then at Calhoun.

"Carfax your pardner, Mr. Calhoun?" he asked.

"Not exactly—jest a friend," said the young man from San Antone.

"I guess my business is private."

The Kid half-rose.

"Stay where you are, Kid!" said Calhoun. "I reckon I haven't any business here that is private from you."

The Kid nodded, and resumed his seat on the rails. The two were Texans; and Mr. Irons was an American of the hardest breed; and Americans were not loved by men of the Lone Star State. Both of them already had a feeling of hostility towards the bald-headed man with the sharp nose and the vice-like jaw.

Mr. Irons set down his glass.

"I guess I'll come down to business, then," he said. "I'm here to buy your mine, Mr. Calhoun."

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
A Business Proposition!

THE Kid started a little. Calhoun stared blankly.

"Buy the mine?" repeated Calhoun.

"Yep."

"There's some mistake, I guess," said Calhoun, with a smile. "The mine is not for sale, Mr. Irons. You've been misinformed, I reckon."

"Forget it!" said Mr. Irons crisply. "Nary mistake! I've ridden over from Taxillo to make you the offer—and a durned long trail it was, too. I reckoned it was the easiest way and the most peaceful, now that Coldcutter's gone up."

"You knew the manager?" asked Calhoun.

"Plenty," answered Mr. Irons. "And I guess that the way he went out calls for some inquiry, if you ask me."

"Nothing secret about it," answered Charley Calhoun. "I'm the owner of the mine, and I came over here from Texas to take charge. Coldcutter had been robbing the mine for years; and he laid a trap for me when I came, to wipe me out. Kid Carfax saved my life, and Coldcutter went over the cliff instead of me. The whole matter was reported to the alcalde of the town here, and he is satisfied."

"I guess you've got that alcalde in your pocket. I guess a hundred pesos would make him satisfied about any old thing."

Calhoun laughed.

"Very likely," he agreed. "But you don't mean that you've come here as a friend of my late manager, to kick up a rookus, do you? You sure don't look like a galoot to come 1-shooting."

"I ain't worrying about Coldcutter any. I'm here to make you an offer for the mine. Name your figure."

"I've not thought of selling."

"You better!" advised Mr. Irons. "Coldcutter was in with the local wire-pullers; you ain't. Coldcutter was a friend of mine; you ain't. Coldcutter could carry on; you can't! What'll you do if a mob of revolutionaries come humping across the hills into this valley? I guess your workmen would hit the horizon pretty quick. I guess your house would go up in smoke. I reckon that mine would shut down, and stay shut. You get me?"

Calhoun looked at him curiously. "You think there's danger of that?" he asked.

"Sure!"

"Yet you offer to buy the mine?"

"I can work it to keep them guys clear," answered Mr. Irons coolly. "You may not be wise to it, but in this region I'm the big noise. I've got Government officials and revolutionary leaders on my pay-roll. They dance to my tune. You ain't a baby, and you don't want telling that most Mexican revolutions are worked from New York. I'm a big man here, and there's bigger men behind me back home in the states. Sell out and clear before you hit a lot of trouble. See?"

"Great gophers!" said the Kid.

Calhoun's handsome face hardened.

"Let's have it clear," he said. "So long as Coldcutter managed the mine you and your bunch were willing to leave El Ojo alone, Mr. Irons?"

"Yep! He was one of us. You ain't!"

"He robbed the mine of thousands of dollars a year, as I've found out since I took control. Did you come in on shares?"

John B. Irons smiled.

"Now you're asking questions," he said. "Comin' down to cases, when Coldcutter was here, El Ojo was as good as ours. Now he's gone up the flume, and you've took control, as you say. That don't suit us. You want to get back to Texas. Raisin' cows is your long suit, I guess. Go back to Texas an' raise cows. Leave Mexican mining propositions to the guys who understand the game. You get me?"

"Quite! I won't sell."

"Guess again," urged Mr. Irons. "You're hunting trouble. I'm offering ten thousand dollars for this mine."

Calhoun stared.

"Less than the profit on a year's output!" he said.

"Correct! But if you get five hundred patriots ranging this here valley, where's your output?" asked John B. Irons.

"Is that a threat?"

"No; jest business. Yep or nope?"

"Nops!"

"You're sure foolish," said Mr. Irons. "I'll give you time to think it over. You send a galoot within three days to my office at Taxillo and say you'll sell. You'll save a lot of trouble."

"Shucks!" said the Kid. "It boils down to this—that you've got to have the mine at a give-away price, Mr. Irons, or else you'll let loose that bunch of revolutionists you've got in your pocket and knock the whole thing to pieces?"

"You can sure put it like that," asserted Mr. Irons calmly.

"Well, if I was boss here—" began the Kid.

He broke off.

Calhoun smiled.

"What'd you do, Kid, if you was boss?" he asked.

"I reckon I'd take my quirt to a guy that offered me terms like that," grunted the Kid.

Calhoun laughed.

"I guess Mister Irons ain't so all-fired powerful as he allows," he remarked. "I reckon he's trying to pull a bluff."

"Forget it!" snapped Irons.

Calhoun rose to his feet.

"Bluff or not, I guess I'm fed-up with you, you pesky polecat! Beat it out of here pronto, or I'll sure ask the Kid to handle his quirt on your hide!"

"You wouldn't have to ask twice," said the Kid.

John B. Irons shrugged his shoulders. "That's your answer?" he asked.

"Sure!"

"I guess I'll beat it, then," said Mr. Irons. "I've no use for a quirt, and I ain't come here a-shooting. That ain't my long suit! I reckon you'll be sorry." He moved to the veranda steps, and then turned back and paused.

"You look here, you gink—"

"You got your quirt handy, Kid?" asked Calhoun.

John B. Irons hurried out of the veranda without finishing his remarks. He mounted his horse in hot haste, and, shaking his fist at the two youngsters, rode off towards the aldea.

The two Texans watched him. Calhoun was smiling contemptuously; but the Kid's face was dark and serious. His hand lingered over the walnut butt of a gun, but he shook his head and relinquished it.

"You figure that guy was talking cold business, Kid?" asked the young owner of the El Ojo mine.

The Kid nodded.

"Business, from the word go!" he answered.

"I reckoned he was shooting off a lot of gas," said Calhoun. "He sure is some hombre, if he can pull off a game like that. I'm putting it down as a bluff."

"Mebbe!" said the Kid slowly. "But I reckon it was the goods. He was sure in cahoots with your manager here to loot the mine. Now Coldcutter's gone he don't reckon on losing on it. I guess there is going to be a whole heap of trouble here, Mr. Calhoun."

"You got time to hit the trail and leave me to it, feller," said Calhoun, with a smile.

The Kid shook his head.

"Afore I sighted that durned pizen skunk, I was figuring on hitting the trail," he said. "Now I reckon I'm staying."

And the Kid stayed.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Patriots!

THE trouble was not long in coming.

Three days elapsed, but no messenger went over the mountain paths from the lonely valley to the grafter's office at Taxillo.

If John B. Irons waited for a word of surrender, he waited in vain.

Charley Calhoun was not figuring on selling the mine for a tenth of its value, and he did not believe that the grafter could carry out his threats.

Just then there were three, if not four, revolutions going on in different parts of Mexico, and one of them had burst out in the Taxillo province.

Fierce fighting and slaughter were reported in American newspapers; but as a rule a casualty list of three or four was rare. Mexican warfare, as the Kid knew, was generally on comic-operative lines. Numerous bodies of Government troops and rebels would advance and retreat, march and counter-march, without any great harm being done to anyone.

If El Ojo was occupied by the rebels, doubtless they would be dislodged sooner or later by Federal troops. There would be plenty of shooting, sound and smoke, and that would be all. Nobody was likely to get hurt.

But while they were there matters would be serious for the men at the mine.

And on the fourth day after the visit of John B. Irons there was great excitement in the aldea. The rebels were coming!

The next day they came. General Xerero—who had been a

muleteer, and had risen to military command as a revolutionist—came down the mountain paths at the head of three or four hundred ragged patriots, and occupied the village.

From the veranda of the Casa, Calhoun watched the tattered array streaming into the aldea.

"I guess they'll leave the mine alone!" he remarked.

"Not if John B. Irons knows it!" said the Kid grimly.

"You figure that he's got Xerero on his pay-roll?"

"Sure! That's why the galoot's here at El Ojo."

"I guess we'll see," said Calhoun, still incredulous.

They were not long in seeing.

The next morning not a single workman turned up at the mine. Evidently "General" Xerero had intervened to that extent.

Later in the day the general rode out from the aldea to the mine. He was a fat, swarthy man, and he looked, as the Kid expressed it, "some" general. He wore a big sombrero, an officer's tunic, leather calzoneros, and had a pair of large, rusty spurs strapped to his feet, which were naked. Also, he looked as if he had not washed for several months, which was probably the case. But he was a polite and good-humoured revolutionist, and he saluted Calhoun with great courtesy.

He was desolated, he explained in flowing Spanish; but exigencies of State required him to take provisional possession of the mine; and the two Gringos were free to leave the country as soon as they liked.

The mine would be, for the present, shut down; but such stock of gold as might happen to be on hand would be taken charge of by the general himself—to be strictly accounted for at the

"Pitch it to him in his own lingo, Kid," said Calhoun.

"What'll I tell him?" asked the Kid.

"Tell him we're not going, and that we're not handing over the mine, and that we'll shoot to kill if any of his dirty crew come messing about this way."

The Kid laughed.

"Feller," he said, "I'm with you all the way; but jest at present this revolutionary army holds all the cards. If we had the old Double-Bar outfit here to back us up I'd undertake to wipe them out to the last grease-spot; but two galoots can't do it, feller. We've got to talk turkey, and keep 'em quiet till the Federal troops come along. They may happen in any day, especially if you get a messenger through with a letter and a banknote in it."

"They ain't taking over the mine!" said Calhoun stubbornly. "This unwashed gink is playing the game for that guy Irons. I guess I see that clear enough now."

"Sure! That guy is sittin' in his office at Taxillo, like a dog-goned spider in a web, pulling the strings," said the Kid. "This ain't a new game in Mexico, nohow. These Mexican revolutions wouldn't amount to a row of beans if there wasn't American dollars behind them. I guess I savvy that you'd like to pull a gun and blow this guy's roof off—"

"I sure would."

"But it ain't any use," said the Kid. "There's two or three hundred of them in El Ojo, and more to come if that ain't enough. John B. Irons has got the dollars; and there ain't a guy in Mexico that wouldn't rather loaf around with a gun, and call himself a patriot, than work. When the troops get this way they'll have to hit the horizon; and until then, feller, we got to talk turkey, or they'll loot the mine

and burn the buildings, and raise thunder generally."

"I guess I'll leave it to you, Kid," said Calhoun, shrugging his shoulders. "But I ain't letting up on the mine. I wish I'd pulled a gun on John B. when he was around here."

The Kid talked to the general in Spanish.

He found General Xerero quite reasonable.

For a contribution to the revolutionary war-chest of five hundred pesos, the general agreed to give the Gringos three days' grace.

Then he stayed only to receive the pesos before riding away. No doubt the pocket of the general's ragged calzoneros represented the revolutionary war-chest.

"And now, Kid?" said Charley Calhoun, as the "general" rode back to the aldea, a richer man than he had ever been before, in his career either as a muleteer or a military chief.

"I guess we've stalled them off," said the Kid. "That's the only way in Mexico in revolution time—you pay them to keep off till the thing fizzles out. Why, bless your little boots, sometimes a mining company or an oil company will have to hand out a bag of pesos to six or seven revolutionary generals, one after another, according to which hungry thief happens to be in the vicinity."

Calhoun laughed.

"We've got off cheaper than that," he remarked.

"Sure," said the Kid; "and if John B. would let up, I guess we'd pull out all right."

"But he sure won't, I reckon."

"No," said the Kid thoughtfully. "He won't. As soon as he hears that the mine ain't taken over by that great and glorious revolutionary big-wig, he will horn in, pronto. And I guess Xerero will jump when John B. pulls the strings again. And I opine that his next jump will land him right here."

"He will get some shooting before he jumps in," said Calhoun, between his teeth. "I'd rather see the mine buildings burnt, and the mine choked up, than hand it over!"

"Good!" said the Kid. "If it comes to a cinch, we'll show these jaspers some shooting, feller. But we've gained time—and the next move is up to John B. I reckon he won't be long in horning in again. We got to handle him when he does."

And the Kid's brow was wrinkled in thought. The crew of ragged patriots who occupied El Ojo del Oro could be dealt with—that kind of problem was common enough in Mexico; but only if John B. Irons ceased to pull the strings. That was the real problem.

And the outcome of the Kid's deep cogitations on the subject was that a messenger rode over from the valley to the grafter's office at Taxillo, with a message that the mine-owner was willing to sell—a message that made John B. Irons grin when he received it.



HURRIED DEPARTURE! John B. Irons hurried out of the cabin. He mounted his horse in hot haste and, shaking his fist at the two youngsters, rode off through the mining town. "That guy means business!" said the Kid (See Chapter 2.)



end of the great and glorious revolution."

"Yep; I guess I'm wise how you'd account for it, you gink!" remarked the Rio Kid. "You wouldn't even go so far as to buy yourself a pair of boots or a cake of soap, sure!"

Fortunately, the general did not understand English.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Another Business Proposition!

"H E'S coming!" drawled the Kid. It was the third day; and in the sunny afternoon a hard-faced man rode across the valley of El Ojo del Oro, and headed for the mine. The Rio Kid watched him curiously as he came.

John B. Irons had lost little time.

The grafter had had no doubt that when he let loose the mob of rebels on the valley the mine-owner would come to his senses, as he regarded it, and sell out for what he could get.

Ten thousand dollars was a mere song for the El Ojo mine; but it was better than nothing. Once the mine was taken over by the rebel general it would be worth nothing to the owner.

John B. Irons was not anxious for that to happen, if it could be avoided. As the prospective owner of the mine, he did not want damage to be done to the buildings and the expensive machinery. He had hoped, and expected, that the arrival of "General" Xerero and his tattered crew would scare Calhoun into selling while there was yet time. The message of surrender had not surprised him in the least.

So, in a cheerful mood, John B. Irons rode over to El Ojo to conclude that business transaction.

Once the mine was his, by regular sale, it would be easy to turn the crew of patriots in some other direction—"General" Xerero being on his payroll, as he described it.

Mr. Irons arrived at the house, and a peon took away his horse, and he was shown in. Calhoun was waiting to receive him; and after he had entered the Rio Kid lounged into the room.

The grafter gave the Kid a quick, suspicious look. With Calhoun he expected dealing to be easy; but he had suspicions of the Kid. Somehow, the boy puncher from Frio made him feel uneasy.

But the Kid's expression was polite and bland, and he gave the man from Taxillo a genial nod.

"I guess I'm glad to see you, Mr. Irons," said the Kid amiably. "I don't come on in this coal, excepting as a friend of Mr. Calhoun; but a sure would like this little affair to be settled up without a whole heap of trouble, and shooting."

"Easy enough!" snapped Irons. "I've received your message, Mr. Calhoun, and I'm here to settle the business. You've decided to sell?"

"Carfax advises me to sell," assented Calhoun.

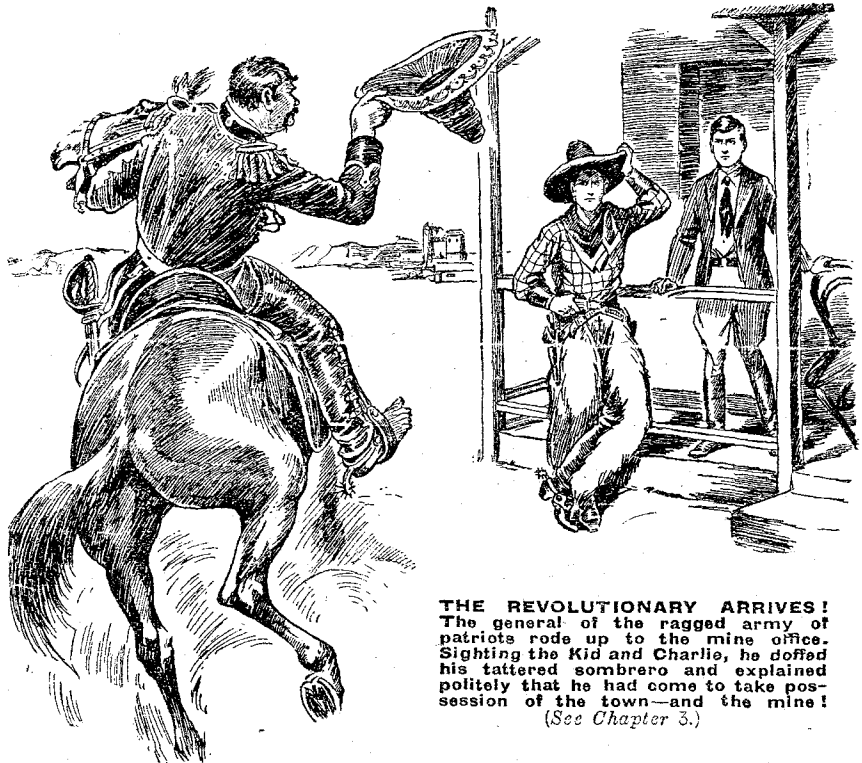
Irons raised his brows. "Well, that's sure sensible of him, and a friend's advice," he said. "I guess he can see you'll do better raising cows in Texas than running a mine in Mexico."

"Sure!" said Calhoun. "I'm taking his advice. The fact is, I'd be glad to sell the mine and quit."

He smiled as he spoke.

Irons smiled, too. He had expected prompt surrender from Calhoun, once the revolutionaries were in the valley. Somehow he had figured that if resistance came, it would be inspired by that puncher from Frio. But Kid Carfax seemed to have inspired the surrender.

"Well, I guess that's satisfactory all



THE REVOLUTIONARY ARRIVES!
The general of the ragged army of patriots rode up to the mine office. Sighting the Kid and Charlie, he doffed his tattered sombrero and explained politely that he had come to take possession of the town—and the mine!
(See Chapter 3.)

round," said Irons. "But I got to tell you that the price has gone down. I'm offering seven thousand dollars for the mine to-day."

"Sho!" said the Kid. "But it's sure as good a mine as ever, Mr. Irons."

"Patriots cost money!" said John B. succinctly.

The Kid laughed. "You've said it," he agreed. "It's a long trip across the sierra here, and I guess them jaspers wouldn't have made it if you hadn't pushed hard. And now they're here they won't march agin, unless you hand out a little more."

"You know the game, I guess," said Irons dryly. "Well, to come down to cases—"

"To come down to cases," said the Kid deliberately. "You reckon that the price of this mine has gone down?"

"Yep." "That's where we don't cinch," said the Kid. "According to this side, the price has gone up!"

Irons stared at him. "I've sure advised my friend Calhoun to sell," said the Kid easily. "This ain't no country for him; and, personal, I wouldn't give an acre of Texas for all Mexico. My idea is, that if he can get a fair price for th mine, it's good business to sell and quit."

"That's it," assented Calhoun, still smiling. "All I want is a fair price, Mr. Irons, and I'll sure be glad to hit the trail to Texas."

"Seven thousand dollars, and not a cent over!" said John B. Irons, his jaw closing like a vice.

"Ninety thousand, and not a cent less!" remarked the Kid.

Irons laughed contemptuously. "What's put that figure into your head?" he asked.

"That's the fair price," said the Kid cheerfully. "I guess I know something about mines. I've run a mine in Arizona, in my time. Why, if this mine was over the border in safe territory, it would be worth half a million dollars. In this country, with pesky patriots on

the rampage, and some grafters pulling the strings behind them, it goes cheap. But ninety thousand dollars will see my friend Calhoun nicely fixed to start a big ranch in Texas. You buying?"

Irons rose from his chair. "We're wasting time," he said curtly.

"That mean nope?" asked the Kid. "You've said it!"

"Every time you refuse, the price goes up," said the Kid. "That offer is now withdrawn, Mr. Irons. The price of this mine, at the present moment, is ninety-five thousand dollars."

Irons stared at him. "Loco?" he asked.

"I guess not. You may as well sit down, feller," drawled the Kid. "You ain't quitting till you've bought this mine!"

"What?" roared Irons. "Don't I speak plain?" asked the Kid patiently. "Carry me home to die!

You was powerful keen on buying this here mine. You let loose a mob of jaspers on us, to make Calhoun sell. You've got it fixed on us so that we've got to sell, or see the mine go to blue blazes. What you grousing about? We're selling, and you're buying."

Irons breathed hard. "Then this was a trick to get me here!" he hissed.

"Where's the trick?" asked the Kid innocently. "We sent you a message that Calhoun was willing to sell. He's willing to sell. He's told you so, and I'm telling you so. It's a question of price. As a square man, you'll be willing to pay the figure Calhoun could get in the open market, if you wasn't working graft agin him. What?"

"You dog-goned geck—"

"If you ain't a square man," continued the Kid urbanely. "you got to act like you was one, for once. Got that?"

"Let me pass!" roared the grafter, striding to the door.

The Rio Kid was leaning his back on THE POPULAR.—No. 540.

the door, and he did not stir. He only smiled at the man from Taxillo.

"Forget it," he said lightly.

Like a flash, the grafter's right hand went to his hip-pocket.

Bang!

He did not see the Kid draw a gun. The movement was too swift for the eye to follow it.

But the gun was in the Kid's hand, and it roared as the grafter drew.

There was a yell from John B. Irons.

His revolver went spinning to the floor, smashed away from his grip by the bullet, and for a moment he fancied his hand had gone with it. But it was only numbed by the shock.

The Kid laughed gently.

"You freeze on to graft, and let gun-play alone, feller," he advised. "That ain't your strong holt, nohow. Sit down!"

"If I don't get back to the aldea, they'll come, sure enough," said Irons. "You can't get away with this game."

"Mebbe!" drawled the Kid.

"Mebbe! But they won't find you here, John B. Irons, if they come! Not alive, feller! You ain't pulling any more strings in this here burg, John B. If them patriots come along here to attack us, the first thing they'll see will be John B. Irons hanging over the gate—as dead as Abe Lincoln. You better hope they won't come!"

The grafter set his teeth hard.

"You'll get nothing out of me!" he said.

"Nope?" asked the Kid gently. "I'm sure sorry for that, feller. You see, you got things fixed so that Calhoun has got to sell this mine, and fixed so that he can't sell it to anybody but you. There's only one other way out. If you couldn't pull the strings any more, I

guess we could fix it with them jaspers at the aldea then. I should sure hate to spill the juice of a dirty coyote like you in this here shebang; but I reckon a rope can be found. I've lent a hand at a necktie party afore, and the galoot sure wasn't such a pizen skunk as you are, John B. I guess you've figured on being hanged some day?"

"You—you'd never dare!" gasped Irons.

The Kid laughed.

The grafter was caught in his own snare, and, with all the cunning he had learned in a long career of graft, he could not see a way out.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER. The Kid Hits the Trail!

JOHAN B. IRONS passed that night in a cellar deep beneath the Casa Calhoun. The next morning the Kid rode into the aldea to carry a letter from the Senor Irons to the General Xerero. The letter contained instructions to the patriot general to march immediately out of El Ojo de Oro, and a draft on the Banco de Taxillo for a thousand pesos, signed by John B. Irons. The Kid did not explain that both the letter and the draft had been written under the persuasion of his quilt. The Kid had a heavy hand with a quilt, as John B. Irons had found to his sorrow.

General Xerero and his tattered army marched promptly, the general chiefly anxious to cash that draft on the Banco de Taxillo, with which, as he concluded, his employer had so generously rewarded his services.

Before noon the last ragged patriot had disappeared over the mountain paths.

John B.'s allies were gone, but John B. remained.

He remained in the deep cellar under the Casa Calhoun, on a spare diet. Three days of this was enough for John B.

The Kid explained to him, with cheery urbanity, that he had not by any means given up the idea of lynching the grafter over the gate. But he was willing to give him a chance to come to terms first. Whether the Kid would ultimately carry out that dire threat, John B. could not feel sure.

And his affairs in Taxillo needed his attention. The robbery of the El Ojo Mine was only one of the many activities of that enterprising Yankee business man.

He realised that in the Rio Kid he had hit up against a proposition of unaccustomed toughness. And he came to terms.

The mine of El Ojo del Oro was sold to John B. Irons for ninety-five thousand dollars. John B. still remained at the Casa Calhoun—though in a more comfortable apartment—until a draft for the cash had been duly presented and honoured at the bank in San Antonio, Texas, and news had come through that it was O.K. The Kid trusted John B. exactly as much as he trusted a rattlesnake, and he gave him no chance for further trickery.

After which the mine was duly handed over to John B., and Charley Calhoun and the Rio Kid rode out of the valley of El Ojo del Oro together—the former to take the trail for his own country, the Kid to linger in Mexico yet awhile.

THE END

(Another Topping Tale of the Rio Kid next week, chums!)

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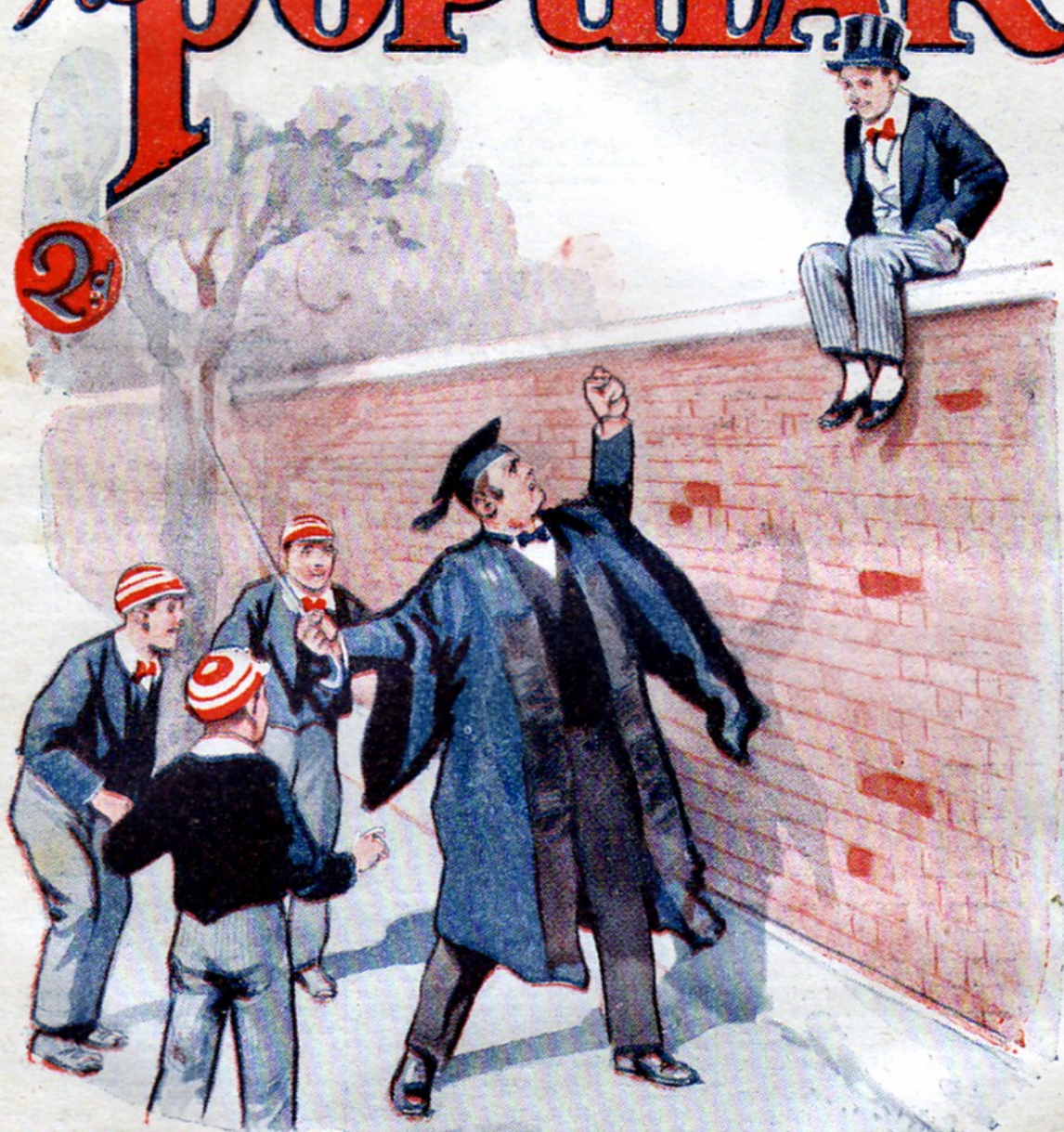
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WHAT! NOT MET THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW? THEN MAKE HIS ACQUAINTANCE AT ONCE IN THE ROARING WESTERN YARN BELOW!



HUNTED ON the PLAINS!

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

THE FIRST CHAPTER. Riders of the Llano!

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

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

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

The Mexicans sighted the Kid as

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then the Mexican grinned.

"The señor is a Gringo?" he asked in English.

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

"You bet!" answered the Kid.

"What you guys in this country call a Gringo. From the Rio Frio, in Texas, if you want the particulars, señor."

"Un Tejano?"

"Jest that," agreed the Kid.

"You are a long way from your country, señor."

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

"Y porque?" said the Mexican.

"And why, señor, are you riding the llano in this Rio Rojo country?"

The Rio Kid laughed.

He was not likely to confide to this

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

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

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

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

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

"Sure," said the Kid.

"You have never heard it?"

"Nix."

"You have not seen that senor?"

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

The Mexican's jaw shut hard.

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

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

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

The Kid shook his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Guzman paused.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Todos los Santos!"

"Vaya!"

"Oiga usted, Don Guzman!"

The square-jawed Mexican swung his horse round.

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

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

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Foe in Ambush!

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

He did not immediately resume his way.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Kid smiled.

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

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

He rode on his way again.

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

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

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

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

Crack!

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

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

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

"Shucks!" ejaculated the Kid.

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

The Kid's eyes gleamed.

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

Crack!

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

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

The Kid's jaw set.

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

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

But the Kid was cautious.

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

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

Now a faint rustle caught his ear.

He smiled grimly.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

The Rio Kid broke off suddenly.

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

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Hunted Man!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You reckoned I was one of the bunch?"

"Si, senor. A thousand pardons!" "Don't you worry any, miss," said the Kid reassuringly. "But, say, you ain't alone here in the middle of the llano, senorita?"

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

"My father!" she whispered.

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

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

And then the Kid thought that he understood.

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

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

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

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

"Mi padre!"

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

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

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

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

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

The girl smiled tremulously.

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

THE POPULAR.—No. 541.

"Estrella! Estrella, mi muchacha! Estrella!"

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

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

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

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

"Venga usted!" said the Mexican girl.

"Si, senorita!"

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

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

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

Estrella led the way into the interior of the motte.

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

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

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

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

"Amigo?" he repeated hoarsely.

"Si, si! un Gringo!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I guess I'll try," said the Kid.

"Gracias, senor!" murmured Donna Estrella. "Save my father—only save my father—"

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

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

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

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

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

And he stumbled to his horse.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. Hitting the Trail!

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

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

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

He swung himself down from the branches of the cottonwood.

"You have seen them, senior?"

The girl's dark eyes read his face.

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

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

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

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

"Forget it!" snapped the Kid.

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

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

Darkness fell on the plains.

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

THIS WEEK'S LIST OF BIRTHDAY DATES!

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

- Fountain Pen.
- Penknife.
- Table Tennis Set.
- Combined Compass and Magnifying Glass.
- Conjuring Outfit.
- Drawing Set.
- Electric Torch and Battery.
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- Hobby Annual.
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—if the date of their birth is the same as a date in the following list—

April 1st, 1915.	Oct. 3rd, 1914.
May 9th, 1915.	Nov. 3rd, 1917.
Feb. 2nd, 1913.	Aug. 2nd, 1911.
July 9th, 1915.	Jan. 3rd, 1916.
Dec. 13th, 1918.	June 5th, 1913.
March 8th, 1917.	Sept. 4th, 1919.
Aug. 20th, 1912.	April 12th, 1920.
Jan. 3rd, 1910.	Nov. 17th, 1908.
May 14th, 1918.	Dec. 23th, 1917.
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No reader may claim a Gift unless he or she has already been registered as a member of our Birthday Gift Club.

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

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

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POPULAR. JUNE 8th.

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

Thud! Thud! Thud!

The Kid listened.

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

Thud! Thud! Thud!

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

The Rio Kid did not need telling that.

He listened intently.

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

"Ride on!" he said tersely.

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

"But you, senior?"

"Ride on!" answered the Kid.

And Donna Estrella spurred on after Pasquale.

The Rio Kid waited.

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

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

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

THE END.

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

"THE TRAIL OF THE TRAITOR!"

By RALPH REDWAY.

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

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YOU'LL FIND THRILLS GALORE IN THIS TOPPING WESTERN YARN!



The Rio Kid, outlaw though he is, is a man of his word. And, although he discovers that he is helping a traitor to freedom, the Kid keeps to the promise he has made!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Fugitive!

THE Rio Kid listened intently. Darkness lay on the Mexican llano.

From the black velvety dome of the sky came a pale gleam of stars that did scarcely more than make the darkness visible.

Save for the sough of the wind in the high grass the prairie was silent, the silence broken only by the soft thudding of the feet of the weary horses. To the ears of the Kid's companions, at least, there was no other sound. But the boy puncher from Frio was listening, as if he caught some other sound from the silence of the night.

The night was growing old. It wanted but an hour to dawn. For long, long hours the weary horses had pushed on, and now they were moving at a walk, almost stumbling with fatigue. Even the grey mustang, the Kid's own almost tireless cow pony, showed weariness.

The Kid pulled in his mustang, the better to listen, and signed to his companions to halt. The soft thudding of hoofs in the thick grass ceased.

"Senor, you hear something?" came a querulous, quavering voice from the shadows.

"Sure!" said the Kid.

"Nombre de Dios! They are behind us, then!" muttered Antonio Pasquale, and his scared eyes stared back fearfully into the darkness.

"I guess they ain't far behind, feller," drawled the Kid. "That pesky guy, Guzman Carrero, is sure powerful anxious to meet up with you, and I reckon he ain't letting the grass grow under the feet of his cayuse. But it

ain't them guys I'm listening for. Can't you hear something?"

"Nada! Nada!" muttered the old Mexican.

"Nor you, senorita?" asked the Kid, peering through the gloom at Donna Estrella.

"Nothing, senor."

"I guess I ain't mistaken," said the Kid slowly. "I reckon I can hear the river. This here is strange country to me, miss. I reckon I ain't rode the trails before in this part of Mexico. If we was in Texas I'd sure guide you anywhere with my eyes shut, but this here is a different proposition—it sure is! But I reckoned when we broke camp that we was hitting for the Rio Rojo, and if my ears ain't telling me lies the river's ahead of us. Send that it is, miss! I guess if we don't strike the Rio Rojo before dawn them galoots on our trail—"

The voice of the old Mexican interrupted him.

"The Rio Rojo, senor? But that does not flow near the border. If we are near the Rio Rojo, we are nowhere near the border—"

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

"But if we do not escape across the border I am a dead man!" wailed Pasquale. "You have led us astray—you are betraying us into the hands of our enemies—"

"Mi padre!" murmured the girl.

"Can it, feller!" said the Kid, unmoved. "I reckon if I was going to hand you over to Carrero's bunch I wouldn't have brought you all these miles to do it. Ain't you any hoss-sense? We got to strike water to blind our trail, or them guys will run us down at sun-up like a bunch of steers. If

that's the river ahead of us we've got a dog's chance; if it ain't you can say your prayers afore Guzman Carrero gets you with his cuchillo, feller."

"Lead on, senor," said Donna Estrella quietly. "We trust you. My father is in terror—"

"We trust you—we trust you, senor!" quavered Pasquale. "Save us from those leperos, caballero, and a rich reward—"

"Aw, can it!" interrupted the Kid rudely.

For the sake of the Mexican girl, brave and calm, who rode by his side in the gloom, the Rio Kid was prepared to face all dangers. For the sake of the old man, with the face of a wolf, he would not have lifted a finger. The Kid had no love for Greasers, and of all the Greasers he had ever met up with Antonio Pasquale got his goat the most. Several times during that weary ride under a black sky the Kid had called himself a dog-goned geek for allowing himself to be drawn into the trouble at all; but it was only on account of Pasquale that such thoughts came into his mind. One glance at the quiet, patient face of the senorita, beautiful in the shadows, was enough to make the Kid glad that he was there to stand between Donna Estrella and her enemies.

He pushed on the mustang again, the weary pack-mule loping behind. The soft thudding of the hoofs in the grass recommenced.

Guided by the faint, distant murmur that had reached his keen ears, the Kid led the way towards the river.

His ears had not deceived him.

Ere long the River Rojo was audible to his companions. And at last a

glimmer far ahead in the darkness showed where the stars were reflected in the broad bosom of the river.

"Halt here," said the Kid brusquely. The weary horses dropped their heads to the water. The Kid dismounted and disappeared in the thickets along the bank.

Donna Estrella sat her pony in silence, waiting. But from the old Mexican came a scared muttering.

"He has deserted us, Estrella!" he mumbled, in Spanish. "He fears Don Guzman, and he has fled—"

"Que verguenza, mi padre. He seeks something. He will return—"

"After all, he is a Gringo, and the Gringos are all liars and ladrones," mumbled Don Antonio.

"This Gringo is neither, mi padre." "He has deserted us! We are abandoned here—we are lost—"

"I guess you're shooting off your mouth a whole lot, feller," came the Kid's cool voice from the shadows. The boy puncher loomed up in the darkness.

Pasquale started and trembled.

"No se enfade usted!" he stammered.

"Do not be offended, señor—"

"Forget it!" grunted the Kid.

"Senorita, I guess it's O.K. This here rio is going to save our scalps, for sure."

"We can cross, señor?" asked the girl eagerly.

"Nope. I guess the hosses'd never make the grade. And it wouldn't be any use; them guys would pick up the trail on the other side—it ain't fur to morning now. But the water's shallow a good step out, and we can ride down the river without leaving a trail. I guess that will get them guessing."

The Kid remounted and led the way again. The horses stepped from the bank at the point the Kid had selected into the shallow waters of the Rio Rojo. Farther out, the wide river ran deep, with a headlong current. But there was a wide stretch of shallow water between the deep river-bed and the grassy bank, and the hoofs sank into soft mud, with the water swirling round the horses' legs. Every hoofmark was washed out almost as soon as it was made, and no sign left to guide the keenest trailer in Mexico.

For more than a mile the Kid led on, through shallow, swirling water.

By that time there was a glimmering of grey in the eastern sky that told of the coming dawn.

"I reckon them guys will be got guessing," he said. "They'll know we've taken to the water when they run down the trail, but I reckon they won't know whether we went down or up the river, and we ain't going to leave no sign when we get back to dry-land, señorita. I guess if that guy, Guzman, ain't a bloodhound we've sure shook him off."

"The holy saints grant it!" murmured Donna Estrella.

"I reckon if the cayuses was fresh we could hit the horizon from here and leave them cussing," said the Kid. "But the critters are sure dead beat, and I guess if we don't stop they'll fall down. We got to take a chance, but I guess I know how to blind our trail when we get ashore, and them guys won't pick it up again in a hurry, señorita. We can lie dogge in some timber island or chaparral, and when the hosses are rested we can hit for the nearest pueblo—"

"No, señor—no!" quavered Pasquale.

"My father has as much to fear from the Government, señor, as from the revolutionists who are tracking him," said Donna Estrella.

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"Oh shucks!" said the Kid.

"There is safety only over the border, in Texas or New Mexico," mumbled Pasquale.

"I guess you're a long way from the border, feller," said the Kid. "But I reckon I'll get you there somehow, if a galoot can do it. Anyhow, we got to get into cover afore the sun's up, and lie doggo while the cayuses rest a spell. It won't be safe to break camp again till sundown, with them guys hunting the llano for us. We got to find good cover."

The Kid scanned the rugged, muddy, grassy bank anxiously. The darkness was less deep now that the pale gleam from the east was spreading. Then suddenly the boy puncher uttered an exclamation.

The grassy bank lay on the right of the fugitives; the deep waters of the river on the left. The opposite bank was far away out of sight in the gloom. But from the shadowy river the Kid discerned a bunch of trees, which evidently grew upon an island in the waters of the Rio Rojo.

"This way!" said the Kid.

And he swung his mustang round towards the black patch that loomed in the gloom.

The island was separated from the bank by only a score of yards of shallow water. The horses and mule splashed wearily towards it. Tall cottonwood-trees grew on the isle, laced with masses of liana and Spanish moss, with thickets growing among the trees in an almost impenetrable mass.

"I guess this here is luck!" said the Kid.

He searched along the island shore for a landing-place. He pushed his mustang up the bank at last through the tangled mesquite. In a few minutes he came back on foot, and led the señorita's pony the same way.

"Mi padre, señor!" whispered the girl anxiously.

"I guess we've got time to burn, miss," said the Kid. "You wait here, and I'll tote him along in two shakes of a coyote's tail."

The girl smiled faintly.

The Kid left her in the blackness under the trees in the centre of the river island, and returned for the old Mexican. In a few minutes Pasquale was with her, and then the Kid led in the pack-mule. Light was spreading over the sky from the east now, but under the thick foliage on the river island all was still black. There were sounds of dawn—the awakening notes of wild birds in the trees, the croaking of bull-frogs in the shallows.

"I guess you camp here," said the Kid. "Leave it to me to blanket the trail."

Leaving them in the darkness, the Kid returned to the landing-place; and for long, long minutes he was busy—erasing tracks in the mud, rearranging even a broken twig or a tuft of grass—"blanketing" the trail with all the cunning skill of an Apache pursued by his foes.

When the Kid rejoined his companions he was satisfied that not a sign remained to tell the keenest eye of the landing on the river island. The Rio Kid had done all that could be done—and the rest was on the knees of the gods.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

In Hiding!

"SILENCIO!"

The Kid whispered in Spanish. Hot and blazing, the semi-tropic sun streamed down on the Rio Rojo, on the muddy rugged

banks, the deep current, and the sluggish shallows. The cold of night—cold enough on the Mexican uplands—had been replaced by the burning heat of day. The river shimmered in blazing sun, and sickly wisps of vapour rose along the banks, and the buzzing of mosquitoes was like a ceaseless chant.

On the river island it was like an oven. When the Rio Rojo was in flood the waters swept over the island; now it was high over the current. But ample irrigation had covered it with luxuriant growths. High over the isle rose a giant cottonwood-tree, towering a hundred feet, with smaller trees round it. Mesquite, maguery, juniper, all kinds of



AT CLOSE QUARTERS! The Rio Kid swung round at the sound of crashing in the thickets. A horse came charging right down on him. The Kid leaped away barely in time, as Don Guzman's arm flashed upwards, and a machete glittered in the sun. (See Chapter 3.)

bramble growths choked the space between the trees. Birds innumerable, insects without number thronged the thickets and the branches. Orchids, sunflowers, blossoms of all gorgeous colours were thick among the sprawling lianas and the pendant masses of Spaniards' beard.

The Kid had cleared a space under the tall cottonwood with a machete for a camp. The old Mexican and Donna Estrella, worn out, had slept; but the boy puncher had scarcely closed his eyes. Inured to fatigue, the Kid seemed to be hardly conscious of it. He had tended the horses and the mule, cleared the ground for a camp, and built a jacal of branches and rushes to shelter the Mexican girl.

Hotter and hotter it grew in the camp on the river island as the blazing sun sailed overhead in a sky of cloudless azure. Through the hot hours of the



morning Don Antonio and Donna Estrella slept, even fear and anxiety banished by utter weariness.

When they awakened, towards noon, the Kid had a meal ready of cold frijoles and bacon and hard bread. He had not ventured to light a cooking-fire; the merest wisp of smoke might have betrayed them to the seeking enemy.

Now the Kid was perched in the high branches of the cottonwood, scanning the banks of the river. At this point the Rio Rojo ran almost directly from south to north. It was from the east bank that the fugitives had come. A score of yards of shallow water lay between them and the bank. On the other side of the island the Rio Rojo was wide and deep; and if they were discovered, attack was not likely to come from that side; few riders or swimmers could have stemmed the current. If attack came,

it would be across the shallows, where horsemen could ride freely; and the Kid guessed that he had a good fighting chance, even against heavy odds. But he had hopes that the hiding-place would not be found.

Scanning the plains eastward of the great river, the Kid picked out a horseman after horseman.

Obviously the hunters had lost the trail. They had followed it, the Kid reckoned, till it ended in the waters of the Rio Rojo. There they were baffled. The fugitives might have gone up the river, or down the river; in either case, they might have landed at any point and struck into the plains again. So far as Guzman Carrero knew, they might have sought to cross the wide river, and either succeeded or perished in the current.

Guzman Carrero had a heavy task before him to pick up the track of the fugitives; and the Kid wondered if he would weary of it and give it up as a failure. But Guzman had not struck him as the kind of pilgrim to give up easily.

Horsemen rode up and down the river, appearing and disappearing among

the inequalities of the llano hunting for sign. The Kid's keen eye picked out the trackers scattered far and wide. They were seeking the spot where the fugitives had left the water; and probably Carrero knew that the Texas cowpuncher had joined the fugitive Mexicans, and guessed that he would know how to blanket the trail.

A splashing in the river drew the Kid's eyes more directly beneath him, and he discerned four or five riders coming along in the shallows under the bank. They were scanning the bank, and not as yet glancing towards the river island. But the Kid knew that their attention must turn that way.

He slid down the branches of the great tree and joined the Mexicans in the camp below. The expression on his face drew an anxious glance from Donna Estrella, a stare of terror from her father.

"Silencio!" breathed the Kid; and they understood.

Pasquale's teeth clattered. "They come?" he whispered.

The Kid nodded.

"Madre de Dios!" groaned Pasquale. "We are lost!"

"We ain't lost yet, not by a jugful!" answered the Kid. "I guess they won't read any sign where we landed byer. But you want to keep quiet, you-uns, and I guess the cayuses have got to keep quiet."

"If they find us—" breathed Pasquale.

"We ain't dead yet, even if they root us out!" said the Kid. "I guess if it comes to shooting, we're in a good fix here. Say, you know how to handle a gun, I reckon?"

"Si, si, senior!" muttered the old Mexican. "Si, si! Yes, I will fight for my life—si, si!"

But the claw-like hands were trembling, and the Kid guessed that Don Antonio's shooting would not help much if it came to fighting. The Mexican girl spoke quietly.

"My father is old, senior, and he is a sick man. But I can use a rifle, and I will use it in his defence."

"I guess you sure are the real goods, miss," said the Kid admiringly. "But it ain't come to shooting yet. We want to lie doggo—and I guess we may pull through."

He went to the horses, tethered securely among the trees, and murmured soothing words. A sound from the animals would have betrayed all. The Kid could rely on his own mustang for silence; Side-Kicker knew the game as well as the Kid himself did. But the other horses, and the mule, worried him a little.

The splashing of riders could now be heard by all on the river-island. Pasquale clasped his hands to still their trembling. Donna Estrella remained motionless; pale as death, but quiet and calm. The Kid moved silently through the mass of thickets, to peer out on the river. Keeping in thick cover, he glimpsed the horsemen who were riding the shallows between the island and the bank. They pulled in their steeds, in the channel, and now they were looking towards the island. The Kid heard the muttering of their voices, in Spanish.

"Una isla!" he heard from one of them.

Don Guzman Carrero was not among them. The Kid wondered whether it had been Don Guzman at whom he had fired, the previous night; and whether the leader of the bunch had fallen to the bullet.

The riders pushed closer to the island, riding close along its bank, and scanning every spot with suspicious eyes.

The Kid watched in silence.

He knew that he had blanketed the trail effectively, and left no sign of the landing. From the river, the dense thickets on the island looked impenetrable, untrampled. The riders passed, slowly, the spot where the fugitives had pushed ashore, and splashed on, and the Kid breathed more freely. They had discerned nothing—he had left nothing for them to discern. Only if they landed to search the island, would they make a discovery. But it was sign they were looking for. Scattered along the Rio Rojo were a dozen such islas, revealed since day had come. Without a sign to guide them, the Mexicans were not likely to search every one, through tangled thickets and thorny brushwood. A single hoof-mark would have been enough for them. But the Rio Kid had been too careful for that.

The horsemen passed on, much to the Kid's relief. His gun was ready; and had they landed, he would have burned powder at once. But he was reluctant to burn powder if it could be helped. Gladly he saw the riders splashing on down the river, now scanning the muddy banks for sign of the escaped party.

They were gone at last; and the Kid returned to the camp in the clearing under the cottonwood.

"Senor—" muttered Pasquale. "I guess they've gone on," said the Kid. "It's O.K. so far, senor." "They have missed our trail?"

The Kid grinned. "I guess they wouldn't have missed any trail, as big as a mosquito might have left," he answered. "There wasn't any trail for them to miss, feller; I took care of that after we landed."

"You have saved us once more, senor," murmured Donna Estrella. "I sure hope so, miss," said the Kid. "Them guys have absquatulated, anyhow; and I guess they'll report to the rest of the bunch that we ain't come this-a-way. We got to lie doggo till dark, and then I reckon we'll make a break, and strike north for the border. Once we've dropped that bunch off our trail, it will be pie."

The long, hot hours passed slowly. Donna Estrella rested on a bed of rugs in the jacal the Kid had built; the old Mexican lay trembling under the cottonwood. He slept fitfully—his siesta was broken by his nervous fears, and again and again he sat up, and gazed fearfully round him. The Kid, when he glanced at him, did so with strong disfavour. It seemed to the Kid that it was not only the fear of a hunted man, but a guilty conscience, that inspired the terrified uneasiness of the fugitive from Olillo. It was not a pleasant thought to the Kid, that he was helping the escape of a man who was pursued for wrongdoing. Carrero had said that Pasquale had robbed him; and the man with the face of a wolf looked none too good for it, to the Kid's eyes. And how did it happen that, as the Kid now knew, Pasquale was hunted by a bunch of revolutionists, and yet feared the Government officers as much as he feared his pursuers? The man could scarcely be in danger from both parties, without treachery of some sort. Less and less the Kid liked the task he had set himself. But Donna Estrella had firm faith in her father, and looked on him as a wronged man. And the Kid had made Donna Estrella's quarrel his own, and that, at least he did not regret.

Splash! It was the sound of a horseman in the shallow water.

Don Antonio Pasquale sat up again, trembling in every limb. The Kid glided softly through mesquite and maguay, and scanned the river. One bunch of hunters had passed the island, seeing nothing. But the search was still going patiently, relentlessly on.

And the Kid, as he peered from cover, set his teeth.

Three horsemen were coming down the shallows, and scanning the island as they came. And the man who rode in the middle was Don Guzman Carrero. The Kid recognised at once the keen, black eyes, the square jaw that was shut like a vice. And he knew that the danger was more pressing now. His hand sought a gun, as the three horsemen drew in their horses, almost up to the stirrups in water, and fixed their eyes on the isle.

As the former party had done, they moved along the bank, searching for sign. Evidently Don Guzman was not trusting wholly to the report of his scouts; their failure to find sign had brought him over the same ground.

But the Kid breathed freely again, as the square-jawed Mexican shook his head.

"Nada," the Kid heard him say. The riders were about to push on past the island. And then the Kid's

luck, that had held good so long, failed him. Don Guzman's horse whinnied, and like an echo from the thickly-wooded island, came the answering whinny of one of the hidden horses.

The Kid gritted his teeth. Instantly, as that sound from the island told of a concealed horse, a change came over the three Mexicans in the river.

They pulled in their steeds, swung round towards the island again, and grasped their weapons. The Kid's gun was out now. The blaze in the black eyes of Don Guzman told that he knew all.

"Un caballo!" exclaimed one of the Mexicans.

"En verdad!" grinned Don Guzman. "Por aqui!"

He spurred his horse to the island, his two companions close behind. From the dense thicket rang the Kid's voice sharply.

"Go slow! I've got you covered, Don Guzman Carrero! Pull in your cayuse, dog-gone you, or you're a dead Greaser!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Face to Face!

"E L TEJANO!" Evidently Don Guzman knew the Kid's voice again. "El Americano!"

"Carambo!" The three Mexicans pulled in their horses.

The Kid's voice had rung out from dense cover. They could not see a sign of him; but they knew that he could see them.

"So you are there, senor el Tejano!" said the Mexican coolly.

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

"Pasquale and his daughter are with you?"

"Search me!"

The Mexican laughed softly.

"You need not tell me, senorito. I know that the old wolf is with you. There was the trail of a third horse when we followed their tracks to the river. You have joined them."

"You can search me!" answered the Kid carelessly. He was not giving any information to the Mexican.

"You are fighting in an ill cause, senor," said Don Guzman. "Why you have joined that ladrone I cannot guess; but you cannot know who or what he is, if you are an honest caballero, as I believe."

"Thank you for nothing, feller!"

"Oiga usted!" said the Mexican.

"You are helping a thief to escape with his plunder, senor. Is that your desire?"

The Kid winced.

"That's your say-so, feller," he answered. "I guess Don Antonio would tell a different tale."

"He would lie, senor, but if you searched his mule-pack or his saco, you would find the loot."

"Oh, guff!" said the Kid uneasily.

"I guess I ain't likely to search that hombre, and you're wise to it, Greaser."

The Mexican smiled. He was talking to, or rather at, a wall of solid green, with no sign of the Kid to be seen. Only from the Texan's voice he could judge the effect of his words. But the tone of the Kid was uncertain, and Guzman knew that what he said was more than half believed.

"Senor, let us avoid useless bloodshed," he said softly. "I have no quarrel with you. I am no robber or bandolero—my men are honest

caballeros. We seek only justice on a traitor. Will you shed blood to deny us that?"

The Kid made no answer. He was troubled in mind; but in his thought was the sad, beautiful face of Donna Estrella Pasquale, and that made it impossible for him to waver. Daughter of a traitor, perhaps; but pure gold herself; "the straight goods," as the Kid expressed it. Whatever Pasquale was, he was her father; and the Kid could not defend the one without defending the other. And to the senorita's defence he was bound.

"Senor, let me tell you—put you wise, as you would say." Guzman's tone was patient, honeyed. No doubt the strong position of the Rio Kid gave him pause, for he well knew that blood would flow like water before the puncher was overcomer. "You are not concerned in this—you are a stranger in this land. You are not one of those meddling, thieving Americans who mix in our national quarrels to find a profit there. A girl's bright eyes have led you into this trouble."

"Aw, can it!" growled the Kid, colouring in his cover. "I guess you've chewed the rag long enough, Greaser!"

"Paciencia, senor! Oiga usted—hear me!" said Guzman. "You know, perhaps, that we are of the revolutionary party—in this province a rising was planned to break out at the pueblo of Olillo. Antonio Pasquale was one of us—and he was the treasurer of the junta—as you would say, the bunch. I am chief of the junta, senor; I, a rich haciendado of Olillo. A large sum was in the hands of Pasquale, to be used for the purposes of the revolution. He speculated with the money, senor, as we learned, and lost much of it—many thousands of pesos, senor, the life-blood of the revolution, went in the stock markets in Mexico City.

"And when we found that he was failing us, and would have given him a traitor's due and saved what was left, he fled in the night, senor, taking with him what remained of the funds. Not less than fifty thousand pesos, senor—perhaps twice as much—we know not exactly. But whatever the sum may be, the traitor has it in his keeping now—not less than twenty-five thousand dollars—the funds of the revolution in Olillo. You are aiding a traitor and a thief, senor."

The Kid stirred uncomfortably in his covert.

The words of the Mexican rang true. That Pasquale was, or had been, one of the revolutionists, was proved by the fact that he feared to place himself under Government protection, even while the bitter foes were seeking his life. And not for nothing, certainly, would the other members of the junta have turned on him.

The wretched man's flight into the prairies, in a wild endeavour to reach the American border and escape into a foreign country, was something like a proof.

Yet it was possible that he had been wrongfully distrusted and suspected by suspicious confederates; distrust and suspicion were inseparable from revolutionary plotting. To that possibility the Kid's mind clung.

There was a long pause. The Rio Kid did not speak; and Don Guzman broke the silence again at last.

"Senor, I have now put you wise! We are trailing a traitor—and we will not let him escape if a thousand Tejanos stood in our way. I have thirty men; but all this country is in my favour. I could call numberless men, from the haciendas and the pueblos, if I needed

them. The traitor must die—his plunder must return to Olillo, to the keeping of the junta. What say you, senior?"

"I don't give a cuss or a Continental red cent, for Pasquale," said the Kid. "But I'm standing between your bunch and the seniorita—and you can come on as soon as you durned well like."

"Yet a moment, senior! We seek not to harm the seniorita—a brave girl, who has done us no harm, except by her devotion to her father, for which no good Mexican would blame her. Should a hand be raised to harm her, senior, I would myself strike it down with my machete. The girl shall go unharmed, in your care, if she so desires. Only Antonio Pasquale is our prey."

"Oh shucks!" growled the Kid un- easily.

A hand was laid on his shoulder in the thickets; he turned, and saw the dark, pleading eyes of Donna Estrella. She had crept from the camp to join him at the sound of the voices.

"Caballero, he lies!" breathed the girl. "He is deceived, or he seeks to deceive. My father, is no traitor! Caballero, you will not abandon him to his enemies."

"You've said it, miss!" said the Kid. "Your answer, senior?" called out the Mexican, his glinting eyes searching the wall of green.

"I guess you've got it, but I'll chirp it over again," said the Kid. "I'm standing by the seniorita and her father."

The Mexican's black eyes blazed, and his teeth shut hard.

"Your fate is on your own head, senior!" he said.

"Yourn will come first, if you don't beat it, pronto!" retorted the Rio Kid.

Don Guzman backed his horse to where his comrades waited for him in the shallows. The three Mexicans exchanged whisgers.

Donna Estrella clasped her hands. "Oh, caballero, they are gone—gracias, caballero! You have saved my father! I tell you from my heart, senior, that he is innocent—unjustly suspected by those leperos—"

"What you say goes, miss," answered the Kid, though he was by no means convinced. "Anyhow, they're a bunch of rebels, and if they kick up a rookus they can take what's coming to them. They won't find it easy to rush this island with my guns popping."

There was a sudden splashing in the water, a jingling of bridles and spurs, and a crash of pistol-fire. Bullets tore and ploughed through mesquite and maguay.

The three Mexicans had not retreated. From the shallow water they made a sudden desperate rush at the river-island.

There was a shriek from Donna Estrella.

"They come—they come! Nuestra seniora!"

The Kid, with blazing eyes, swung towards the attack. He had figured that Don Guzman was going to call up his men, and the sudden rush took him almost by surprise. Three horses, desperately driven, crashed into the thickets on the low shore of the island before the Kid was ready to receive the rush. As they crashed in the horsemen fired fast, though at random, for they could not see a foe.

Over his lifted six-gun the Kid's eyes flashed.

It had come to burning powder now, and the Kid was the man for it. Doubt and hesitation had to be dismissed now that the struggle had come.

Bang!

There was a fearful yell as the Kid

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tired, and a rider went toppling from a saddle, the horse dashing away into the water.

Bang roared the heavy Colt again, and another saddle was empty, a wounded man splashing back into the river.

Crash came a charging horse, right on the Kid; and he leaped away barely in time as Don Guzman Carrero drove at him through the thickets. A machete flashed in the shadow of the branches and missed the Kid's head by an inch as he leaped back. Guzman Carrero hurled himself from the saddle at the Texan, fierce rage and fury blazing in his swarthy face, his machete whirling up to strike. But his foot caught in a trailing rope of liara as he rushed on the Kid, and he fell almost at the feet of the puncher.

The six-gun was jammed to his head, and the Kid's finger trembled on the trigger. But he did not fire. The Mexican lay at his mercy; his desperate attempt had failed. Through the mesquite peered an old, wrinkled, wolfish face, and Pasquale screamed: "Kill him, caballero—kill him and save us! Death—death!"

The Kid thrust the revolver back into his holster.

"Git!" he snapped.

"Caballero!" screamed Pasquale.

"You are mad! Kill him and save all

our lives! Nombre de Dios! Shoot—shoot!"

The Kid paid no heed. Guzman Carrero, breathless, bruised, defeated, disappeared through the thickets, and a plunge was heard in the river. There was a howl of rage from the old Mexican which fell upon heedless ears.

The Kid looked out from cover. Guzman had mounted one of the riderless horses and was splashing away up the river in the shallows. At a distance two wounded men were crawling up the muddy bank of the Rio Rojo. Guzman turned in the saddle for a moment to shake a clenched fist at the island, and then disappeared by the winding bank.

He was gone—to return with overpowering force. The Kid whistled through his teeth. Quietly, carefully, he reloaded his six-gun. A struggle was coming—a struggle against overpowering odds, and the Kid would not have given a Continental red cent for his chance of coming through it alive. But a mocking light danced in his eyes, and a smile was on his face. The Kid might be at the end of his rope, but he was game!

THE END.

(The Rio Kid is in the thick of perils again in next week's powerful long yarn of the West. Look out for "FACING FEARFUL ODDS!")

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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 politeness 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 Ojillo, 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.

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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 maguey 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, losing 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

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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.

"Geo!" 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?"
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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 Olillo. 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."

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"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 lepers 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

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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 carcase, 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.

"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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THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The End of the Rope!

THE night had been cold, as usual on the Mexican uplands, but with day came a blaze of heat.

In the dense tropical forest by the Rio Rojo thick interlaced branches, massed with foliage and pendant mosses, shut off the burning rays of the sun, but did not shut off its heat. The Rio Kid, leaning against the massive trunk of a ceiba, fanned his face with his Stetson hat. Day had come and with the daylight he looked for pursuit from Guzman Carrero and his bunch. But as yet there had been no sound of foes in the forest; and the wide waters of the Rio Rojo rolled in the sunshine, desolate, deserted.

The forest grew down to the river's edge, and great branches jutted over the water. In the mud of the bank, amid tangled roots, lizards crawled, the bell-frog sounded his peculiar note.

The thought came into the Rio Kid's mind that perhaps that desperate race in the night, down the river, had thrown the pursuers off the track. But he shook his head.

"I guess this hyer bunch is cinched!" murmured the Kid, and he looked once more to his walnut-butted guns, to make sure that they were ready for the conflict that must come; the conflict that could end only one way, unless the Kid had phenomenal luck.

His companions were sleeping.

Donna Estrella, wrapped in the Kid's blanket and slicker, lay sleeping the

sleep of utter fatigue. Don Antonio Pasquale was hunched in the herbage, snoring. He had forgotten his terrors in the sleep of exhaustion; but even in slumber his claw-like hand clutched the sacco buckled to his belt; even in his dreams he had not forgotten the pesos with which he had fled from Olillo.

The Kid's face grew grim and hard as he looked at the wrinkled old face of the Mexican. But it softened again as he glanced at Estrella. The Kid had slept, but he had wakened at dawn, watchful for the enemy. But it was useless to awake his companions. The Kid figured that the fugitives were at the end of their rope; and nothing remained but to wait. And he waited. It would have been easy enough for the Kid to plunge into the deep forest and save himself. But that thought did not enter the mind of the boy puncher.

His glance travelled over the sunny waters of the Rio Rojo, beyond the branches that drooped over the margin. It was down the river he reckoned the enemy would come. But as yet, he could see no sign of the Mexicans.

Pasquale stirred at last, and woke. He sat up, passing his claw-like hand over his brow and staring round him. He dragged himself wearily to his feet. He looked round at the dense trees, at the shining river, and fixed his glance at last on the impassive face of the Rio Kid.

"Senor! We have escaped them?" he muttered.

The Kid smiled grimly.

"Not by a jugful," he answered. "Don Guzman—he comes?" breathed the old Mexican.

"Not yet! Them jaspers don't seem to be in a hurry," drawled the Kid. "I guess that's the way of this country, feller—Greasers sure don't hustle a whole heap. But they'll come, you can bet your bottom dollar on that."

"Then why do we linger here, senor?"

The Kid shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess we're at the end of the riata, senor. We've lost the horses and the mule—my mustang is the only cayuse left in this bunch. He's a good hoss, is Side-Kicker; he sure is the darndest critter to go that ever was raised in Texas. But I reckon he can't carry three. This bunch is cinched, senor—we only got to wait till them Greasers root us out. I reckon we've got them guessing where to look for us, or they'd have been hyer afore this. But they'll come."

Pasquale trembled from head to foot.

At the sound of voices the Mexican girl had awakened.

She threw aside the slicker and rose to her feet, colouring under the eyes of the Rio Kid. Her hair was in wild disorder, her beautiful face stained by the mud of the river, but it was still beautiful. The Kid's heart, little accustomed to yield to such influences, stirred as he looked at her. It was the chivalry of the boy puncher that had led him to join up with the hunted Mexican fugitives, but there was perhaps some-

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thing more than that in his honest breast now.

The girl's dark eyes glanced rapidly round.

"Señor el Tejano! We are safe here?" she breathed.

The Kid's answer was gentler than that he had given to her father.

"I reckon we're O.K. jest for the present, señorita," he answered. "Them guys ain't run us down yet."

"They must have lost the track?"

"I guess there's a chance they have, miss," said the Kid, "but I wouldn't bank on it."

The girl understood.

"They will find us here?" she said in a low voice.

"Well, that galoot, Guzman Carrero, is sure a bloodhound on the trail," said the Kid uneasily. "He's after them pesos your padre has got in his grip, and he's got a hunch that Don Antonio

double-crossed the junta that them revolutionary jaspers belong to. He sure does seem to want Mister Pasquale's scalp bad. I hope he's lost the trail, miss, for your sake; but I allow he ain't the kind of guy to lose a trail easy."

"Let us go!"

"That ain't so easy, miss," said the Kid apologetically. "We got one hoss among three and we're in a pesky forest where the going's slow and hard. I reckon we wouldn't get far afore them rubes run us down."

The Mexican girl clasped her hands.

"We wait here—like sheep for the slaughter," she whispered. "Oh, señor! Save my father! Leave me, but save him!"

The Kid made a grimace. Exactly the reverse was his own desire. Only for Donna Estrella's sake would he have lifted a finger to save the wrinkled old rascal whose greed and treachery, as the

Kid was only too well aware, had caused this trouble. But the girl's devotion to her wretched father touched him strangely.

"I guess, miss," said the Kid slowly, "that if Don Antonio has a hunch to try it on, I'll lend him my cayuse, and he can hit the horizon as soon as he likes. But there ain't a dog's chance of getting clear of them bucks, miss. This is as good a place as any other when it comes to a rookus. I guess a whole heap of them Greasers will go under afore they finish with this Kid. That's all I can do, miss."

The Kid's glance wandered to the river. Far in the distance a sombrero nodded over the shining waters. A horseman was riding the shallows near the bank, slowly, watching the forest as he rode. He was small in the distance, but he was approaching. And
(Continued on next page.)

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the Kid knew that he was only one of the scouts of Carrero's bunch. Jutting trees hid him the next moment. But the Kid had seen him, and knew that the enemy were closing in.

"Senor! Save my father!" breathed Donna Estrella. "They wrong him, senor—he is an innocent man! He never betrayed the junta—and what he has is his own, senor. You will not leave him to those wolves. Save him, senor."

The Kid stirred uneasily. "Look here, you'uns," he said at last, "I guess there's a chance—a mighty slim chance. Them jaspers allow that Don Antonio's lit out with the pesos belonging to the junta at Ollilo. They're after his blood—but I reckon they want the money more than they want his juice. They'll be here afore long. If we leave that bag of money here for them to find there's just a dog's chance that they may let up. Stick that bag of pesos on the bank where they'll sure have to see it—and we'll try our luck in the forest."

"Si, si, senor."
But though the Mexican girl answered at once in the affirmative, the old miser of Ollilo clutched at the sacco and croaked out a negative.

"Jamás! Jamás! Never! You would make me a beggar! Jamás!"

"I guess a live beggar's better than a dead rico hombre, feller," said the Kid, "and you're sure a dead man if you stick to them pesos."

"They are mine—mine!"
"Them jaspers allow they're theirs," said the Kid. "But it don't cut no ice either way, as they can cinch them when they like. You can't keep them durocks, feller. You can leave them here or they'll take them from your dead body. That's your choice."

Splash!
The Kid's glance turned swiftly to the river. The horseman he had seen had reappeared, close at hand. The man, scanning the bank, uttered an exclamation, which told that he had picked up sign. The Kid's hand dropped to a gun, his face set grimly. The horseman came spurring on through the shallow water under overhanging branches.

Bang!
The sombrero spun on the Mexican's head.

"Caramba!" the Kid heard him yell. He swung round his horse and went dashing madly away up the stream. In a moment he had vanished.

"I guess that jasper's gone to bring down the bunch," said the Kid. "If we're going to make a break we ain't a lot of time to waste, you'uns. There's a slim chance they'll let up if we leave them the pesos. There ain't any dog-goned chance otherwise."

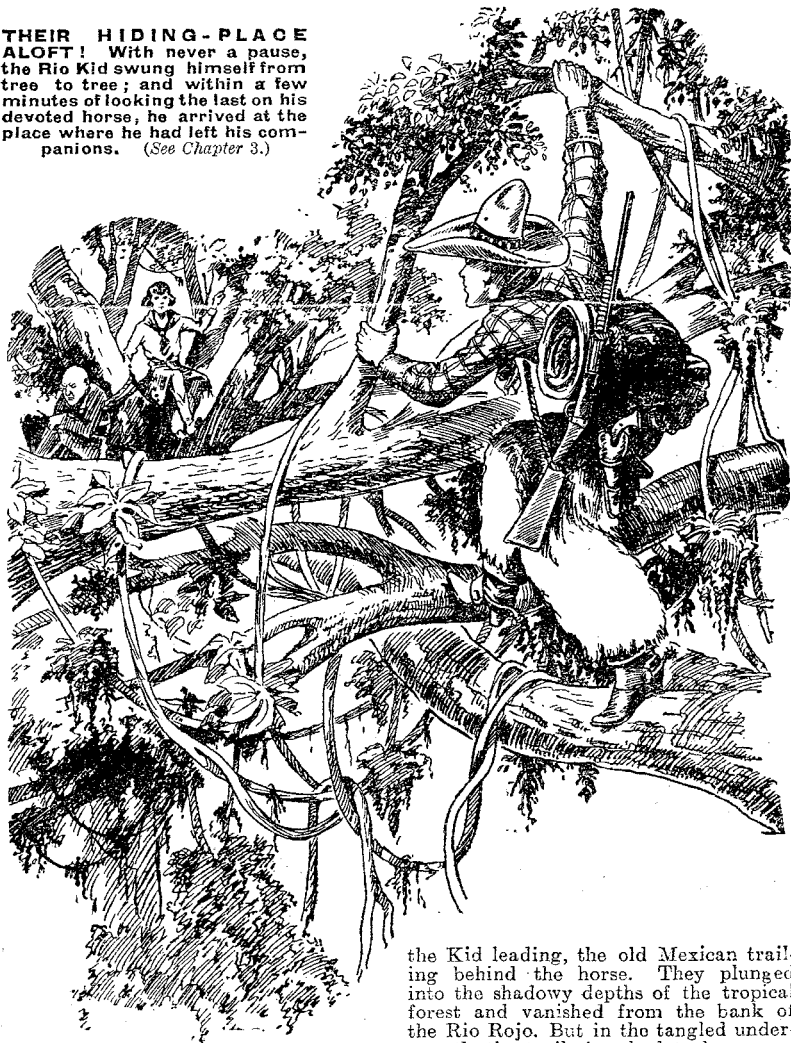
"Mi padre!" whispered the Mexican girl pleadingly.

There was a struggle in the breast of the old miser. The perspiration stood in clots on his swarthy brow. His hand went to the sacco—and came away again. But even the wretched old miser seemed to realize that it was not possible to cling longer to the funds of the revolutionary junta, with which he had fled. With trembling fingers he unbuckled the sacco and relinquished the leather, stuffed with gold and silver and paper money.

Taking it carelessly, the Kid walked down to the margin of the Rio Rojo.

From there, at a distance up the river, he could see the nodding of sombreros. It would not be long before the Mexicans were on hand. They were coming along the shallow margin of the rio, under the forest branches, and they would enter the forest where the

THEIR HIDING-PLACE ALOFT! With never a pause, the Rio Kid swung himself from tree to tree; and within a few minutes of looking the last on his devoted horse, he arrived at the place where he had left his companions. (See Chapter 3.)



the Kid leading, the old Mexican trailing behind the horse. They plunged into the shadowy depths of the tropical forest and vanished from the bank of the Rio Rojo. But in the tangled undergrowth the trail they had to leave was plain enough for a blind man to follow, and the Kid knew only too well that there was no hope of eluding the enemy unless the return of the loot gave him pause.

The dense forest swallowed the fugitives. But from behind came sounds of the unseen enemy. There was a splashing of horses in the water, a shouting in Spanish.

"Los pesos! El traidor! El traidor!"

The pursuers had found the bag of money. But the shouts of "The traitor!" did not indicate that the finding of the stolen pesos had satisfied them. The Rio Kid hoped for the best as he wound his way through the dense tropical forest, leading the mustang. But in his heart he knew that there was little hope.

**THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Gun Play!**

THE Kid paused to listen. Under the thick masses of foliage a dusky twilight reigned in the forest, simmering with tropical heat. Here and there the Kid had to cut a way through the dense, tangled undergrowths with slashes of his bowie-knife. Sounds of pursuit reached his ears, and they were drawing closer. Don Guzman had not been satisfied with the recovery of the junta's

fugitives had entered it. Good man as the Kid was in a fight, the odds were too heavy to give him a chance, and the game was in Don Guzman's hands if he pushed matters to an extremity. There was, as the Kid had said, a dog's chance that the vengeful Mexican might relinquish the pursuit when he had recovered the stolen pesos. The Kid placed little faith in it, but it was the only chance that remained.

On an overhanging bough, over the shallows, in full sight of any man coming down the river, the Kid hung the sacco of pesos.

There it could not fail to meet the eyes of Don Guzman and his bunch, when they came. And they were coming.

Leaving the precious sacco hanging over the stream, the Kid rejoined his companions. There was a faint hope in Donna Estrella's face, but the old Mexican was wringing his hands, as if in despair. Parting with his loot seemed almost as terrible to him as parting with his life. The look he gave the Kid was black, and bitter, and hostile. But the puncher did not heed that. Only too willingly, but for the senorita's sake, he would have left the old miser, as well as his loot, in the hands of the avengers.

The Kid lost no time now. The black-muzzled mustang was roused and the Mexican girl seated in the Kid's saddle. The Kid and Pasquale tramped on foot,

pesos. It was the life of the traitor he was seeking; and it was his to take, so far as the Kid could see. But it was some relief to the Kid, at least, that the stolen money was gone.

And the fight was coming now. Closer and closer came the sounds of pursuit in the dense forest. By such a way, no horse could proceed faster than at a walk, and frequently there were pauses for the mustang to force a way through dense growths, aided by the Kid's knife. The Kid figured that the Mexicans had left their horses, and were following the trail on foot, and undoubtedly they were gaining. The way was easier for the pursuers than for the fugitives, who were blazing their way. Light, running footsteps reached the Kid's ears, echoing through the forest, and a rustling of branches and twigs. The avengers were closing in.

Donna Estrella's dark eyes turned on the Kid as he paused.

"Apresuresse usted—hasten, señor!" she breathed. "Venga usted."

"I guess they're close behind, señorita," answered the Kid quietly. "That sack of pesos ain't stopped them, but I reckon my gun may help. You 'uns push on. I guess I'm aiming to show them jaspers that it ain't safe to crowd this Kid."

"The holy saints preserve you, señor!"

The Kid dropped behind, the mustang pushing on, with the old Mexican tramping at his tail. The Kid's gun was in his hand now as he posted himself in a mass of hanging lianas, through which the fugitives had passed, and waited.

He had not long to wait.

A sombrero showed in the dusk, a swarthy face, a pair of glinting, watchful black eyes. It was Don Guzman Carrero, the leader of the revolutionary bunch, picking up the trail ahead of his men. Through a slit in the lianas the Kid's six-gun was aimed—but he did not pull the trigger.

It went against the grain with the Kid to shoot down an enemy without warning, even a deadly enemy close on his trail, seeking his life. From his cover he grimly watched the square-jawed Mexican haciendado, as he came on. Don Guzman was within six feet of the Kid when the boy puncher rapped out suddenly:

"Put 'em up, Greaser!"

Carrero started violently. He had not expected the hunted fugitives to halt. There was a revolver in his hand, but he did not raise it as he saw the Kid's muzzle looking at him from the lianas, the Kid's eyes gleaming over it.

But there was no fear in the Mexican's face. He looked coolly at the half-seen face of the boy puncher from Frio.

"You, Señor el Tejano!" he said.

"Jest me," agreed the Kid. "I've told you to grab the air, señor, and I ain't waiting."

Don Guzman lifted his hands above his head. But he smiled darkly as he obeyed.

"It is of little use, señorito," he said. "My men are close behind—more than a score, señorito."

"I guess your galoots won't bite so hard without you to lead them, señor," said the Kid. "Drop that gun!"

Don Guzman's revolver dropped to the earth. But there was a mocking smile on his swarthy face. The rustling footsteps of his followers were close behind.

"I guess I'm going to chew the rag with you a piece," said the Kid. "Call out to your jaspers to stop."

THE POPULAR.—No. 544.

"Para!" called out the Mexican.

The rustling ceased.

"I listen, señor," said Don Guzman politely. "It is always a pleasure to exchange words with a brave caballero."

The Kid grunted. He was not in a mood himself for flowing Spanish courtesy.

"Jest you chew on this, Don Guzman," he said. "That old lobo-wolf, Pasquale ain't the kind of hombre I'd save from a necktie party—he sure ain't. But his daughter thinks a whole heap of him. You've got back the money you say he robbed you of—"

"Do you not take my word that that old traitor robbed the junta of Olillo, señor?"

"I guess I'd rather take your word than his," admitted the Kid. "I sure never saw a galoot that got my goat worse'n he does. Anyhow, you've cinched the pesos—I've made him leave them. You've got them?"

"Si, señor."

"Now you want to let up," said the Kid persuasively. "What's the good of running the thing into the ground? You've got a fight ahead if you come on—I guess you've seen my shooting, and you've found out that I'm all wildcat from the toes up. I guess I can blow your cazeba into little pieces to begin with, feller—I've got you covered. Let up, feller. Let that old lobo-wolf get clear to the border—for the señorita's sake."

"I am desolated to refuse you, señor," answered Don Guzman, with a shake of the head. "Believe me, señor, I respect you, and would willingly spare your life. The señorita is as safe from harm as if she were in her home at Olillo. But the junta he has betrayed has doomed the traitor to death—and he must die!"

"Dog-gone, your pesky junta!" growled the Kid. "I reckon you're the king-pin of the bunch, Don Guzman, and what you say goes."

"Sin duda, señor! But not for all the wealth of all the mines of Mexico would I spare the traitor!"

"Then it's goin' to be a rookus!" said the Kid.

"Unless you stand out of the matter, which, after all, is not your concern, Señor el Tejano!" suggested the Mexican. "Leave us to deal with that old picaro, and ride with the señorita where you choose."

"I guess I'd jump to it, if the señorita said yes," grunted the Kid. "That old lobo-wolf sure gets my goat. But I'm in this up to the neck, feller. You got to let up on Pasquale or walk over my guns."

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders.

"You go first, hombre," said the Kid, his eyes gleaming with menace over the levelled revolver.

"A Mexican caballero does not fear death, señor! Fire—my men will speedily avenge me," said Don Guzman coolly.

The Kid's finger was pressing on the trigger. But he relaxed it. He could not shoot down the man who faced death coolly, with a smile on his face. The Mexican watched him curiously.

"Senor, it would be little use to kill me," he said. "Every man in my party is as determined as I that the traitor shall not live. There are a score of men close at hand—two score more are following. Why waste your life in a quarrel that is not your own? Have the dark eyes of Donna Estrella bewitched you?"

The Kid coloured.

"Cut that out, dog-gone you!" he growled. "You ain't letting up on that old lobo-wolf?"

"No, señor! Never!"

"Then I guess I got to spill your juice."

Don Guzman gave another shrug of the shoulders.

"Dog-gone you!" snapped the Kid. "I reckon you know that I can't let daylight through a man standing with his hands up. Dog-gone all Greasers! I reckon I ought to wipe you out. But you've sure got a whole heap of pluck for a Greaser! But there's more ways of killing a coyote than feeding him on canned beef. You're going to be put out of this rookus for a piece, Don Guzman, and I guess I ain't forgot how to crease an ornery cayuse."

Bang!

The roar of the six-gun followed the Kid's words.

The Mexican gave a cry and pitched headlong to the ground. While the report still echoed in the trees the Rio Kid hurried after the fugitives; and from behind he heard the rushing footsteps and furious cries of the Mexicans gathering round their fallen leader. They found him senseless on the ground, with blood flowing down his face; but they soon found that he was not dead, or even badly hurt. The Kid had "creased" the chief of the Olillo junta, the bullet, grazing his head, had stunned him. For the time Don Guzman was senseless and out of the fight; but he was worth many dead men yet. Four or five of the Mexicans remained with their insensible leader; the rest, with fierce cries, pushed on in pursuit of the man who had shot him down.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

From the dense cover ahead of the Mexicans came the roar of the Rio Kid's six-guns.

The Kid was shooting in deadly earnest now. He had to stop the rush or to be overwhelmed by it. A Mexican crashed to the earth and lay still—another reeled and fell, groaning; a third clung to a tree, sorely wounded. The rush, had it gone on, must have overwhelmed the Kid, fast and accurately as he handled his guns; but the Mexicans, no longer led by the indomitable Don Guzman, were daunted by the deadly fire. The rush stopped, and the Mexicans scattered into thick cover. And the Rio Kid turned once more and hurried after the fugitives ahead of him in the forest. The pursuit was checked, and if there was a chance left the Rio Kid was the hombre to make the most of it.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The False Trail!

"MADRE DE DIOS!" groaned Antonio Pasquale; and he stumbled and fell in the underbrush.

The Kid breathed hard.

He was fatigued himself; even the iron-limbed mustang showed signs of fatigue. The girl, seated on the mustang, was silent, and seemed to the Kid only half-conscious, so worn down was she by the hard going through the tropical Mexican forest. How the old man of Olillo had kept on so long the Kid hardly knew—terror at his heels drove him on, and he tottered and limped and stumbled long after the Kid had expected him to break down from exhaustion. But now Pasquale had reached the end of his strength, and even the fear of death could not drive him farther. He lay where he had fallen, babbling to the saints to aid him.

The Kid pulled the mustang to a halt. For hours—long, burning hours—in the heat of the sun-scorched forest,

they had pushed on, after the Kid's guns had checked the pursuit. They were still followed—the Kid was certain of that—but for the time Don Guzman Carrero was out of action, and the pursuit did not come close.

Had the strength of the fugitives held out there was a remote chance of escape yet—had they been but able to hold on their way till night fell on the forest. But there was no hope for it—and now the old miser of Olillo had petered out completely.

The forest seemed interminable, stretching endless, dense, tangled, untrodden by the foot of man, as lonely and desolate as in the days before the Conquistadores landed in Mexico. From leafy branches, jaguars had stared down, with glittering eyes, at the fugitives—amid the massy trunks and giant ferns, serpents writhed from their path. But such perils passed unheeded, with vengeance and death behind. Donna Estrella seemed in a trance of fatigue; but she woke to alarm as her father collapsed in the thicket. Her dark eyes turned on him, and then on the Kid, and then she slid from the back of the mustang.

She sank on her knees beside her father. The tears were streaming down her cheeks, and the Kid's heart ached to see it. Little as he liked the old miser, he would have given his life to save him, and dry the tears of the Mexican girl. But the Kid was at the end of his rope. All that was left to him was a hopeless struggle against odds when the pursuers came.

"Mi padre—mi padre!" whispered Estrella.

"Hija mia, I am a dead man! Nombre de Dios! Nombre de Dios!" moaned Pasquale.

"Senor!" The dark, weeping eyes turned on the dismayed face of the Kid. "Save him, señor! Save my father! Noble caballero, save an old man from assassins!"

"I guess they won't touch him till they've wiped me out, senorita," said the Kid. "But that's the pesky limit! We ain't got a dog-goned chance left miss, and I'm telling you!"

The girl's faith in him, her belief that he could yet do something to save the wretched old man, touched the Kid and stirred his heart. But he could do nothing but die in defence of the wretch, and even that could not save him.

The girl bent her head to listen. "I do not hear them, señor. Perhaps they have lost the track," she whispered.

The Kid shook his head. He did not hear sounds of pursuit, but he knew that the pursuers were not far away. The track in the dense forest was not likely to be lost. The delay, he was well aware, was only caused by Don Guzman being put out of action. But with him or without him, it would go on to the fatal finish. The struggle of the fugitives was like that of an animal in a net. The end was only postponed, and must come all the same.

"They must not find my father, señor! Save my father! You are a brave caballero; you will save him?"

The girl was asking the impossible, and the Kid could only stand silent, with a heavy heart. Her dark eyes glanced round at the wall of greenery. "If we could hide, señor."

The Kid smiled faintly. "I guess they'd root us out fast enough, senorita, when they hit the end of the trail," he said.

"Cierto!"—murmured the girl. "Siguro! But—but—" It seemed that, in the stress of her father's peril, the girl's brain worked more actively

than the Kid's. "The caballo, senor—your horse—drive him on, and he will leave a trail that may deceive them."

The Kid started. "Gee!" he muttered. "Drive on the horse, señor. It is a chance, if but a feeble one—a chance that they may fail to find us!"

The Kid stood grim and silent.

Not for a moment had it occurred to his mind to part with his faithful steed. The grey mustang that had been the tried comrade in all his dangers, whose speed and intelligence had so often saved him from his foes. To part with Side-Kicker, for the sake of that old picaro with the face of a wolf—Then the Kid smiled at his own folly. When the finish came, he would have to part with Side-Kicker, and the finish could not be long delayed. And he could only hope, when he went down under the machetes, that the cayuse would find a kind master among the Mexicans into whose hands he would fall. And there was a chance, as the girl said—a feeble chance. The pursuers would press on, on the trail of the mustang, through the dense underwoods, and the fugitives might remain in hiding, and elude their eyes. There was a chance!

The girl did not understand his hesitation. She did not know that parting with his horse was, to the puncher, like parting with life itself.

"Senor, it may save us!"

The Kid nodded.

"I guess it's the big idea, miss," he said. "I wouldn't bank too high on it; but it's jest a chance, as you say. I reckon I got to let the cayuse go, when they get me. And I guess it won't hurt me none to tie a can to Side-Kicker an hour ahead of time. You've said it, miss."

Having resolved, the Kid did not lose a moment. Far off in the forest sounded a shot, doubtless a signal of some Mexican scout. But the enemy were not yet near. The Kid scanned his surroundings, and picked up the wizened old Mexican in his strong arms. He stepped lightly through the thickets, taking care to break no twig or tendril, and laid the old man down at the foot of a towering ceiba—a giant tree, that grew to a height of more than a hundred feet—a mountain of vast branches and foliage. Then he returned and drew the girl to the foot of the tree, leaving the mustang standing where he had halted.

"We got to hump it into this hyer tree, miss," said the Kid. "I guess there's cover in them branches for a hundred galoots. If the jaspers behind us give us time."

He said no more, but clambered into the ceiba, uncoiling his lasso as he went, the loop already round the shoulders of the fainting Pasquale. The girl stood silent, leaning on the tree, while the

Kid drew on the rope from above, and the old Mexican was drawn up the trunk. He disappeared into the foliage, and the Kid landed him in a fork between two huge branches, and secured him there with a length cut from the rope. Then he lowered the lasso again to Estrella.

With the help of the rope, the girl climbed the massive trunk, and the thick foliage swallowed her. In the fork between two mighty branches, was

a space several feet in extent, a safe resting-place. The girl sank down there, beside her father, leaning back against a branch.

"Keep mum, miss," said the Kid. "I guess I'll be back when I've started the cayuse on a leetle pasear on his lonesome."

He dropped from the tree and returned to the horse. With a grim, clouded face, the Kid signed to Side-Kicker to go on, and followed him, tramping heavy and deep in the underbrush, slashing branches with his bowie-knife, to leave the plainest trail he could. The pursuers were to be led past the big ceiba that hid the fugitives, and the Kid was leaving a trail for them that they could not miss. For a hundred yards he forced his way on through dense tropical growths, and then he stopped. There was no more time to lose. He took his rifle and slicker pack from the horse, his sunburnt face darkly clouded. It wrung his heart to part with Side-Kicker, and the knowledge that there was no help for it did not make it easier.

"Beat it, old hoss!" murmured the Kid huskily. "Beat it, you old cayuse! I live, I'll sure find you again, if I have to trail you all over Mexico, from the Rio Grande to Yucatan. I sure will, old hoss. Beat it!"

Side-Kicker looked round at him, not understanding. The Kid struck him slightly on the flank and pointed. The intelligent animal understood then, and plunged on through the tropical thickets.

The Kid stood watching him with a heavy heart.

Side-Kicker looked round once, perplexity in his eyes. The Kid waved him on, and the horse went plunging through the undergrowths, trampling a trail, breaking bush and branch with his shoulders as he forced his way. He disappeared from the Kid's sight, leaving him with a strange sense of forlornness.

With a deep sigh, the Kid turned away.

But he did not follow the trail back to the ceiba. He swung himself into the boughs overhead, and worked his way back from branch to branch, without touching the ground. The thick forest formed a network of interlaced branches, so close that one tree could hardly be distinguished from another. It was not the first time that the Kid had thus avoided leaving a trail, and it was necessary that there should be no track leading back to catch a wary eye among the pursuers. How the Kid found his way through the wilderness of locked branches, back to the ceiba, would have puzzled any man whose life had not been spent in llano and forest. But the Kid never paused; and within

(Continued on page 28.)



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The Trail of Vengeance!

(Continued from page 17.)

a few minutes after looking his last on Side-Kicker, he was in the branches of the great ceiba where he had left the fugitives.

Donna Estrella's dark eyes met his. "I guess the cayuse is gone, miss," whispered the Kid. "There's sure a trail to lead them jaspers on a fool's chase. If they get wise to it, the game's up; but there's a dog's chance. I reckon a sheriff's outfit in Texas wouldn't be fooled that-a-way, and the old Double-Bar bunch would sure smile at such a trick; but them Greasers may fall for it. I guess they're more stuck on revolutions and pronunciamientos than on raising a trail." He started and listened. "Silencio!"

There was a sound in the forest. The rustling and crashing of Side-Kicker

had died away in the distance. From closer at hand came a sound. The Kid put his finger on his lips.

Silently he moved on a thick branch. From a slit in the mass of foliage he watched the ground below where the trail lay. A sombrero was almost beneath him. Another and another appeared from the shades of the forest. Swarthy men were tramping the trail. And a man walking a horse followed, sitting heavily in the saddle. His sombrero hid him, but a movement revealed, for a moment, bandages below the hat, and the Kid knew that it was Don Guzman. Silent, watchful as a cougar crouched on a branch, the Kid eyed the Mexicans passing almost directly beneath him. Many of them looked weary and sullen, some savagely fierce; and muttered threats and curses in Spanish reached the puncher's ears above.

They wound on, and vanished into the forest ahead. But more followed, twos and threes, then a bunch of six—then, singly, a dozen more swarthy men

trailed past. The last of them disappeared in the forest from the Kid's watching eyes. The Kid listened with painful intentness. Don Guzman and the men ahead must have reached, by this time, the spot where the Kid had parted with Side-Kicker. If they stopped; if they scented the trick, then it was the end of the rope. He listened; but there was no sound from the Mexicans now—no sign of a return. The rustling and swaying and trampling passed on and on, till every sound was lost in the silence of the forest.

The Kid drew a deep, deep breath. The pursuit had passed, following the trail of the mustang through the dense Mexican forest. The pursuers had passed and gone, led on a false scent, and there was a glimpse of hope that the fugitives might yet escape the trail of vengeance.

THE END.

(*"HUNTED DOWN!"* is the title of next week's roaring long complete story of the Rio Kid in Mexico.)

PLAYING THE GAME!

(Continued from page 8.)

"I was thinking the same, and wondering how long it would be before you came to it," he said.

And in the Rag that day there was a meeting, at which the Bouncer was not present. But after the meeting Harry Wharton strolled along to Study No. 4 in the Remove. He found Vernon-Smith and Redwing there.

The Bouncer eyed him as he entered. His face expressed nothing, but Tom Redwing was bright.

"Smithy, old man," said Wharton, plunging into the subject directly, "we've had a Form meeting, and the sentence is knocked on the head. I'm sorry it ever came to that."

"So am I," said the Bouncer. "I'm not grumbling; the sentence was fair enough for what I did."

"Oh!" ejaculated Wharton. "You see that?"

"I'm not a fool," said Vernon-Smith composedly. "I was let off lightly. That's a fact."

Wharton smiled.

"Well, it's all over now," he said. "Nobody wants to keep you out of the cricket; and, if you're willing, we'd like to blot out what's happened, and let it be forgotten."

"I'm your man!"

"Good!" exclaimed Wharton. "And that means that your name goes down for the St. Jim's match."

"Right-ho!"

"Oh, good!" exclaimed Redwing. "That's jolly good news!"

"And there's room for Redwing, too," said Harry. "The list goes up to-day.

Smithy; and I don't mind saying that I'm jolly glad your name's going to be in it!"

And the captain of the Remove went down to the Rag to post the list.

The feud in the Remove was over.

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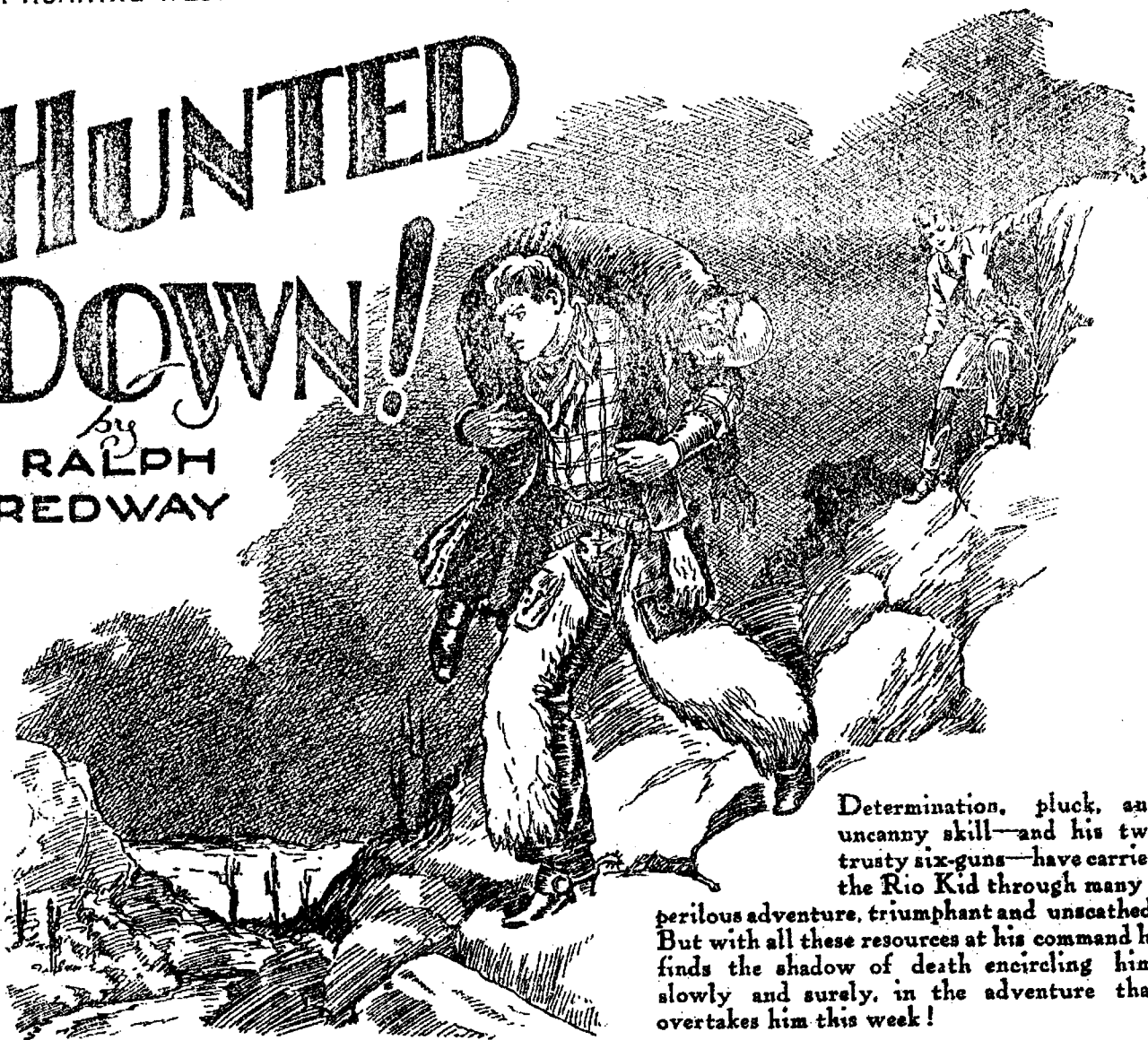
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by
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THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Hunted!

"LISTEN, señor!" breathed Donna Estrella.

The Rio Kid was listening. For hours, since he had taken refuge in the vast branches of the ceiba, the Kid's ears had been on the strain. He did not need the Mexican girl's whispered warning.

In the heart of the tropical forest, stretching from the banks of the Rio Rojo, the great ceiba reared its massive trunk and mighty branches, interlaced with the branches of other towering trees. Thick foliage, hanging lianas, masses of Spaniard's beard, made it an almost solid mass, impenetrable to the eye. Scarcely a safer hiding-place could have been found by the fugitives, if only the bunch who were hunting them had missed the trail. And as the hot hours crawled by the Rio Kid's hopes had risen. Don Guzman Carrero and his men had passed on, under the great branches and disappeared into the forest, hours since. The Kid's mustang, trampling a trail through the dense forest, had led them far, on a false scent—far from sight and hearing of the hidden ones in the great ceiba.

Had the Kid been alone he could have dropped from his hiding-place in the great tree, struck off into the forest, and laughed at pursuit. But his two companions had sunk under the fatigue of the long, weary flight. It was because they could go no farther that

the hiding-place had been sought. In a fork of two great branches Don Antonio Pasquale lay, secured by a rope from falling, half-sleeping, worn out, incapable of further exertion. His wizened face was deeply lined, his hawk-like eyes closed, opening at intervals to glance round him in fear and apprehension. And Donna Estrella, though her courage had never faltered, lay heavily against a slanting branch, without motion. The Kid could not make a break without leaving his companions to their fate, and of that the boy puncher from Texas was not thinking.

Hours had passed, and the dusk of the Mexican forest was deepening to dark. It seemed to the Kid that fortune was turning his friend. No sound or sign of the enemy, after long hours of watching and listening. Side-Kicker had gone far into the forest, and his trail had led the Mexican bunch far astray. Parting with his faithful mustang made the Kid's heart ache, but it seemed that his device had been successful. Later, when the moon came up over the forest and his exhausted companions had recovered their strength a little, it would be possible to make a break, with a chance of escape.

And then, to dash the Kid's rising hopes, came sounds from the tangled woods below—rustling, swaying of creepers, followed by the murmur of voices speaking in Spanish. Estrella Pasquale laid her hand on the puncher's

arm, her dark eyes dilated, and she whispered:

"Oigo! Oiga, usted! Listen!"

The Kid set his lips.

From a slit in the mass of vegetation he looked below, and a sombrero nodded in his sight. A Mexican was passing under the tree. The Kid's hand sought the walnut butt of a gun, but the sombrero did not tilt, the man did not look up. It passed and vanished.

Pasquale's eyes opened, gleaming with fear. He was about to speak, but the Kid laid a hand on his lips. The old miser of Olillo was silent, trembling in every limb.

The Kid listened almost painfully.

He knew what had happened. The Mexicans had followed the trail left by the mustang—a trampled trail they could not miss—but they had discovered at last that the horse had gone alone. After wasting hours they had turned back along the trail to seek the fugitives who had remained behind. Now they had reached the spot where the fugitives had hidden, and were searching the tangled forest on either side of the trail. The Kid could hear voices calling, rustling and swaying in all directions. Again a Mexican passed under the branches of the ceiba and crashed on through a mass of lianas and disappeared. The spot where the Kid had started Side-Kicker on his lone trail was a hundred yards away—

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at that distance from the ceiba there were footprints to be picked up by a keen eye—none nearer, for the Kid had been careful to leave no sign near the hiding-place. Don Guzman must know that they were not far away; he must know that they were hidden, but finding them in the impenetrable greenery was another matter. The Kid figured that it was more than likely that they could be doggo in the branches of the ceiba till dark, and when darkness fell the hunt would have to be abandoned. There was a chance yet.

Footsteps beneath the ceiba again; a muttering in Spanish. The Kid caught the words "el traidor." They were speaking of Antonio Pasquale, the man who had fled, a traitor to the revolutionary junta of Olillo; and the savage bitterness of their voices told how fiercely keen they were to bring him to account. Pasquale, as he heard the words, trembled like a leaf. Only the foliage hid him from the men whose knives would have leaped to take his life, had they seen him.

"They are not far away!"

The voice, speaking in Spanish, came clearly to the fugitives in the ceiba, and the Kid recognised the tones of Don Guzman Carrero. He peered down through the foliage, and had a glimpse of the square jaw and dark, swarthy face of the Mexican hacendado, with the forehead bandaged under the sombrero. One glimpse was enough for the Kid and he drew back silently into thicker cover. The black, glinting eyes under

the blood-stained bandage were watchful.

"They cannot be far!" Don Guzman was speaking again, evidently without a suspicion that his words were heard by those he sought. "The horse went on alone—that is certain. That Tojano played a trick on us, and we were deceived. But it is certain that they did not go with the horse. Felipe has picked up the trail where the horse was sent on alone—there is no question of it. They sent on the horse to delude us, and found a hiding-place."

"Si, señor Don Guzman," came another voice.

"In the thickets, in the lianas, perhaps in the branches of the trees," said Don Guzman. "We have but to seek. That old picaro cannot escape us now. Harm not the senorita, she is innocent. And spare the life of that Tejano, if it be possible. Ho spared mine when it was his to take. But kill Pasquale when your eyes fall on him—a knife or a bullet at the sight of the old wolf."

There were footsteps again. The Mexicans were spreading among the tangled tropical vegetation, searching. Don Guzman remained for some moments where he stood, and though the Kid could not see him now, he knew that the hacendado was staring upward, scanning the mighty branches over his head. But there was nothing to betray the fugitives to his eyes, and the Kid heard him pass on at last.

Donna Estrella breathed a panting breath.

"Senor, they are gone!" she whispered.

"Nombre de Dios!" muttered Pasquale. "Madre de Dios! I am a dead man! Por todos los Santos! I am lost!"

The Rio Kid figured that the man of Olillo was right. But to the Mexican girl he still kept a face of hope.

"There's a chance yet," muttered the Kid. "If we keep doggo till dark, there's a chance, though a mighty slim one. Send that them guys don't root us out before sundown."

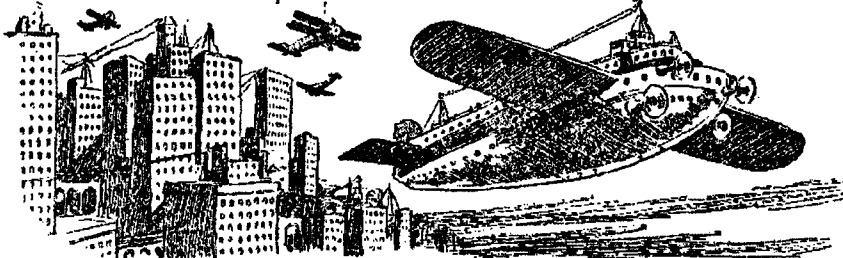
Sounds of rustling, of calling voices, came at intervals, but farther from the hiding-place in the ceiba. And at last the light of day was gone, and darkness, deepening swiftly to blackness, descended on the Mexican forest.

THE SECOND CHAPTER. The Flight!

SILENCE in the forest! Through the thick foliage there was a gleam of silver from the unseen moon that sailed over the Rio Rojo.

Long the Kid had listened; but all sounds of the enemy had died away. It seemed that they had passed far from the hiding-place in their vain search. With nightfall, the Kid reckoned, they would camp—it might be at a distance. That was the chance for which the Kid had hoped. To make a break might be to run fairly into the hands of the enemy, but the chance had to be taken. (Continued on opposite page.)

WHEN THE EARTH BECOMES TOO SMALL!



At the swift rate Mechanical Science progresses to-day, what will this world of ours be like in the years to come? This vast question is skilfully answered by our contributor in the special article below.

EVERY few weeks some clever brain is responsible for the hastening of the time when this world of ours will become such a very tight fit that inventors will have to start scheming for a way of escape from the earth. There won't be room for us all, and people who want to travel tremendous distances at the speed of the wind won't be satisfied to do it here.

You can speak to a friend at the other side of the world at five minutes' notice, if you can pay the wireless fee. Very soon now someone will have perfected a plan whereby you will be able to see your friend, in his home surroundings, in natural colours, whilst you chat across thousands of miles of space.

Airmen have flown to India in two days. Enormous trains are slaughtering space and time incredibly. Inventors are planning to turn the North Pole into wheat-growing country, and people are living in parts of the world that a little while ago were unknown.

Labour-saving devices are giving folk more time to spend on pleasure trips, and the sum total of every invention now being completed is the very startling fact that the world is rapidly becoming too small for us. We are outgrowing it like a youngster outgrows his breeches!

When air-liners have conquered the air completely, explorers will turn their backs on the countries of this world and try to visit those other worlds dotted immense distances out in space—the planets. Of course, it will be necessary to learn far more about these mysterious other worlds before such trips cease to be jumps in the dark, but they are doing amazing things towards gathering that knowledge in the various observatories of the world.

At the great Mount Wilson Observatory, in America, they are now buffing a telescope that will be able to see at least 600,000

times better than the sharpest human eye! It will cost £1,000,000 at least, and it will have a mirror not quite seven-teen feet in diameter!

It will take anything from five to ten years to complete, this mighty instrument that is going to wrench from the planets the secrets they have hidden so long from mortal eyes. When the job is done, and the telescope is pointed at the first great star that astronomers want to tackle, the greatest feat of modern engineering ever performed will reveal to us—what?

That question must remain a fascinating problem until the time is ripe. Meanwhile engineers are tunnelling the earth in all directions, deeper and deeper every day, and others are rearing up skyscrapers, the mere thought of which turns one giddy.

The cities are nearing the limit of their possible expansions, so buildings of the future must either be reared higher into the skies or deeper into the bowels of the earth. Pedestrians must give way to swift and colossal traffic, and for these immense tunnels are even now being built.

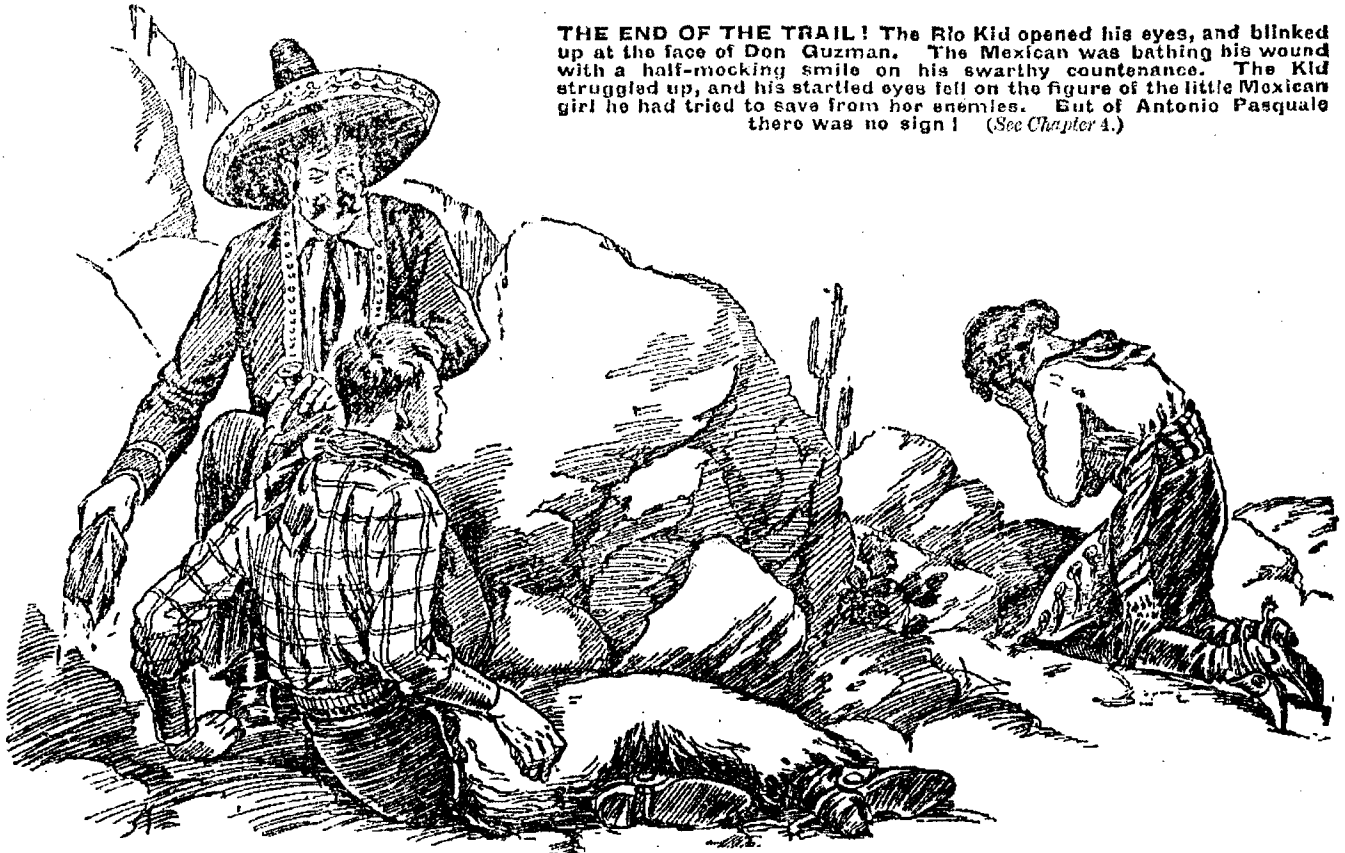
Those skyscrapers are being pushed up in a fever of wild competition. They have just started work on one, in Chicago, which is going to be *seventy-five stories high!* In it there will be innumerable shops and offices, a hotel with well over 400 rooms, a garage to hold more than 1,000 motor-cars, a hospital, two clubs, gymnasiums, and swimming pools; a golf course, and a railway running through the bottom of it! The whole gigantic scheme will cost about £11,000,000!

Britain has already shown the rest of the world what can be done in the way of underground railways, as any fellow who lives in, or can visit, London can see any day or night for himself. Piecemeal is far and away the most amazing underground railway station ever known, one of the tubes through which one of the several railways run being over a hundred feet below the roads.

An army of workmen took four years to construct it, and it cost £5,000,000. Eleven moving stairways take you down or up, and for the time being, once aboard the train, you become a swift-moving human mole.

Another sort of tunnel, three-quarters of a mile long, has just replaced a big bridge spanning a busy river in America. It was built in enormous sections, each 200 feet long and weighing 4,500 tons apiece. When all the mighty sections were ready they were floated down the river and sunk, all twelve of them, in the places prepared on the bed of the river. Then they were joined end to end, and now 12,000 motor-cars can use it daily, with two lines of street trams whizzing down it, and pavements on either side of the twenty-three feet wide under-river roadway!

THE END OF THE TRAIL! The Rio Kid opened his eyes, and blinked up at the face of Don Guzman. The Mexican was bathing his wound with a half-mocking smile on his swarthy countenance. The Kid struggled up, and his startled eyes fell on the figure of the little Mexican girl he had tried to save from her enemies. But of Antonio Pasquale there was no sign! (See Chapter 4.)



for to remain was death. With the new day the beating of the forest would begin again, and it was too much to hope that the hiding-place would remain undiscovered till another night came. It was now or never.

After the long rest in the ceiba, the old Mexican and his daughter were capable of renewed exertion. As for the Kid, he had forgotten that he had been fatigued. The faint glimmer of the moon gave light enough for the Kid to pick his way, and any way was good that led far from the pursuers. With luck, they might be at a good distance by dawn, to hide the next day in a more secure place of concealment. The Kid knew how slim the chances were, but such as they were he was the hombre to make the most of them.

He whispered to his companions. They were eager to go—old Pasquale almost panting with eagerness to make the attempt to put a safe distance between himself and the foes who hunted him for his life. The Kid swung him down to the earth with his lasso, and then helped the Mexican girl to descend. He dropped lightly after them, packed on his rifle and slicker-pack, and stood for some moments watching and listening. But all was silent and still, and the boy puncher led the way through the tangled forest.

From the underbush the fierce eyes of a jaguar glared; but the savage brute leaped away from the flash of the Kid's knife, much to his relief. A single shot, he knew, would be enough to bring the whole bunch of Mexicans down on them.

Winding through the forest, they pressed on their way, the Kid leading and forcing a path where the brush was thick. No skill could blanket such a trail—it had to be left for the enemy to pick up when daylight came. But by daylight the Kid hoped to be far away.

The Kid stopped suddenly. He signed to his companions to halt. In the dimness of the forest he had almost trodden on a sleeping figure—a Mexican rolled in his serape, his head pillowed on his arm.

The Kid was only a foot from him when he stopped.

But caution was useless—the sleeper awakened. Two black, fierce eyes gleamed, startled, lips were opened for a shout. But the shout was never uttered. The heavy butt of the Kid's Colt crashed down, and the Mexican rolled senseless in the herbage.

"I guess that Jasper won't yap a whole heap!" growled the Kid. "Follow me, you-uns."

He trod round the stunned Mexican. The man was left behind, lying where he had fallen.

With redoubled caution the Kid pressed on. But he saw no more of the enemy, though once or twice he thought he heard sounds from the dimness of the night. The rest of the bunch, the Kid figured, would not be far from the man he had struck down, and that meant that the whole bunch was left behind. When more than a mile had passed under his feet the Kid breathed more easily. He was fairly certain now that he was out of the radius of Don Guzman's farthest scout, and there was no sound of pursuit. And the night was before him—so long as the strength of his companions held out.

The Kid alone would have travelled fast, but he had to accommodate his pace to that of a stumbling old man and a girl. From the old Mexican, who realised now that he was out of hearing of his pursuers, came a constant muttering of complaint, of curses on Don Guzman, and invocations to the saints. Donna Estrella was silent; only her dark eyes turned gratefully on the Kid when he helped her in difficult places with his strong arm.

She was the real goods, this Mexican girl, the Kid reckoned, and the thought of escape, though it was what he aimed for, was not wholly agreeable to his mind, because it meant that he would see Donna Estrella no more. That old lobo-wolf, her father, got the Kid's goat sorely; but his heart was growing very tender towards the old traitor's daughter.

The Kid had left his native Texas for a spell in Mexico, to keep out of the way of searching sheriffs and Rangers, who had made things hot for the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. He had not thought of locating in the country of the Greasers for keeps. But now that thought was in his mind—vague pictures of a rancho in the Mexican cow-country, with a dark-haired, dark-eyed Mexican girl riding by his side. It hardly occurred to the Kid's simple mind that in those days and nights of danger and stress his heart had gone into Estrella's keeping. But he knew that the thought of parting brought a strange pain, and once, when the Mexican girl leaned heavily on his arm as he helped her over a fallen trunk, the Kid felt his heart beating fast.

But if such thoughts were in his mind they did not draw the Kid's attention from the matter in hand. For some time now he had noted that the forest was thinning—the trees no longer grew in interlaced masses, the swarming creepers no longer choked the way. The Kid figured that he was, at last, getting out of that seemingly interminable forest, and the prospect cheered him. The Kid was a man of the plains, and he longed to be under the open sky again.

They came at last to a deep, wide arroyo, where the forest ended. Beyond the moonlight lay like a sea of silver. Where he was the Kid was left guessing; he was a stranger in the country of the Rio Rojo. Beyond the arroyo stretched a stony plain, rising towards a long, low line of sierra. Clumps of bush and tall cactus and yucca showed dim in the moon. He clambered over the edge of the arroyo and looked down. At the bottom of the channel a thin stream flowed and murmured, and the Kid guessed that it was one of the innumerable tributaries of the Rio Rojo. He returned to his companions with a brighter face.

"I guess our luck's holding, you-uns," he said. "We got to hump it down into the arroyo, and follow the water—it's a chance of blinding the trail. If them

jaspers don't get after us pretty slick now, I guess they can call it a day, and hit for home."

Pasquale had sunk down on the earth, groaning with weariness.

"Senor, I can do no more," he mumbled. "Not to save my life can I take another step! Nombro do Dios!"

The girl's dark eyes turned outreatingly on the Rio Kid.

"You reckon you can make the grade, miss?" he asked.

"Si, senor."

"I guess I'll get your padre along, then."

The sinewy Kid swung the skinny old man on his shoulder, and carried him down the steep side of the arroyo. Donna Estrella followed. They reached the stream a score of yards below the high, stony banks, and entered the shallow water—it was but a few inches deep. Up the stream the Kid led the way, the old Mexican on his shoulder, mumbling and muttering. His weight was a heavy burden to the Kid, but he tramped on steadily, the water washing round his riding-boots. No trail was left now—it meant delay, if not defeat, to the pursuers. For more than a mile the Kid, carrying the miser of Olillo, tramped up the winding watercourse, and it was the sound of a stumbling fall behind him that made him stop at last and turn.

Donna Estrella struggled to her feet. "No es nada, senor! It is nothing! I can go on!" she whispered.

But she stumbled again as she moved, and the Kid shook his head.

"I guess it's close on sun-up now, miss," he said. "We got to stop at sun-up and hunt cover. You rest here a piece while I take a leetle pasear around."

The Kid placed his burden down, and Estrella sank on a rock and waited. The Kid moved on, his own sinewy limbs aching now. It was impossible to push on farther, and many miles lay between them and the enemy. All that remained was to find a new hiding-place for the new day—and hope!

The Kid soon found a place—a deep fissure in the side of the rocky arroyo, screened by irregular rocks. He carried the old Mexican into the hollow, and then helped Donna Estrella over the rough rocks and jagged stones. The girl looked round her when they stopped. Walls of rock shut in the hiding-place, save on the side towards the stream, where great boulders were piled.

"We are safe here, senor," she whispered.

"I sure hope so, miss," said the Kid.

Old Pasquale was sleeping where the Kid had laid him down on the stony earth. At the farthest extremity of the fissure the Kid stretched his slicker and blanket for the girl to rest upon. Then he went back to the stream, and in the glimmering moonlight, mingled now with the first gleam of dawn, carefully obliterated every sign of their passage. Satisfied at last, the Kid clambered over the boulders again into the hollow of the high bank, threw himself on the stony earth, and slept.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Kid's Last Fight!

HIGHER rose the burning sun over arid plain and rocky arroyo. Light blazed down and simmering heat in the hollow of the high bank of the water-course. Faintly the shallow stream murmured over stone and sand, shining in the bright sunlight.

Among the silent rocks a coyote crept

and slunk, with watchful, glaring eyes. He peered and sniffed about the boulders that hid the camp of the fugitives, and slunk on down the ravine, whining. And then suddenly the lean, hungry beast started, pricked up his ears, turned and scuttled up the arroyo again, and vanished into the dusty distance.

Some sound of alarm had reached him from lower down the stream, though it did not reach the ears of the sleepers—sounds of men pursuing a weary way in the blazing sun, tramping over rugged rocks, splashing in the stream, muttering Spanish oaths. The slinking coyote had fled, but there was no flight for the fugitives who slept in the hollow of the bank; even if they waked, there was no more flight for them. And as yet they did not wake.

Up the arroyo the Mexican bunch came, picking their way, watchful, suspicious, savage-eyed. Don Guzman Carrero, his forehead bandaged under the wide sombrero, bloodstained, worn, and weary, but indomitable as ever, led the bunch—a human bloodhound on the trail of vengeance.

By what good fortune the Rio Kid had escaped him so far, and kept the old lobo-wolf of Olillo from his clutches, the haciendado hardly knew, but he knew that, at long last, there was no escape. The Kid was fighting against Fate in his struggle to save Estrella's father from the vengeance of the junta.

In the forest the trail had been found at dawn, followed swiftly to the arroyo, and now the arroyo that rived the stony plain was under search. A dozen men had been sent down the stream towards its junction with the Rio Rojo, for Don Guzman left nothing to chance; but it was not in that direction that he believed the fugitives had gone. Up the stream he went with a score of men at his back, scanning and searching every foot of the way.

High up on either side of the sunken ravine, riding the dusty plain, wore a dozen horsemen, watching the desert for sign if the fugitives had left the arroyo. But Don Guzman knew they had not left it; he could follow the reasonings of the Kid's mind; he knew that it was cover the Texan was seeking, and on the open plain there was no cover, and the fugitives would have been visible for miles in the sunlight. It was in the arroyo that he would find them, if he found them at all, and he swore with many Spanish oaths that find them he would. Towards the girl he had no anger, and the Kid he admired with the respect of one brave man for another; but to the traitor—"el traidor"—he was implacable.

But in the rugged, rocky sides of the deep arroyo, amid crevices and fissures and hollows, there were hiding-places innumerable, and the progress was slow, for not a chance would the chief of the Olillo junta leave.

Men on foot explored every rocky recess and hunted for sign, while Don Guzman walked his horse up the stream. Behind the party came other led horses and pack-mules; in the remuda was the Kid's powerful mustang, which had led the Mexicans so far astray the previous day in the forest, and which had been roped in at last with a lasso.

In the hunt in the forest the bunch had left their horses, but the animals had been promptly brought up when the trail was found leading on to the plain. The fugitives were dismounted, and if they broke cover, they would be ridden down; the haciendado was sure that they would not break cover while the day lasted. And ere sundown their hiding-place would be found. It was

yet long till noon when one of the riders on the upper plain halted, and waved his sombrero as a signal to the trackers below in the arroyo.

A grim smile crossed Don Guzman's swarthy face. He knew that the quarry had been sighted.

The Rio Kid, on his stony bed, slept soundly through the hot hours of the morning. In those hours the enemy were stealing upon him, but had he waked he could have done nothing but wait for them to come. He hoped that the trackers had lost the trail; but if that hope failed the game was up, and the fugitives were at the end of their rope. He slept, knowing that he would wake if a foe came near. And he awakened suddenly.

Across his face a moving shadow had passed—the shadow of a horseman who had halted on the high bank, with the sun behind him, and was looking down into the fissure. The Kid, without stirring, looked up and saw the dark face of a Mexican, the black eyes glinting as they searched the hollow of the rocky bank of the arroyo. He read the grin of triumph on the swarthy face, and knew that he had been seen—knew that it was the finish. And he flashed a gun from his belt and lifted it, and the horseman backed away out of sight only in time to escape the swift bullet.

The crack of the six-gun awoke a thousand echoes on the arroyo. It startled Donna Estrella and the old Mexican from slumber.

"Nombro de Dios!" babbled Pasquale.

"Senor!" It was a cry of fear from the Mexican girl. "Senor! Los picaros! They are here!"

The Kid was on his feet now, his face grim.

"I guess it's the dog-goned finish, miss!" he said. "That guy Guzman is sure a bloodhound on the trail! We had a dog's chance, but it ain't bought us anything! They got us!"

"Save my father!" breathed the girl, her eyes wide with terror. "Senor, caballero, save my father!"

"They ain't touching him while this Kid can pull a trigger, miss!" said the boy puncher quietly. "You get back, miss, and keep doggo! There'll be lead flying hyer soon!"

The girl did not heed. All her fear was for her father, and all the wretched old man's fear was for himself. From behind the boulders that screened them from the stream came trampling of feet, clattering of hoofs, triumphant shouts of the Mexicans. From the high upper bank, more trampling and shouting. The fugitives were surrounded, and the end had come at last—the grim, desperate fight against odds that the Kid had long expected at the end of the desperate trail—and it only remained to the boy outlaw to sell his life as dearly as he could. And that would be very dearly, he told himself savagely, as he gripped a walnut-butted gun in either hand and watched for the first enemy to show himself.

A shadow fell again across the fissure from above, and the Kid lifted a gun. But the man who showed himself on the high bank, looking down, came unarmed and held up a hand. The Kid stared up grimly at Don Guzman Carrero.

"We meet again, caballero!" said the haciendado politely. "Do not reproach yourself, senor. You have done miracles, but there was no chance for you. And now it is the end."

"You've said it, fellow," answered the Kid coolly. "You've got me cinched, and I guess it's me for the long jump!"

"Sin duda, señor," smiled Don Guzman. "But, you see, caballero, that it is the end; you cannot save that old wolf now! Why throw away your life in a futile struggle against thirty men?"

"I guess I've given my word to the señorita, feller!" said the Kid stubbornly. "You ain't touching that old hombre while this guy can put up a fight! Come on as soon as you want!"

"You are a brave caballero!" said the Mexican. "I shall be sorry to see you cut to pieces, señor. Once more I offer you a chance. I have your horse. You shall take it, and another for the señorita, and ride where you choose, leaving to me that old wolf, who is now in my power, and whom you cannot save. You have done all that a man can do, señor; there is no shame in yielding to what is inevitable. Do not spill blood for nothing."

The Kid shook his head. "You sure are a white man, fellow!" he said. "I ain't much use for Greasers, as a rule; but I do allow you sure are a white man from the toes up! But there ain't nothing doing! I'm standing by the old guy so long as I can put up a rookus! Quit chewing the rag, and let the bell ring!"

The Mexican, looking down at him, paused. There was regret in his face. He would gladly have spared the Kid; and he knew, too, how desperate and deadly the fight would be when the bunch closed in on the boy puncher for the last savage struggle. Perhaps for some moments and for the first time, the avenger paused in his purpose. But as his eyes turned on the figure of the miser of Ohillo, a blaze came into them, and his face set hard, his square jaw shut grimly. If he had thought of abandoning his purpose, it was only for a moment.

"As you desire, señor!" he said. And he stepped back. "Now for the circus!" said the Rio Kid grimly. "I guess this is going to be some rookus."

There was a rush and scramble of feet over the boulders; sombreros and dark, fierce faces showed in a swarm. The Rio Kid's guns began to roar. There was a shriek from Estrella—a wail of terror from the miser of Ohillo. From the side of the stream the attack came swarming; and at the same moment men scrambled down into the fissure in the bank from the upper plain. On all sides the Rio Kid was surrounded, foe-swarming on every side, knives and machetes gleaming, firearms crashing in a chorus of pandemonium.

Men were yelling, falling, stumbling, cursing, while the Kid's guns streamed fire and smoke, as if an inferno had broken out amid the rocks under the burning sun. Death was before the Kid, death behind him; but the Rio Kid was a bad man to crowd, and certain death did not daunt him. Foes crowded on all sides, amid frightful yells and cries, till a crashing bullet brought sudden darkness and oblivion to the puncher as he fought in the midst of a swarm of foes. And as the Rio Kid went down, the Mexicans swarmed in the rock fissure with shouts of triumph, and the traitor of Ohillo cowered in the grasp of the avengers who had tracked him to his doom.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Hitting the Trail!

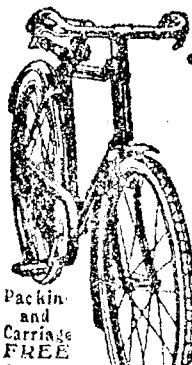
THE Rio Kid opened his eyes. He opened them in wonder, blinking at the sun. It had not been in his thoughts that he would ever open them again when he had closed in that last wild affray with the Mexican bunch.

Yet he lived, and wondered to find himself still living. A bitter ache was in his head—he was covered with dust and blood; yet he did not feel that he was badly hurt. His hand went to his head, and felt the cut on the scalp. A bullet had gone close—close enough to stun him; an inch lower and the Kid would have found the end of his wild life-trail. His hair was wet with water—someone was bathing the hurt. The Kid's dazed eyes discerned Guzman Carrero. The Mexican smiled as he met his glance—a smile, half-mocking, but not unfriendly. The Kid's glance passed him, and fell upon a kneeling form—Donna Estrella, her face buried in her hands, her graceful form shaken by sobs, weeping. The Kid felt a pang at his heart. His hand went instinctively to his belt, but his weapons were gone. He could see nothing of Antonio Pasquale; and he could guess what had happened while he lay senseless in the hands of his enemies. The traitor had paid for his treachery.

"Shucks!" murmured the Kid. He sat up and leaned on a rock. "You dog-goned Greaser, what's this game? Where's Pasquale?"

Don Guzman shrugged his shoulders slightly. "We have not trailed that old wolf, señor, for days and nights, to spure him at the end," he answered.

(Continued on next page.)



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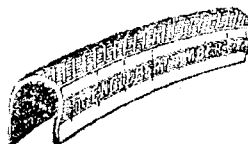
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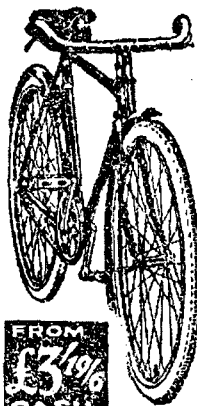
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"The senorita—" faltered the Kid. "The senorita saw nothing. Antonio Pasquale has paid for his treachery—speak no more of him," said Guzman Carrero. "Fear nothing for the senorita—we are caballeros, and the nina is as safe with us as in the house of her relatives. And you, senor—" He paused, with a strange smile on his swarthy, bandaged face.

The Kid's lip curled. "I guess I ain't got no kick coming," he answered coolly. "You got me, and it's your game, feller; and I'll say you're a white man. You got the senorita safe to her folks, and I guess I'll go up the flume without raisin' a howl. I reckoned I'd come out at the little end of the horn when I horned into this rookus; and I ain't got any kick coming. Get it over and be damned to you!"

"It is over, senor," answered the Mexican. He touched his bandaged head. "You spared my life when it was yours to take—"

"I guess I creased you like an ornery steer in the forest yesterday," said the Kid. "I reckon I'd have done better to put the lead through your cabeza, feller."

"Perhaps not," said Guzman Carrero. "You spared me, like a brave caballero, and I spare you. I also can handle a gun, senor." He smiled. "I can crease a steer as well as a Texas puncher. It was my bullet that struck you down, senor, but even in the heat of conflict I spared you. My men demand your life, but—caramba—I am master. You live, senor, and you will live to ride with the senorita to Olillo."

"Gee!" muttered the Kid. He stared blankly at the Mexican. "You ain't putting me out?" he ejaculated.

"No, senor. I should be sorry to take the life of so brave a caballero. There is now no quarrel between us; the man you sought to save has met his punishment, and all is at an end. Your horse is here—your guns at your saddle. We part, senor, for ever; let us part like caballeros."

The Kid staggered to his feet. His mustang, his beloved Side-Kicker, was tethered close at hand, with another horse and a pack-mule.

"Don Guzman, I've said that you're a white man," he said. "You are sure white, and clean grit all through. I guess I never figured I'd take my hat off to a Greaser, but I do now. You sure are the real goods!"

The Mexican grasped his hand.

"Adios, senor!" he said.

"Adios!" said the Kid.

The Mexican mounted his horse and rode away down the arroyo, the way his men had gone. The clattering hoof-beats died away.

In the lonely, rocky arroyo the Rio Kid remained—with Estrella. He spoke what words of comfort he could to the Mexican girl, weeping for the father who had been unworthy of her devotion, but who had been dearly loved. The traitor had fallen to the vengeance of the junta of Olillo, and one heart, at least, mourned for him.

It was days later that the Rio Kid rode into the tree-shaded streets of Olillo, the Mexican girl riding by his side. Safely the Kid had brought her home from the desert, and in respect for her grief he had said no word of the feelings in his heart. But the Kid had been thinking—thinking of that picture of a rancho in the Mexican cow-country, with a dark-eyed donna who would ride the range at his side.

Through the sunny adobe street of Olillo they rode to the Casa Pasquale, where wondering peons came to greet the daughter of their master who had fled in the night, and who would never return. And then the Kid rode to a fonda, leaving Donna Estrella in her home, but thinking—still thinking of the rancho of his dreams. But it was fated that the Rio Kid should ride a lone trail.

The next day the boy puncher was at the Casa Pasquale, where Donna Estrella, clad in deep black, her pale face more beautiful than ever under the black lace mantilla, greeted him with grateful courtesy. The Kid wondered shyly whether he would dare to speak what was in his mind; and he coloured and hesitated long, hardly hearing even the sweet voice of the senorita as she thanked him for his courage and devotion. But he started and gave sudden attention as a name fell from her lips.

"Don Jose Amado," the girl was saying; and the Kid, wondering who that guy might happen to be, soon learned, as the girl, colouring, proceeded: "Mi novio—"

The Kid drew a deep, deep breath. It had never crossed his mind, though he figured now that he might have guessed as much; he knew what a "novio" was. Donna Estrella was betrothed to this Don Jose Amado, of whom the Kid had never heard till that moment; and in her gratitude to the chivalrous Kid the senorita was asking him to meet Don Jose; assuring him that she had already told Don Jose of his chivalry, his courage, his courtesy, and that Don Jose was as eager to thank him as she herself was. She was anxious that he should meet this Don Jose, at the mention of whose name her pale, sad face lighted. The Kid was glad to see it light; but he had no hunch to meet Don Jose Amado, and he was glad that the words that had been in his mind had not passed his lips.

"You dog-goned gink!" was what the Kid said to himself. And that picture of a rancho in the Mexican cow-country and a dark-eyed donna riding by his side, faded from the Kid's mind. He pulled himself together; the Kid was not the galoot to wince under a blow.

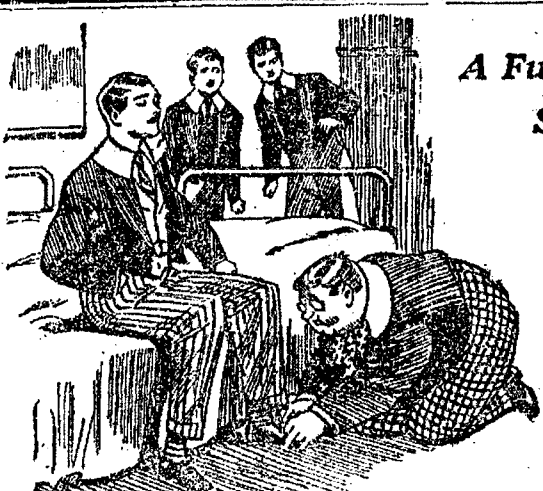
"I guess, miss," he said slowly; "I guess I'd be powerful glad to meet up with this Don Jose, who I'm sure is the pick of all the guys in this section, or you wouldn't like him, miss, like you do. But it jest happens that I got to hit the trail pronto; I jest got to ride out of Olillo powerful quick and—"

"But you will return, senor," said Dona Estrella eagerly; "and when you return—"

"Sure!" said the Kid. "When I return, senorita—" It was little likely that the Kid would ever ride again into the adobe streets of Olillo.

He took his leave, and returned to the fonda. An hour later the Rio Kid was riding out of Olillo to the west.

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THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Plot I

THE casa de campo stood lonely, surrounded by dark, sweeping woods. The Rio Kid figured that the man who had built it must have had a taste for solitude. For miles and miles the Kid had ridden by winding tracks through the shady forest, ignorant where they would lead him, and cheerfully indifferent on that point. The boy puncher from Texas was not in need of *fonda* or *posada*; he carried all he needed in his slicker pack, on the back of the grey mustang. His time was his own, and he could camp where and when he pleased. He had not expected to hit up against a house in that lonely region, and when he came in sight of the adobe building he drew rein and sat in the saddle looking at it.

It was a hot day—hot even for Mexico—and the Kid had been grateful for the shade of the thick leafy branches over the forest trails. He had reached the end of an avenue, and beyond lay gardens surrounding the casa, glowing in the brilliant Mexican sunlight.

The casa, like most Mexican buildings, was flat-roofed, and on the roof nodded graceful palms and tropical shrubs, and gorgeous flowers displayed their brilliant colouring in the sun. Evidently it was a "casa de campo"—the country house of some wealthy Mexican—an old building, dating from Spanish days, with immensely thick walls built for defence, like all the old buildings in Mexico, and not a window showing on the outer walls, all the windows opening on the inner courtyard

—out of the Kid's sight. Only the patio stood open, and there two or three sleepy peons could be seen lounging.

The Kid was accustomed to the free hospitality of the West; but he did not think of horning into a Mexican country house, the owner of which, more likely than not, shared the national hatred for men from the northern side of the border. But there would be no harm, he reckoned, in camping in the great woods that surrounded the solitary adobe. And after regarding the casa de campo from a distance for some minutes he wheeled his mustang and rode back along the shady avenue and struck off from it into a bridle-path that led through the forest.

The path was narrow, and tangled with shrubs and lianas, and the Kid dismounted, taking his rein over his arm, and walked the mustang under the trees. Shady as it was under the leafy branches, the heat was intense, and the Kid, who had followed a long trail that day, was rather keen to find a camp, especially if there was water handy. The murmur of rippling water reached his ears through the trees, and he stopped and looked about him.

The rippling sound came from beyond a wall of greenery that was almost solid, from some hidden stream meandering through the wood, and it was not easy to force a path through without slashing away the underwoods with his bowie-knife. The Kid was an outlaw in his own country, of Texas; but he was a respecter of property, and he hesitated to gash a way through the woods that belonged to some unknown Mexican haciendado.

And as he stood debating the matter

The Rio Kid has seen a good deal of the world, and in his lone travels has experienced some amazing adventures. But they are nothing compared with the adventure that overtakes him in the heart of a Mexican forest!



in his mind he started a little at the sound of voices. The deep shadowy forest was not so solitary as he had thought. Voices, speaking in Spanish—the language of the country—came to his ears from beyond that solid green wall by the bridle path—the speakers within a short distance of him.

Spanish was a tongue familiar enough to the Texas puncher, who had heard plenty of Greaser lingo before coming over into Mexico. But the speakers were not near enough for him to make out the words—he heard only the musical murmur of the most musical of languages. There were two voices, and, judging by the tones, the Kid figured that one was that of a master, the other of a serving-man. And the former voice, rising a little in emphasis, came more clearly, and one word struck the Kid's ear sharply.

"Muerte!"

The Kid whistled softly.

Who was speaking of death, there in the solitary shades of the tropical woods?

The voice, with an angry tone in it, was clear, though the Kid caught only that one fatal word, he heard it plainly enough. The murmur of the other voice followed, the words indistinguishable. Then the masterly tones were audible again, sharp and emphatic, though the Kid did not catch the words.

The Rio Kid stood silent by the head of his horse, and pondered a little. Two Mexicans were close at hand, hidden by the thick trees and undergrowths on some other path, the Kid reckoned, that approached the bridle path where he was standing—some path by the

rippling stream he could hear. One was giving orders to the other, in bitter tones, using the word "death."

The Kid scented trouble for somebody. The Kid was not looking for trouble, and he did not want to run into a gang of bravos or bandoleros, or whatever they might be. On the other hand, he wanted to get to the stream he could hear rippling so near at hand; he wanted fresh water both for himself and for his horse.

Caution was second nature to the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. He made up his mind to scout a little before he ran the risk of making his presence known. Leaving the powerful mustang on the bridle-path, the Kid swung himself into the branches of a big tree and worked his way along an immense branch in the direction of the voices. For a distance of fifty feet that great thick branch extended, and the Kid worked his way along it with the silence of a creeping cougar.

Below him, then, he could see the ripple of the forest stream, gleaming in rays of bright sunlight that filtered through the boughs. A path ran by the water, and on the path two Mexicans were standing.

Both of them were clearly visible to the Kid, hidden in the foliage above.

One was a young man, richly clad, with a dark, swarthy face that was handsome in feature, but anything but handsome in expression. In guarded moments it might have been pleasing; but it was unguarded now, and its look told plainly of a hard, fierce unscrupulous nature within. The lips were drawn tight, the black eyes glittered; the whole expression was bitter, savage, and relentless.

The other man was older, bulkier, with a dark, bearded face, and knife and pistol stuck in his sash. The Kid did not need a second glance to tell him that this was a bravo, likely enough a bandolero of the sierra. And the Kid reckoned that something was surely amiss when a wealthy-looking young Mexican was holding a secret meeting in the deep woods with a cut-throat of such a stamp, and talking of "muerte." Whose death was he speaking of to that truculent-looking bandit? The Kid figured that he was going to know, and that if some guy's life was in danger the Kid was going to horn in and put that guy wise to it.

The voices were quite audible now, coming clearly up to the Kid's ears. The young man was speaking in Spanish, of which the Kid now followed every word.

"Death, I tell you, Gomez. Carama! What do you think I want you for? Will Don Carlos be the first hombre you have slain for a price?"

The bravo grinned.

"Not the first by a score, *Senor Don Pedro*. But the caballero being your cousin—"

Don Pedro gave a snarl that reminded the Kid of a cornered panther he had seen.

"That does not concern you, Gomez!"

"The *Senor Ximenas* is dying?" asked Gomez.

"Pah! No! He is sick, that is all. He has heard stories of me—of my life in the city, and he has turned against me. I am scarcely welcome at the *Casa Ximenas* now, and Carlos is the favourite, as he has always been, more than ever. I tell you, the old picaro has sent a confidential servant to *Mexico City* to inquire into the tales they tell of me—and when he learns—"

Pedro paused.

"The truth?" grinned Gomez.

"When he learns all, I shall be cut

off—a beggar," said Don Pedro between his teeth. "It cannot be long now. I am taking my measures in time. You will deal with Carlos—I have told you where he will be in an hour's time, and no one will take heed of a shot in these woods. As for the old fool, my uncle, that matter is in my hands."

The Kid started a little, in his concealment, in the foliage above, at the expression that came over Don Pedro's face—an expression black, terrible, sinister.

"I understand, *senor*," said Gomez.

"Leave Don Carlos to me. But—"

"A thousand pesos!" muttered the young Mexican.

"The word of a caballero like you, *senor*, is gold," said the bandit. "But I, too, have heard of the tales that have reached old *Ximenas*. Your debts, *senor*, are piled as high as the *Sierra Madre*. The death of Don Carlos will not make you wealthy while the old man lives, and you tell me that he is but sick, and not likely to die."

Don Pedro did not answer. But the look on his face made the bandit start a little and pale slightly. Evidently he understood something from the young man's look, and did not need words.

"Por todos los santos!" muttered Gomez. "El Demonio must be in your heart, Don Pedro."

"Is that your concern?" sneered Don Pedro. "Do your task, *hombre*, and count on your thousand pesos."

"I count on it, *senor*."

"Basta!"

There were a few more words, and the two men parted. Don Pedro disappeared by the path down the rugged bank of the stream, the bandit remained where he was, and there was a gleam of sunlight on metal as he stood examining a pistol.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Kid Burns Powder!

"GEE whiz!" murmured the Rio Kid.

He remained watching.

From what he had heard the Kid figured that the *casa de campo* he had scanned bosomed in the forest, was the *Casa Ximenas*, and the "old man" to whom the two scoundrels had alluded, was the *haciendado* to whom it belonged. The uncle of this lobo-wolf, Don Pedro, and either the uncle or the father of the Don Carlos they had mentioned, since the two were cousins. The Kid half-regretted that he had not let one of the walnut-butted guns horn into that conversation. Of all the black-hearted rascals the Kid had ever struck, he reckoned that this young caballero, Don Pedro, was the blackest. A dissipated, gambling, unclean sort of guy, the Kid reckoned, up to his neck in debt, and coolly planning a crime with a bandit of the sierra to get out of them. The Kid would have had little scruple in drawing a bead on the young Mexican and sending him along the lonely trail he had planned for his unsuspecting relative.

But Don Pedro was gone now, and was out of sight. The bandit remained—and it was, after all, the bandit with whom the Kid was concerned, as to him had been left the work of death. For the Rio Kid had not the slightest hunch to get back to his horse and go his ways without taking a hand in this game. A man's life was threatened in dastardly ambush, and the Kid was not the galoot to let the bravo get away with it. The Kid was going to keep a very keen eye on Gomez, and he

guessed that Gomez was going to slip up on the job he had in hand.

He watched him from the foliage, quietly.

According to what had been said, the assassin knew where Don Carlos would be within the hour. The Kid was prepared to trail him when he moved away, and keep him in sight, and chip in if and when required. And his idea was that after he had chipped in there would be one cut-throat the less in Mexico. He did not reckon that Gomez was going to earn that thousand pesos.

But the bandit did not stir from the spot.

After examining the pistol and finding it satisfactory, ready for the murderous work that was to be done, the black-bearded ruffian lounged idly for a time, rolling husk cigarettes and smoking them, one after another. The Kid wondered. Gomez did not seem in a hurry to reach the place where he was to ambush Don Carlos.

Long minutes passed, and still the Mexican bravo lounged and smoked. But at last he threw away a cigarette and ceased to roll fresh ones, and backed from the path on the bank of the stream into a thick clump of mesquite and creepers. There he was hidden from the Kid's eyes, save for the crown of his huge sombrero.

Then the Kid understood.

The ambushade was to be laid on that very spot. It was up the path by the forest stream that Don Carlos was coming to his death. Gomez, in cover in the bush, was waiting for him, finger on trigger.

As soon as that was clear to the Kid he prepared for action. The bravo, watching the path, waiting for his victim, did not once glance round. He had not the faintest suspicion that there was any other living being in the lonely vicinity. The Kid moved with the silent caution of a panther. At any moment now Don Carlos might come in sight. It was almost an hour since the plotter had gone, leaving Gomez there alone. He was coming to certain death, to fall before a treacherous bullet, unless the Kid intervened in time. The Kid crawled from the massive branch to the branch of another tree, near the path, and down the trunk of the latter, and stood on the ground. He was not more than a dozen feet from the crouching bravo in the mesquite. And now a gun was in his hand.

He waited, screened by the tree-trunk.

A few minutes more, and there were footsteps on the path by the winding, rippling stream.

Someone was approaching, as yet unseen.

The Kid saw the mesquite stir and the sombrero came into fuller view as the bravo moved and peered out of his cover at the path. Once more the Kid caught the glint of a pistol-barrel.

Suddenly the newcomer appeared in sight, swinging along with an active gait up the path.

The Kid saw a young Mexican, with a handsome, frank countenance, like enough to Don Pedro to show that he was a relation, but much more prepossessing to the eye. He had no doubt that it was Don Carlos, and had he doubted, the motions of the ambushed bravo would have settled the doubt.

The bandit's arm was raised, the pistol in his hand levelled through the creepers that hid him. His black eyes glinted over it at the young caballero coming up the path.

Bang!

It was the Kid's gun that roared.

There was a convulsive start from the bandit, a scream of pain. The raised right arm dropped to his side like a broken reed. The pistol crashed to the earth.

Yelling with pain and rage, the bandit plunged out of his cover into the open path, glaring round him like a wild beast for the man who had fired. The young Mexican, still a score of paces distant, halted, staring before him with amazed eyes.

The Kid, for the moment, did not heed him. His eyes were on Gomez—and he was fully occupied. The bandit had seen him, and he had dragged a long, sharp cuchillo from his belt with his left hand and was leaping on the Texan like a tiger.

Two or three seconds, and the knife would have been buried in the heart of the Rio Kid. But the Kid was wary. The six-gun roared again, and the bandit staggered and fell at the puncher's feet with a bullet through his heart.

The Kid lowered his gun. The bandit lay at his feet, still. He

was not likely to stir again. The Kid gave a shrug of the shoulders and turned towards the amazed young Mexican.

"Say, bo!" he called out coolly. "You dont want to pull a gun." The young man's hand had gone to his belt. "Amigo, hombre, amigo!"

The young Mexican came forward. "Who are you?" he asked in Spanish.

He scanned the Rio Kid, his Stetson, and his silk neck-scarf, and his goat-skin chaps, curiously. Then he went on in English: "Who are you? A cowboy from Texas, by your looks?"

"You've said it," agreed the Kid. "Kid Carfax, if you want the name. I guess you'll be Don Carlos?"

"My name is Carlos Ximenes. But what—" He looked down at the savage, black-bearded face of the fallen man. "Nombre de Dios! You have slain Ricardo Gomez, the bandit of Iquito." His face cleared. "Senior el Tejano, you have done a good work; that picaro is wanted by the Mexican police for a dozen murders. Did he seek your life, senior?"

"I guess he never knew I was here till he heard my hardware rattle," grinned the Kid. "If you're Don Carlos you're the guy whose scalp he was after."

"But why—how—"
"I guess I ain't sorry I've made it last sickness for him, senior," said the Kid. "He sure was a pizen rattlesnake. Say, what brought you up this path at this special time?"

"My cousin, Don Pedro, asked me to come." Carlos Ximenes glanced round him. "He should be here—"

"I guess you won't see him in nary hurry," said the Kid. "He's sure been here, and he left this pizen galoot to meet you."

"Senior! You do not mean—"
"Say, I better sing over what I heard them two pizen galoots chewing to one another," said the Kid. "You want to be put wise, hombre, or I guess you'll get yours afore long. That lobo-wolf Gomez ain't the only guy in this country who'd pull a bead on a galoot for a thousand pesos."

(Continued on opposite page.)

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THIS COUPON IS ONLY AVAILABLE UNTIL JULY 20th, 1929.
POPULAR. JULY 13th, 1929.

"You mean that the picaro was hired—"
 "Jest that."
 "By whom?"
 "By the durndest, blackest lobo-wolf in Mexico, named Don Pedro."

The young man started again.
 "Senor, it is impossible. Don Pedro Ximenas is my cousin—my father's nephew—it is impossible. You have made some strange mistake, senor."
 "Nary a mistake, I reckon."

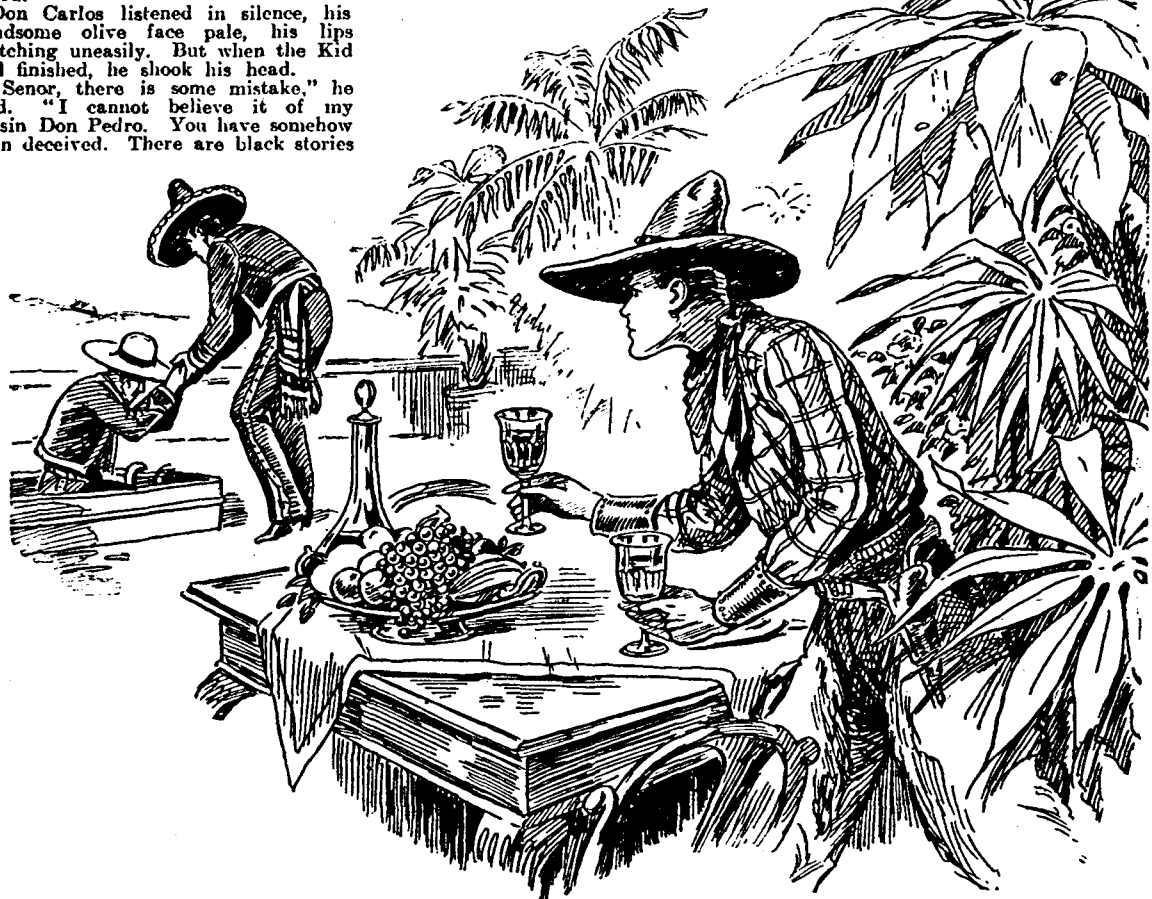
And the Kid repeated what he had heard.

Don Carlos listened in silence, his handsome olive face pale, his lips twitching uneasily. But when the Kid had finished, he shook his head.

"Senor, there is some mistake," he said. "I cannot believe it of my cousin Don Pedro. You have somehow been deceived. There are black stories

hacienda Ximenas would Pedro be guilty of such villainy. Let us say no more of it, senor."

The Kid shrugged his shoulders.
 "I reckon you ain't wise to that pizen skunk, senor," he said. "But it ain't my business. I allow; let it go at that, now I've warned you. I guess I'll be getting my hoss, and camping. Seeing as you're the son of the owner of this shebang, I guess I'll ask your leave to camp herabouts."



THE KID'S GOOD DEED! While Don Pedro, his back turned at the top of the steps, was helping the old man mount to the roof with much affected solicitude, the Kid pushed quietly through the shrubbery, reached over the table, and changed the positions of the two goblets. (See Chapter 3.)

told of my cousin—I know it—but I do not believe he is capable of a crime. No, senor—there is some mistake. The man you saw was perhaps not Don Pedro—or perhaps, senor, you mistook what you heard in a foreign tongue."

The Kid surveyed him rather grimly. It was evident that Don Carlos was unwilling to believe in such villainy on the part of his relative, and that his unwillingness clouded his judgment. He refused to believe what he did not want to believe.

"Have it your own way, feller," said the Kid. "But I guess I've given you the straight goods, and you want to watch out. I reckon you've been as near Jordan this day, as any galoot ever wants to get."

Don Carlos nodded.
 "Senor, I do not doubt that you have saved my life—that this picaro you shot was ambushing me," he said. "That much is clear. But—" He shook his head. "My father's nephew would not plot against my life. In that there is some mistake. Not for all the

Don Carlos smiled.
 "Senor el Tejano, you have saved my life," he said, extending his hand. "I am your servant, and all I have is yours. You will not camp in the forest—you will come with me to the Casa Ximenas—my friend and guest."

"Say, now you're talking," said the Kid cheerily. "I guess I'll be glad to bed down for a night at your casa, senor."

"For many days, I hope, senor," said the young Mexican courteously.

"What'll be done with that pizen skunk?" asked the Kid, with a nod towards the body of the bandit.

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"Leave him for the coyotes—it is a good enough fate for such a picaro. Come with me, senor."

"I reckon I'll get my cayuse, hombre, and come with pleasure," said the Kid.

"I left him on a path, way back—"

"I will lead you to him, senor," said Don Carlos, when the Kid had explained where he had left the mustang.

"Farther up the stream, the two paths join."

Ten minutes later, the Rio Kid, with his reins over his arm, leading the grey mustang, was walking by the young Mexican's side, towards the solitary casa de campo in the heart of the forest.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Black Treachery!

FROM the azotea, the flat roof of the house, the Rio Kid watched the sun sinking to the west, in clouds of purple and gold, thoughtfully.

The Kid was troubled in mind. The boy puncher from Texas found himself in luxurious quarters at the Casa Ximenas. He had nothing to give him a grouch in that respect. He had cleaned off the dust of the trail, he had seen his beloved Side-Kicker comfortably ensconced in a stall, he had eaten and drunk of the best, and now

he was taking his ease on a seat on the azotea, under nodding palms, amid gorgeous flowers that glowed with all the colours of the rainbow. Over his head the cloudless sky was turning to a pearly grey in the east. In the west it was a sea of crimson and purple and gold, where the fiery sun was sinking. It was still hot—but the heat was less intense, and the Kid was feeling, physically, very pleasant and at ease. But mentally he was troubled.

Don Carlos had been kind, courteous, hospitable, evidently grateful to the Kid, and desiring to make much of him. The Kid had taken a liking to the young fellow. Since he had been in Mexico, the puncher from Texas had lost much of his old prejudice against "Greasers" and of all the Mexicans he had seen, he liked young Carlos Ximenas the best. But that only added to the trouble on the Kid's mind.

For Carlos, with a trust in the good faith of his relative, that the Kid could not help liking him better for, persisted that there had been some mistake in what the Kid had discovered, and refused steadily to believe that his life was in danger from his cousin.

That it was in danger—deadly danger—the Kid knew only too well. More than that, he had no doubt, from what he had heard, that the life of the old haciendado was in danger as great. The ruined profligate, desperate with debts and difficulties, had planned a desperate crime, and as the bandit had said, the death of young Carlos would not serve him so long as the old haciendado lived. The old man was not intended to live, the Kid was sure of that. Danger and death brooded over the lonely casa de campo, that lay so peacefully embosomed amid the

woods. The old man knew nothing of his danger—the young caballero refused to believe in it though he knew of it—and the Kid was worried. How could he saddle up and hit the trail, with an easy mind, leaving a conscienceless and ruthless dastard behind him to carry out his evil plans unwatched and unchecked. There was no hurry, it was true, for the Kid to hit the trail; hospitality at the Casa Ximenas was unbanded. But it was problematic whether the Kid could serve any good purpose by remaining, if Don Carlos refused to be put on his guard.

So the Kid, amid those peaceful and luxurious surroundings, had a grouch. Generally, the Kid was apt to grasp a situation, and decide rapidly what was to be done. Now he confessed himself perplexed.

He had been presented, for a few minutes, to Don Carlos' father—a stately old gentleman with white hair, in feeble health. Since coming to the casa, however, he had not seen Don Pedro. Likely enough, that picaro was keeping away from the house for a time, perhaps desiring to be off the scene when the assassination of Carlos was discovered. The Kid reflected that the plotter, so far, knew nothing of Carlos' escape from the ambush, and did not dream that the bandit had fallen in the place of his intended victim. The Kid wondered how he should act, when he came face to face with the scoundrel, as he could scarcely avoid doing, if he remained a guest at the casa. The idea was repugnant to the Kid. He did not want to see Pedro Ximenas, unless it was to grasp him in his sinowy hands, and wring his rascally neck. That, however, obviously was not a practical proposition, in the house of Don Pedro's uncle.

Don Carlos was gone from the casa now, he had ridden over to Iquito, on some business of his father's, but he had told the Kid that he would be back before night. While he was gone, the Kid reflected on the position, but reflection brought him no satisfaction. He had a deep disinclination to remain in the same house with Don Pedro, unless to wring his neck, yet to mount and ride, and leave the rascal free to carry on his scheming, seemed impossible. The Kid felt that he could not pretend civility to a galoot whom he knew to be a plotting assassin, yet incivility to the nephew of the haciendado, the cousin of Don Carlos, was not to be thought of. The Kid told himself that he had better go, before he met the rascal face to face; yet he was sorely unwilling to go and leave Carlos Ximenas to his fate.

There were footsteps, on the broad adobe steps that mounted from the patio to the azotea. Several peons came up to the flat roof, and placed wine and goblets, and dishes of tropical fruits, on a table at a little distance from the Rio Kid.

The table was shaded by palms growing in great tubs, and almost surrounded by a wall of flowering plants. The Kid guessed that it was a favourite spot for the old haciendado to take the air when the heat of the day was over, and he expected to see Senor Ximenas come up the steps from the patio after the peons were gone. But from the patio, a few minutes later, he heard a voice he had heard once before—the voice of Don Pedro. He was on the azotea steps and speaking to the peons below.

The Kid made a grimace of disgust.

Don Pedro was there, and was coming up to the azotea. For the moment the Kid was alone there, as the peons had gone down again into the patio. The meeting he had foreseen was about to take place—he would be face to face with the plotter, upon whom, in the strange circumstances, he could not pull a gun—to whom he was bound to be civil, indeed, so long as he was in the Casa Ximenas.

But that idea got the Kid's goat completely. He could not, and he would not, exchange even a salutation with the scoundrel.

Fortunately, it was easy enough to keep out of the way. Amid the shrubberies on the azotea there was plenty of cover for one who wished to keep out of sight. The Kid rose from the bench where he was lounging, and moved behind the high bank of flowering shrubs that rose bright and many-coloured between the set table and the adobe parapet of the roof.

There, unless Don Pedro looked for him, he was not likely to be seen, and he could remain till the scoundrel went.

A few minutes later there was a step on the azotea.

Through a narrow interstice in the shrubbery the Kid saw the handsome, evil face of Don Pedro, as the Mexican came on the roof.

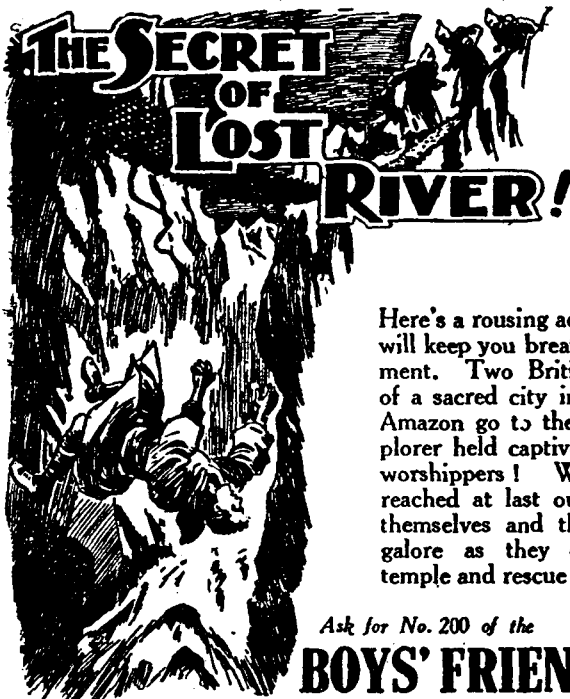
Don Pedro, evidently unaware that anyone was on the azotea, yet glanced round him several times, as if to make sure of the fact.

Then he stopped at the table that the peons had set.

There was something so strange, almost uncanny, in his manner and look that the Kid, deep in cover behind the flowering shrubs, did not take his eyes off the swarthy face.

Evil personified was in the dark face of the Mexican.

A footstep, and a peon rose into view from the steps up from the patio. Don Pedro started violently, turned on him,



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and cursed him in Spanish. The frightened peon descended at once and disappeared.

Don Pedro turned to the table again.

His face was hideously white, his eyes furtive, his hands trembling. The Kid's face as he watched him unseen grew grimmer and grimmer. What demon's thoughts were passing in the mind behind that evil face?

For long minutes Don Pedro stood still, as if listening, and screwing up his determination. Then he moved suddenly. His hand went to a pocket, and came out again with a little phial in the fingers.

The sweat was on his swarthy brow in great drops.

The Rio Kid felt a chill run through his veins; he hardly knew why. It was as if the wings of the Angel of Death had darkened for a moment the sunlight azotea of the Casa Ximenas.

He did not stir. He watched in chilled silence, hidden by the flowering shrubs.

On the table were two richly-cut goblets and a flask of the red wine of the Rio Rojo. Into one of the goblets Don Pedro poured the contents of the little phial, till it was half-empty. Then he returned the phial to his pocket.

He wiped the sweat from his brow. The goblet containing the potion he placed on one side of the table, where there was a deep cane armchair—the seat of the old haciendado, as the Kid guessed.

He filled it to the brim with red wine. The other goblet he kept on his own side of the table, and filled also with the red wine of Rojo.

There was a sound of footsteps on the azotea stair. A white head under a Panama hat rose into view. Senor Ximenas was coming up to the azotea.

Don Pedro hurried across to meet him.

He had pulled himself together now. His voice was calm and normal as he spoke to his uncle in Spanish.

"Do you feel better, tio mio? Your wine is ready. Let me help you to your chair."

The Kid seemed frozen. What was it that the plotter, already an assassin in intent, had placed in the old man's goblet and concealed with red wine?

The terrible word "poison" was in the Kid's horrified thoughts.

Yet it was possible—surely it was possible—that it was some drug the old haciendado was accustomed to take in that way—he was a sick man, taking medicines. Was it possible?

The Kid hardly knew what he thought. But he knew that he was taking no chances. While Don Pedro, his back turned at the top of the azotea steps, was helping the old man mount to the roof with much affected solicitude, the Kid pushed quietly through the shrubbery, reached over the table, and changed the position of the two goblets.

He had time to effect that movement and to back out of sight again before Don Pedro and his uncle turned towards the spot and came slowly, the old man leaning heavily on his nephew's arm.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

In His Own Snare!

SEÑOR XIMENAS sank heavily in the great chair. The old man was feeble, if not actually ill, and there were signs of trouble and strain in his handsome old face. Don Pedro sat down on the opposite side of the table, and toyed with the stem of his goblet. The Kid watched. The two goblets were exactly alike, and the

red wine hid all trace of the potion that had been poured in from the phial. There was nothing to indicate that the goblets had been changed—only the Kid knew.

"You seem less well to-day, my uncle," said Don Pedro in soft Spanish, his tone almost caressing.

"I am less well, Pedro," said the old senior. "I am troubled in mind."

"Drink your wine, my uncle—it will cheer you."

"Wine will not banish my trouble," said the old haciendado gruffly. "I have learned that my nephew, my dead brother's son, is little better than a picaro, than a leproso. Wine will not cure that."

"They have wronged me who told you that, my uncle," said Don Pedro in the same soft tone, but with a tigerish glint in his dark eyes.

"It is the truth," grunted the old Mexican. "Do not add falsehood to your other misdeeds, Pedro. I have forgiven you much, but this is the end! After this day you remain no longer in the Casa Ximenas. For the future you must care for yourself. You shall, if you choose, manage my rancho in Sonora and earn your bread like an honest man, otherwise you may return to your gambling friends in the city of Mexico, and finish your career in shame, as you have begun it."

He paused, and raised the goblet of red wine to his lips. Don Pedro's eyes burned at him. He raised his own goblet.

"I drink to you, my uncle, and a long and happy life, little as you love me," he said, and drained the glass.

The old haciendado drank more slowly, but he set down the goblet empty at last. A demon seemed to be dancing in the dark eyes of Don Pedro as the old man replaced the empty glass on the table.

He refilled his own glass and emptied it again. But the old man shook his head.

There was a long silence. It was broken by the sound of hoof-beats in the patio, the clink of bridle and stirrup. A few minutes later Don Carlos came up the steps.

The old haciendado's face lighted up at the sight of his son. Don Pedro turned his eyes on him, glinting.

The Kid noted that Carlos greeted his cousin cordially. Evidently he had not allowed suspicion or distrust to take root in his frank mind. But the expression on Pedro's face was strange, almost terrible. The Kid, watching him, guessed that this was the first appraisal the plotter had had, that his cousin had escaped the ambush in the forest. 'Till that moment he had believed Don Carlos dead, slain by the bandit. Even the unsuspecting Carlos could not fail to note the strangeness of his startled

look, and perhaps the Rio Kid's words came back into his mind.

"You seem surprised, my cousin," said Don Carlos, in a quiet tone. "Did you not expect to see me, though we meet daily?"

"Si, si," muttered Don Pedro thickly. He made a restless movement. I think I am not well, Carlos—the heat of the sun, perhaps,

and the bitter words your father has spoken to me."

"I am sorry for that," said Carlos. "Padre mio, if you are angry with poor Pedro again—"

"Say nothing for him, hijo," interrupted the old haciendado. "He is not worthy of a word from you."

"He is my cousin, padre, my good cousin, and—Nombre de Dios! What is the matter with you, Pedro? Are you ill?"

Don Pedro staggered from his chair.

He stood, holding on to the edge of the table with both hands, his face white and tortured, his eyes starting from his head.

"Madre de Dios!" The words came from him in a groan. "The holy saints save me, a sinner! Madre de Dios!"

The old haciendado started up. "Pedro! Quo! What troubles you? The wine—"

The wretched plotter sank forward on the table, knocking aside the flask and fruit dishes.

"The wine?" he repeated. "Ay, the wine—death has hold of me—and it was the wine! Was I mad, then, that I placed the poison in my own goblet? Madre de Dios, save me."

"The poison!" breathed the old man in horror.

"Are you mad?" exclaimed Carlos huskily.

Don Pedro made no reply. He crumpled and slid from the table.

"Pedro!" panted Don Carlos.

He sprang forward and bent over the fallen man. But it was a face without life that was upturned to him; the fatal draught had done its work.

Of his own part in that last scene the Rio Kid said nothing.

The plotter's last words and the half-filled phial found in his pocket revealed his guilt, and there was no need for the Kid to speak. The old haciendado and his son concluded, as they could only conclude, that the assassin had mistaken the goblets, and if they felt shame they could scarcely feel grief for the fate that had overtaken him.

So the kid puncher from Texas kept his own counsel. El médico, summoned hastily from Iquito, found a natural cause of death, and the secret was kept. Under the stars that night the Rio Kid led his mustang out of the patio, and mounted, and hit the trail, and there was no regret in the boy puncher's heart for the fate of the wretch who had sinned so deeply and earned the wages of sin.

THE END.
(Look out for another stirring yarn of the West, featuring the Rio Kid, in next Tuesday's issue, entitled, "FRIEND OR FOE?")



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THE FIRST CHAPTER. In the Mexican Desert!

SILENT, deadly, with scintillating eyes, and teeth bared in a snarl, the panther crept closer and closer over the hot rocks that baked in the burning blaze of the Mexican sun. Closer and closer, within reach of a spring, and still the Rio Kid did not stir.

It was not often that the Kid was caught napping. But the panther had crept out of his lair in the rocks without a sound behind the boy puncher as he stood, shading his eyes with his Stetson hat, staring away across the sunlit plain, a perplexed frown on his brow.

The Kid had lost the trail.

All through the hot day he had followed it—the trail of many horses and mules, not more than a few hours old.

Somewhere ahead of him, on the arid plains, was a numerous party. The Kid was in Sonora, a Mexican province that was new country to him. He had struck the trail by chance early in the day, and followed it, figuring that it would lead him to some pueblo or aldea on the edge of the desert.

But long hours had passed, and the Kid realised at last that the party ahead of him were not hitting for any town or village, but were riding into the desert that stretched northward to the Arizona border. They had not halted at noon, or the Kid would have come up with them; and the Kid was in Mexico, where in the noontide heat no one stirred, if he could help it. That alone was enough to make the Kid curious.

That unknown party must, he reckoned, be in hot haste if they pushed on in a blaze of heat, when even the

hungry coyotes lay still in what shade they could find. But why any galoots should be in a hurry to push into the trackless, burning desert, or why they should enter it at all, perplexed the Kid.

Now the trail, which he had followed so long, was lost.

On that stretch of rocky soil the hoof-tracks had disappeared, leaving no sign for the Texan puncher.

Leaving his mustang in the shade of a rock, the Kid sought for sign, but there was little to find.

Now he stood looking into the desert, puzzled and pondering.

All through the day he had passed no stream or spring, and his water was short. Water he wanted for himself and his mustang; and the Kid reckoned that unless those galoots were plumb loco they must be making for a water-hole.

Standing on the rugged rocks, the Kid stared across the hot plain, seeking a sign of the travellers in the distance. Far away, a little cloud of dust met his keen eyes, and he nodded. He figured that that cloud of dust showed where they were, though he could see nothing of them.

And while he stood there the creeping panther crawled closer and closer behind him, with burning eyes—savage, hungry, deadly, ruthless.

The sinuous spotted body came to a stop at last, crouching and quivering. The fierce brute was preparing to spring, and still the Kid heard nothing, and did not look round—his eyes on that little cloud of dust far across the plain.

"I guess I'll follow on!" the Kid muttered. "If them galoots ain't plumb loco, they know where to hit water, and I guess that's what I want. If they're some bunch of contrabandistas, I reckon this infant can take care of himself. It's me for the desert!"

Then, at a faint sound, he turned. But it was too late.

The Kid, as he turned, met the leaping body, and the shock hurled him backwards.

Before he could grasp a gun, before he could stir, the panther was on him, scrambling, snarling, tearing.

A second more, and savage jaws would have been buried in his throat, terrible claws would have torn him.

Crack!

At that instant the sharp ring of a rifle awoke the echoes of the rocks.

The Kid hardly knew what was happening.

He had grasped his bowie-knife, but he had not had time to draw it, when suddenly the heavy body above him pitched over, the threatening jaws no longer threatened him, the tearing claws were tearing up stones and sand in the death-struggle.

The Kid scrambled up, the hoarse screaming of the panther a deafening noise in his ears.

"Great gophers!" he gasped. He leaped clear of the struggling, tearing panther; but the great cat had no eyes for him. In a few seconds it stretched out and lay still.

"Gee-whiz!" muttered the Kid. "I reckon the guy that drew a bead on that

critter knew where to put his lead, he sure did!"

He stared round him. Who had fired the shot that, more likely than not, had saved his life the Kid could not guess. He had believed himself alone in that solitary waste—no one nearer to him than the travellers who were miles away under the moving cloud of dust in the desert. Yet the shot had been fired from close at hand, among the rugged rocks.

The Kid stared round, but no human form met his view. He stared in amazement.

"Say!" he called out at last. "I guess you can show up, you galoot! I guess you took a hand right on time, and I'm sure powerful obliged to you, whoever you are, feller!"

From behind a rock not ten paces from the Kid a man stepped into view, a smoking rifle in his hand.

The Kid started and looked at him.

The man was a Mexican, as was to be expected in that country—a tall, dark, rather handsome fellow, with a clean-cut olive face shadowed under his wide sombrero. The dust of the desert was thick on him, but he was well-clad, with

abundance of silver buttons and silver braid. There was a slightly mocking expression on his face as he met the Kid's eyes.

The boy puncher from Texas eyed him.

"Say, feller, I reckon you horned in just where you was wanted!" said the Kid. "That critter had sure got me where he wanted me. Say, why didn't you show up?"

The Mexican smiled. "I stayed to reload my rifle, senor," he answered in English. "I may need it again in dealing with you."

As he spoke he lifted the rifle to his shoulder, taking aim at the astonished face of the Rio Kid.

"Hands up, as you say in your country, Gringo!" he said.

"Thunder! I guess—"

"Hands up!" The Mexican's voice came in almost a snarl, and his black eyes gleamed over the levelled rifle. And the Kid, astonished as he was, knew better than to delay when a rifle was looking him in the face, with a finger pressing on the trigger. And his hands went up promptly over his head.

THE SECOND CHAPTER. Friend or Foe?

"KEEP them up!" granted the tall Mexican.

The Rio Kid smiled. "I sure ain't going to argue about it, feller, at the wrong end of a shooting-iron," he remarked amiably, "but I reckon you've got me guessing. What's this dog-goned game, anyhow? I guess if you wanted to spill my juice you could have let that painter get on with it. He sure had me cinched for fair."

The Mexican, still watching the Kid keenly over the rifle, nodded.

"It was an error on my part, senor," he said. "Had I allowed the panther to finish you it would have saved me, perhaps, the trouble of blowing your brains out. But we Spanish-Americans are a hasty race—I acted without thinking, senor. As soon as I saw you in the claws of the panther I had no other thought but to help you—Gringo and enemy as you are."

The Kid shook his head.

"I guess I'm what you Greasers call a Gringo, seeing that I was raised in (Continued on opposite page.)

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Texas," he said, "but I ain't your enemy that I know of, as I've never seen you before, and don't know you from Adam, feller."

"It is said in Mexico that the Gringos are all liars!" said the tall Mexican.

"That sure describes a good few of them," said the Kid, unmoved. "But no galoot ever called me a liar, feller, and bragged about it afterwards. Still, you saved my life, I reckon, and so I'd let you shoot off your mouth all you want, even if I was holding the gun. Get on with it."

The Mexican scanned him with a perplexed and doubting look.

Why the man should take him for an enemy the Kid could not surmise, but plainly he did. And, taking him for an enemy, he had fired the shot that had saved him from the panther. That was an action the Kid could appreciate, and in spite of the fact that a rifle was aimed at him, likely enough with intent to kill, the Kid was feeling quite friendly towards the stranger. A man who chipped in to save an enemy, or a supposed enemy, from a terrible death was a white man, at least.

"You are a Gringo!" The Mexican's glance lingered on the Kid's goatskin chaps.

"You look like a vaquero—what you call a cow-puncher in your country. Is that so, hombre?"

"Sure; I reckon I used to punch cows on the old Double Bar Ranch, in the Frio country in Texas," answered the Kid.

"Your name?"

"I guess you can call me Kid Carfax!"

The Kid was far enough from his own country now; but he had no hunch to tell this stranger that he was the Rio Kid, the outlaw of the Rio Grande.

"Why did you follow my trail?"

The Kid started.

"I guess you've got it wrong," he said cheerily. "I sure ain't been following your trail, feller, if you've left one."

The Mexican's brow darkened.

"Say," ejaculated the Kid, a sudden thought striking him, "if you belong to that bunch that's gone into the desert—"

"Si!"

"Gee!" said the Kid. "I been following that trail, sure."

"You did not know it was my trail?"

"How in thunder would I know it was your trail when I've never seen hide nor hair of you afore?" demanded the Kid.

"Then why did you follow it?"

"Looking for water," explained the Kid. "I reckon that bunch will hit water when they camp, and that's what I want."

"Is that the truth?"

"I guess you wouldn't ask that twice

if you wasn't holding the gun, feller," said the Kid cheerfully. "But with this child at the little end of the horn, I reckon you can ask what you like, and be durned to you!"

"Is it by chance, then, that you struck my trail, and followed it?" exclaimed the Mexican.

"Jest that!"

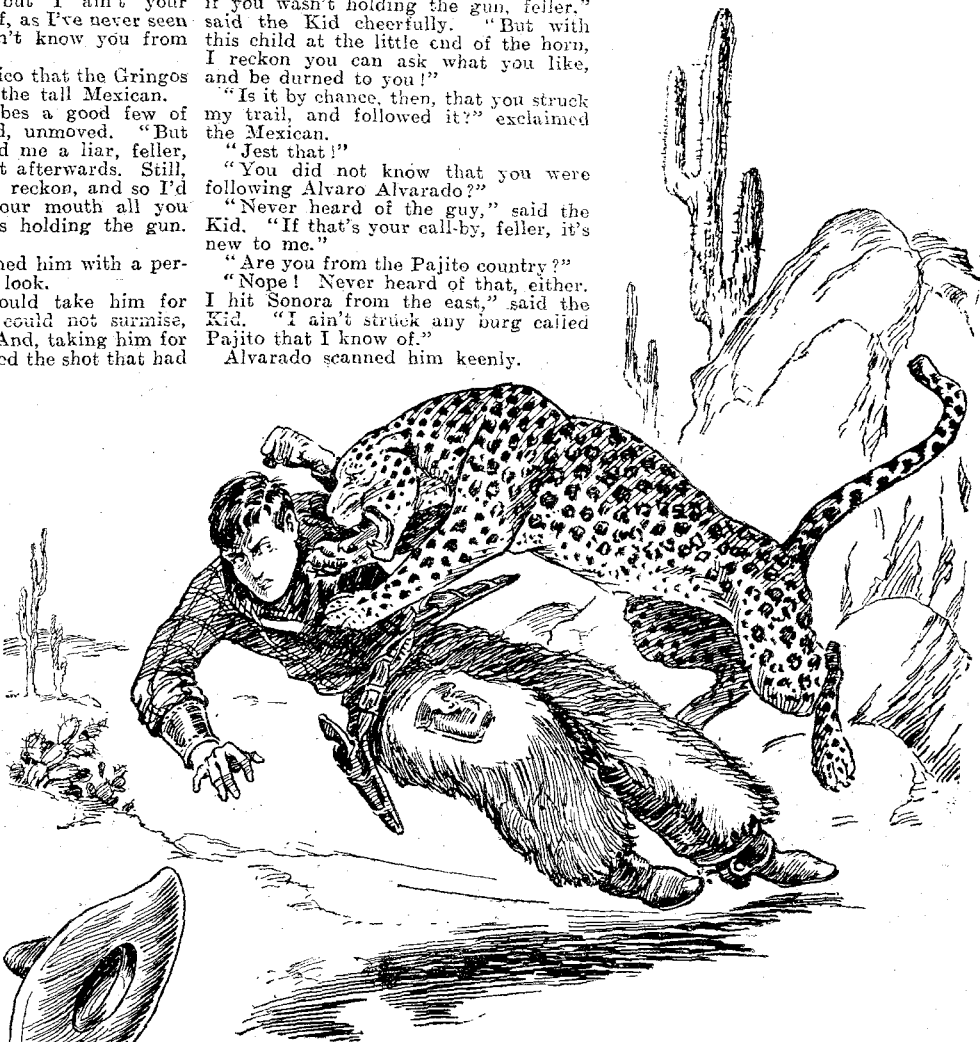
"You did not know that you were following Alvaro Alvarado?"

"Never heard of the guy," said the Kid. "If that's your call-by, feller, it's new to me."

"Are you from the Pajito country?"

"Nope! Never heard of that, either. I hit Sonora from the east," said the Kid. "I ain't struck any burg called Pajito that I know of."

Alvarado scanned him keenly.



CAUGHT NAPPING! At the faint sound behind him, the Rio Kid turned. But it was too late. The sound, the first the panther had made, was when he leaped at the boy puncher. The Kid, as he turned, met the leaping body, and the shock hurtled him backwards. (See Chapter 1.)

"You are not sent by the alcalde of Pajito to pick up my trail?"

"Never heard of the alcalde of Pajito," grinned the Kid. "Say, feller, you got the wrong cayuse in your rope. Put away your hardware and let's talk turkey."

The Mexican paused some moments, still scanning the Kid's frank, sunburnt face; but at last he seemed satisfied, and lowered the rifle.

"Senor," he said, "for hours I was aware that you were following my trail; and what could I believe but that you were an enemy, employed by the alcalde of Pajito, who would give a thousand pesos to know where to seek me? I sent my men on and stayed behind in these rocks to wait for you and deal with you."

"I guess I savvy," assented the Kid. "But you've sure wasted your time, Mister Alvarado. You sure was cute in lying doggo, feller—I never s'picioned that you was around. Say, you've left yourself a long way behind your bunch."

"My horse is swift and will soon overtake them," said Alvarado. He gave a shrill whistle and a powerful black bronco appeared from its place of concealment among the rocks. "My party

does not travel fast, with mules and a litter. I shall overtake them within the hour. But you, senor—"

The Kid smiled.

"I guess I'll look around for water in some other direction, feller, if you don't want to see me at your camp," he answered. "I guess my cayuse will smell out water by sundown."

"You think no more of following my trail into the desert?"

"Nope; why should I?" said the Kid, staring at him. "I guess I ain't wanting to horn in on your bunch, feller, except that I want to strike a water hole."

"But you are welcome, senorito," said Alvarado, in a tone of great politeness. "Now that I am assured that you are not an enemy I shall be glad to see you at my camp."

The words were courteously enough spoken, but the Kid could guess that hospitality was not the Mexican's only motive. And he was not long in guessing what was in Alvaro Alvarado's mind.

"Say," he said, "you'd rather I came on with you because if I turn back you reckon I may meet up with that alcalde

you've spoken of, and put him wise where you've gone."

"Such a thought was in my mind, senior," admitted Don Alvaro, showing his white teeth in a smile.

The Kid frowned.

"You figure that I'd let out a word against you after you got me out of the claws of that painter?" he said gruffly.

"But the alcaide of Pajito represents the law in this part of Sonora, senior, such law as there is," said Alvarado.

"I guess I ain't always been on the best terms with the law in my own country, feller," said the Kid, "and if I meet up with that pesky alcaide I sure ain't giving him any information."

"I will trust you, senior," said the Mexican. "You shall ride where you will. Nombre de Dios! I know a caballero when I see one!"

The Rio Kid laughed. From the

moment that the Mexican had lowered the muzzle of the rifle his life had been at the Kid's mercy. The Kid could have pulled a gun and shot him dead long before the Mexican could have used his rifle—the tenth part of a second was enough for the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande.

Alvarado seemed puzzled by his laughter.

"I repeat, senior, I trust you, and you shall go where you will," he said. "What do you find amusing in that?"

"Jest this, feller."

Like magic, as it seemed, a gun was in the Kid's hand, aimed at the heart of the tall Mexican.

Alvarado stared at him.

"Caramba! You—"

The Kid laughed again and thrust the revolver back into his holster.

"Keep that rifle down, feller!" he drawled. "I guess I could pull agin

before you could get a bead on me. I was only jest showing you that you ain't the king-pin hyer. All the while we've been chewing the rag, feller, you was a dead man, if I wanted, since you quit covering me."

The Mexican frowned blackly for a moment. Then his brow cleared, and he smiled again, with another flash of white teeth.

"Senior, if I had doubted before I know now that I can trust you," he said. "Ride where you will, but you are well come at my camp, if you will ride with me into the desert."

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

He called to the black-muzzled Mustang, and Side-Kicker came trotting up from where the Kid had left him.

The Kid mounted, the Mexican following his example. Leaving the rocks where the panther's body lay, the two

(Continued on opposite page.)



No. 6.—THE PIT STEWARD TALKS.

One of the busiest officials on a Dirt Track is the Pit Steward. In this article he tells "Popular" readers of his many thrilling experiences in this capacity.

had no chance of getting out of it, and with reluctance he presented his signature to each of the girls.

However, that was not enough for them. In addition to his autograph each of the girls wanted him to give her a kiss! At the mere mention of the idea the star made a desperate attempt to get to his feet and flee! But the girls were expecting that, and held tightly on to his leather jacket, refusing to let him go before he had obliged.

It so came about that the next race was the final of the scratch event, in which, of course, the unfortunate fellow was riding. I was running about the pits shouting for him in all directions, and all the time the rider himself was doing his best to attract my attention from the top of the stand.

I heard his stentorian bellow at last—and great was the laughter all round when, with another official, I went up among the spectators and joined in the struggle, getting him at last out of his predicament. That rider will run a mile now if he sees a girl with an autograph-book!

Incidentally, ever since then I have looked round the stands first of all when I can't find some of the riders I am wanting. It's amazing what a lot of them get mixed up with the spectators during the course of the evening.

One more duty of mine is to see that each rider goes on to the track properly equipped, and this led to a little excitement on one occasion last season.

A French rider was competing for the first time in England, and apparently he was unaware that crash hats must be, according to the regulations, of one particular kind. His own helmet did not fit in with the regulations at all. It was a curious balloon-like affair perched right on the top of his head and painted in all colours of the rainbow.

I went forward to protest to him about it—and then found that he couldn't understand a word of English! No linguists were about at the time, and so I had to explain what the trouble was by gestures. When the Frenchman saw what I meant he was not at all pleased about it and looked with disdain on the more sober English crash hat that I borrowed for him.

At length, however, he consented to wear it—but he told me afterwards, through an interpreter, that his luck always deserted him when he had not got his own multi-coloured contraption on his head, and that he could never do anything right in a race without it.

I think, in fact that this is his chief reason for not coming to England during the present season.

stood at the entrance to the pits with a newspaper wrapped round him.

Rather different, but no less amusing, were the circumstances which almost prevented another star riding in an important race. The trouble about this fellow was that he happened to be too popular.

He had just ridden in magnificent style, winning his heat in the scratch event by several lengths. After getting back some of his breath he went up and joined a friend of his in the stand. About ten minutes later the friend was wanted elsewhere and our star was left sitting there alone.

But he was not alone for long. Two girls, each hugging an autograph-book, ran up the steps and settled down next to him, one on each side. Now, dirt-track heroes are not too fond of signing autographs during the meetings; as soon as one enthusiast is favoured there is the danger that hundreds more will come along with their books. But this particular rider, cornered as he was,



I found the missing rider at last among the spectators.

I THINK I can be described best as the "father" of all the riders at the dirt track. I am the man who attends to their needs and makes sure that each rider is quite prepared for a race in which he is taking part.

And I don't mind confessing that it is a bit of a job at times! Some of the riders seem to experience far more difficulties during their preparation for a race than in the actual running of it. Let me give a few examples of what I mean.

A short while ago one of the "stars" broke down in his car on the way to the track. He managed to get hold of a taxi, but it looked so old and so slow that he knew it would be touch and go whether he arrived in time for his heat in the handicap.

To save precious minutes, therefore, he decided to change into his "leathers" inside the taxi. He started to do this—and then, to his horror, he discovered that he had been forgetful enough to leave his breeches out in packing his bag. When he reached the track he was wearing all the rest of his equipment—but with it he had on a pair of ordinary flannel trousers.

Meanwhile I had been hunting high and low for him. I had just given up hope of getting hold of him for the race, and had sent the other riders out on to the track when he appeared in his very mixed garb.

"Give me a pair of breeches," was all he said.

As there was no spare pair available I ordered another rider, who was not taking part just then, to take off his own breeches at once and give them up! This he did—and watched his forgetful friend win the race, while he

rode together into the arid plain that stretched illimitably to north and west.

Far away from them, dim against the setting sun, the dustcloud showed that the "bunch" were still proceeding on their way. In that direction the Kid and his new acquaintance rode at a gallop.

Behind them the cloudless blue of the sky was dotted with black specks. Vulture after vulture winged from the blue spaces, gathering at the spot they had left, dropping with whirring wings to the hot rocks, seeking carrion. Before the riders were a mile away the panther's skeleton, picked clean, gleamed white in the blaze of the sun.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Prisoner of the Litter!

THE Rio Kid's brow was thoughtful as he rode into the desert with the Mexican.

More than once, since the Texas puncher had ridden over the border from his own country, he had found himself in strange company. He figured that he was in strange company once more.

Who and what Don Alvaro Alvarado and his party could be, the Kid had no idea. But that they were on the wrong side of the law—such law as existed in that wild, unpeopled section of Mexico—seemed certain. They were pursued by that official, Contrabandistas was the Kid's first thought. But he dismissed it; Alvarado did not look like a smuggler. Still less did he look like a brigand. A rancher was what the Kid would have taken him to be, on his looks. Yet he was apparently a fugitive, with the law behind him, seeking him, in the person of a Mexican alcalde and his alguazils. And he had spoken of his party travelling slowly, because there were mules and a litter. A mule litter must mean that there was a woman in the party. Taking a woman into the burning, trackless desert of Sonora seemed to the Kid plumb loco. It was no place for a man unless that man was well able to take care of himself; yet the mule litter must mean that a woman was travelling into the desert with Alvarado's bunch.

The Kid could not help feeling curious to know what it meant, but it was clear that his companion did not intend to enlighten him. Alvarado spoke few words as they galloped; and of his few words, not one was on the subject of his reason for entering the desert or of the occupant of the litter. The Kid wondered. His wife or his sister, perhaps, or— A more troubling thought came into the Kid's mind. Surely it was not possible that there was a prisoner in the litter that accompanied the mysterious bunch?

At that thought the Kid glanced aside and scanned the handsome profile of his companion, and he shook his head. Alvaro Alvarado looked as if he might have done desperate deeds; but he had the traits of a Spanish caballero—brave and generous to an enemy. Not the man to harm a woman, if the Kid was any judge of character, and the Kid figured that he knew a white man when he saw one.

But it was perplexing enough, and the Kid was quite keen to reach the bunch and see for himself what Alvarado's party was like—still more curious to see the litter and its occupant.

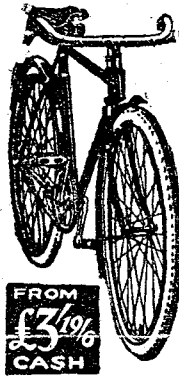
Obviously, Alvarado was striking into the trackless wastes of the desert, desiring to lose his trail there—to keep out of the way of pursuers. And although he had been ready to let the Kid ride where he would, the Kid guessed that he was glad to keep him in company under his own eye. He was glad to avoid the slightest chance of the alcalde of Pajito picking up his trail. Personal fear it could not be—the Mexican was as fearless as the Kid himself. His reason for hiding his tracks must be a strong one, but the Kid had to admit that he could not figure what it was.

The swift horses ate up the miles under the sun blaze. Closer and closer they drew to the dustcloud in the desert, looming larger as they neared it, and the Kid was able to pick out the cavalcade. In the midst of the party swung the litter, with closed curtains, borne by four mules harnessed to the poles that projected before and behind the vehicle. Of the occupant no glimpse was to be had—the curtains were close-drawn.

A muleteer was in charge of the mules, driving them. Round the litter rode a bunch of horsemen—more than a dozen of them, in the garb of vaqueros or Mexican cowboys—and all, the Kid noted, armed to the teeth.

Every man in the party, even the peon muleteer, had a rifle at his back, revolver and cuchillo at his belt.

But that did not surprise the Kid. It was asking for death to travel unarmed in the Sonora desert. There were bandoleros, gangs of contrabandistas, bunches of outcast Apaches and Yaquis to be met with in those lonely wastes, as well as the panther and the wolf. The party, howsoever



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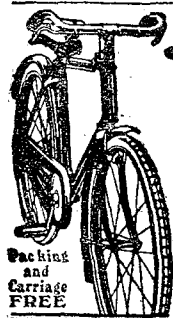


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peaceful, needed to be well armed if they were to traverse the desert in security. Still, the Kid figured that their weapons were more intended for use against possible pursuers than against any savage denizens of the desert.

"And that's your bunch, amigo?" remarked the Kid, as they drew near the dusty calvacade.

"Si, senior."

"What's in the litter?"

The Kid asked the direct question.

Don Alvaro's glance turned swiftly on him.

"Are you curious, senior?" he asked.

"I guess I'm a galoot to mind his own business, feller," said the Kid gruffly. "But I reckon I'll tell a man it's a dog-goned foolish thing to bring a woman into the desert! And I reckon it ain't a man you've got boxed up in that litter!"

"There are dangers in the desert," said Don Alvaro. "But sometimes there are greater dangers in a pueblo, senior."

"You might hit up agin a bunch of Apaches this-a-way," said the Kid.

"It is possible. But my men are well armed, and we do not fear the Apaches." The Mexican smiled. "All the more reason, senior, why I should be glad of your company. A caballero like you would be a useful friend if the Redskins came down on us."

"You've said it," assented the Kid. "But I reckon your wife would be safer in any pueblo in Mexico."

"I have no wife, senior."

"Your sister, then."

"I have no sister, senior."

"Well, I ain't asking questions," said the Kid. "I guess you're a square man, and we can let it go at that."

"Senior, you do me honour," said Don Alvaro gravely. "I am what you call a square man—what we call a caballero. If you find strange things here, senior, do not judge by appearances, but remember that you have to do with a caballero. A man may be hunted for his life, and yet be guilty of no wrong."

"I guess I'm wise to that, feller," grinned the Kid. "I've sure been there."

The young Mexican's words touched a chord in the heart of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. The Rio Kid had been hunted for his life, yet never had he willingly done any man wrong. They drew closer and closer to the calvacade, and many of the Mexicans stared back curiously at the Kid; but seeing him in company with their leader obviously reassured them, for there was no sign of hostility.

The Kid observed now that one of the riders beside the litter was a half-breed Indian woman, and he guessed that she was an attendant of the unseen occupant of the litter—proof, if that was so, that the unseen traveller was a woman. With a clatter of hoofs, the two horsemen rode up to the calvacade and joined it. Don Alvaro spoke in Spanish to a young vaquero, whom he addressed as Ramon, and who eyed the Kid very curiously.

"We halt soon, senior," said Don Alvaro, rejoining the Kid, after speaking a few minutes with Ramon. "My guide tells me that we are close on the water-hole. It lies in that clump yonder."

He pointed with his riding-whip.

At a distance a clump of trees and bushes broke the monotonous flat of the arid plain. The trees showed that there was water—some spring that bubbled up from the sandy waste.

THE POPULAR.—No. 547.

"I guess we'll hit it before sundown," said the Kid.

"Si, senior. We camp here for the night."

"And hit the trail again to-morrow?" asked the Kid.

"Si, senior."

It was on the Kid's lips to ask the Mexican what his mysterious destination might be in the heart of the Sonora desert, but he refrained.

The tired horses and mules pushed on with lagging steps. The clump of ceibas was reached at last, and horses and riders gladly passed under the grateful shade of the branches.

There was a pool under the trees fed by the spring, and in the soft earth round it innumerable tracks of animals that came there to drink. Horses and men quenched their thirst at the pool, but Don Alvaro gave no heed to it. He stopped his horse beside the halted litter, and, without removing or touching the closely drawn curtains, addressed the unseen occupant. The Kid was near enough to hear his voice—Alvaro gave him no heed—and he was surprised to hear the Mexican speak in English. It had not occurred to him hitherto that the occupant of the litter might not be a Mexican.

"Seniorita, we camp!"

There was no answer from behind the curtains.

"Seniorita, you sleep, perhaps?" asked the Mexican, and it struck the Kid that his voice was very musical, almost caressing in its tones.

This time an answer came.

"I am not sleeping." It was a sweet voice, yet in its tones there was something bitter and antagonistic. "Have you brought me into the desert?"

"Si, seniorita."

"To keep me prisoner here?"

"Not a prisoner, seniorita; an honoured guest of a Mexican caballero, who would give his life to defend you from harm."

The curtain was suddenly pulled aside, and the occupant of the litter looked out. The Kid's eyes were on her. Her face was half-hidden by a Mexican rebozo, but he saw that she was fair and pale. It was a beautiful face, though full of trouble and sadness, and, the Kid thought, indignation. The girl's eyes fixed on the Mexican with a look that the Kid could not fathom.

"We are far from Pajito?" she asked.

"Many long miles, seniorita."

"If we were hundreds of miles, he would find me, and punish you for your villainy!" said the girl, in a low, bitter tone. "My guardian—"

Alvaro winced.

"Have I not told you, seniorita, that it is for your own sake, to save you from a danger you know nothing of, that I have taken you from the Casa Manderson?"

"You have told me more than one falsehood, and I believe none of them," was the answer. "If you are not a villain, take me back to my guardian's house at Pajito."

"That is impossible, Donna Juana."

"And why?"

The Mexican did not answer.

"Then say no more, and leave me in peace." The curtain dropped into place again, shutting off the girl from view.

Alvaro Alvarado turned away, and the Kid noted that the perspiration was thick upon his brow. The cold contempt in the girl's voice seemed to have stung him to the quick.

Without glancing at the Kid, the

Mexican proceeded to give directions for a tent to be erected under the trees. Pack mules were unpacked, and the men set to work. Alvarado, so far as the Kid could see, had forgotten his presence at the camp.

The Kid stood leaning against a tree, while his mustang was drinking at the pool, a cloud on his brow, his eyes on the curtained litter. What he had heard was ringing in his brain. As he looked at the litter the curtain moved again slightly. He did not see the girl within, but he knew that she was looking out, and he guessed that she had seen him—noticed him as a Gringo among the crowd of Mexicans.

He felt that his eyes were on him, and he wondered whether she was thinking of him as a possible helper; whether it was in her mind to call to him, to make an appeal. For it was clear, from what the Kid had heard, that she was a prisoner. For whatever reason, good or evil, the Mexican had taken her from Pajito; he had taken her against her will. That he treated her with the courtesy of a caballero did not alter that fact.

The Kid was sorely troubled in mind. The girl belonged to his own country, a foreigner in the land of Mexico. If she called to him for aid, how could he refuse? Indeed, how could he forbear to aid her to liberty, even if she not call? Yet he had come into Alvarado's camp as a friend. He was not watched, he was not distrusted.

But he was surrounded by armed men, and, plainly, had he sought to intervene, it would have led to immediate bloodshed—with overwhelming odds against the Kid, odds over which he could scarcely have hoped to triumph. That, however, was less in the Kid's mind than his disinclination to pull a gun on Alvaro Alvarado; and he knew that if he horned in, it meant death either to him or to the Mexican who had saved him from the panther.

The Kid's sunburnt face was clouded with troubled thought. Had insult or harm been offered to the prisoner in the litter, it would have decided his doubts at once; his guns would have leapt from their holsters. But beyond her detention in the camp of the Mexican, it was evident that the prisoner had nothing to fear. Nothing could have been more respectful, more chivalrous, than Alvarado's manner to "Donna Juana," as he called her. Yet she was a prisoner. And it got the Kid's goat sorely to think of a woman as a prisoner.

The tent was up, carpeted, the Kid noted, with rugs and serapes, furnished with every comfort that it was possible to carry into the desert on the backs of pack mules. The litter moved on to the opening of the tent, so that the girl was able to alight and enter it without stepping out into view of the whole party. The half-breed Indian girl opened the curtains for her to descend, Don Alvaro keeping his distance. The tent-flap dropped, the litter moved on. A camp-fire was already glowing by the pool, and the Mexicans were preparing supper, and the half-breed girl carried a meal into the tent.

"Will you join us, senior?"

Alvarado's voice broke in on the Kid's troubled meditations.

"Sure!" said the Kid.

He sat on a log by the camp-fire to his supper, still in deep thought, and a troubled frame of mind.

(Continued on page 28.)

FRIEND OR FOE?

(Continued from page 18)

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

In Doubt!

NIGHT in the desert. The camp-fire burned with a dull glow, thick with logs cut from the timber by the machetes of the Mexicans. The day had been burning; but the night was cold. Round the fire, their feet to it, the Mexicans lay rolled in their serapes sleeping. But the Kid noted that a watch had been posted. Three men were keeping watch at different points round the camp—for possible pursuers from Pajito, for possible enemies of the desert. From the darkness of the plains, the dismal howl of coyotes came through the night.

Save for the dull glow from the camp-fire, all was dark under the great branches of the ceibas. There were sleepers all round the Kid, as he lay in his blanket, his feet to the fire; but for the Rio Kid there was no sleep. Somewhere near him in the gloom was Alvarado, though the Kid could not see him, and he had a hunch that the Mexican also was wakeful.

The Kid's eyes did not close. He was not watched; he was not treated as an enemy. That trust in him, the Kid realised, was the trust of a brave man whose conscience was clear. Had Don Alvaro been a villain, as the prisoner of the litter called him, the thrust of a poniard in the darkness might have been the Kid's lot. He was no villain, the Kid felt sure of that. And yet—

He had saved the Kid's life, while he believed him to be an enemy, and now he trusted him. Yet in the tent there lay a girl whom he had forcibly taken from her guardian's house and carried into the desert—exposed to all the dangers of the wilderness. It was a mystery to the Kid. He did not begin to understand what it all meant.

What part he was called on to play was a puzzle to the Kid. To mount and ride at dawn, and leave the party and the problem behind him, would be easy—and yet impossible. To leave a woman a prisoner in lawless hands in the desert—the Kid did not figure on doing that.

In the girl's voice he had detected the soft, drawing tones of his own country of Texas. It was a Texan girl who was in the tent, a prisoner in the hands of

Greasers. To mount and ride, and leave her so, seemed impossible to the Kid. Yet, pulling his gun on the man who had saved his life and treated him as a friend, appeared to him equally impossible. It was no wonder that sleep was slow to come to the Rio Kid that night in the desert.

But he slept at last.

He awakened at dawn, with the early rays of the sun glinting down through the foliage of the ceibas. Most of the Mexicans were already up, and the Kid, as he glanced round, saw the tall figure of Don Alvaro Alvarado at a little distance, standing on a rocky knoll, scanning the plain in the direction from which the party had come. Looking for a sign of pursuers, the Kid reckoned, and he scanned the arid plain, already glistening in the sunrays, in the same direction. But there was no sign of a rider to be seen.

Don Alvaro came back to camp as Ramon, the guide, called, to join the breakfast round the embers of the fire. The half-breed girl, Conchita, carried the morning meal into the tent for the prisoner there. Some of the Mexicans had been glancing towards the tent, grinning a little among themselves; but as Don Alvaro came up, glancing and grinning, ceased instantly. The Kid judged that these Greasers took the view that the strange adventure was some sort of romantic love affair, and he wondered, if that was the explanation. It did not seem likely to the Kid. He knew little about love affairs; it was true; but if this was one, it was the strangest that the Rio Kid had ever struck.

Immediately after the morning meal the camp broke up. It was evidently Don Alvaro's intention to hit the trail at once, in the cool of the morning, and plunge deeper into the trackless desert, farther and farther from the outermost edge of civilisation.

The Kid saddled his mustang, with a gloomy and troubled brow. The litter, swung to the mules, drew up before the tent, and the girl stepped into it, the curtains immediately dropping into place. Then the tent was struck and packed away on the backs of the numerous mules. As the Mexicans prepared to take the trail, the Kid stood in doubt, and Don Alvaro approached him, with a faint smile on his handsome, olive face.

"We part, senor," he said.

"You hitting for the desert?"

"Si, senor."

"I reckon the desert's free to all," said the Kid. "I've sure got a hunch for hitting the same trail, feller."

Alvarado's face grew grave.

There was a pause.

"Senor," said the Mexican at last, "I shall be glad of your company in riding the desert trails. You are a brave caballero, and I know well that many dangers may lie in our path, as well as behind us. But—"

"But—" said the Kid grimly.

"Do you come as friend or foe, senor?" asked the Mexican quietly. "I know that you have seen the senorita, but I know not what you may think, what you may believe, and I can tell you nothing. My lips are sealed. If you come as a friend, senor, you are very welcome; but if what you have seen has made you my foe, let us part now—or, if you choose, our weapons shall decide between us."

The Kid shook his head.

"I guess I ain't pulling a gun on you, feller," he said. "I don't rightly understand this game, but I got a hunch that you're a white man, queer as it all looks. But I'm coming. There's a woman in that litter who figures that she's in an enemy's hands, and I ain't losing sight of that shebang, senor. And I guess if you run into a gang of Apaches or Yaquis, they won't be so durned polite to her as you are, feller. I guess my guns will come in useful if that happens. Anyhow, I'm humping along the same trail that the lady does; and if that gives you a grouch, I guess it will come to gun-play."

The Mexican smiled.

"Come, if you come as a friend," he said.

The Kid considered.

"I reckon," he said slowly, "that if I see any reason for raising a rookus, feller, I'll give you fair warning. Up to that, you can count me a friend."

"I am satisfied, senor."

The Mexican mounted the black broncho, and rode after the cavalcade, which had already started. The Rio Kid shook out his reins, and dashed after him. The litter, swinging between the mules, rolled on its way, its occupant hidden from the sun, and from curious eyes, by the closely-drawn curtains, and round it rode the armed band of Mexicans. And with Don Alvaro Alvarado and his men rode the Kid, wondering what might be the end of this strange and mysterious adventure in the desert.

THE END

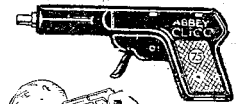
(What happens to the Rio Kid and his strange companions you will learn in "FOES OF THE DESERT!" a rattling fine yarn of the West, in next Tuesday's bumper issue.)

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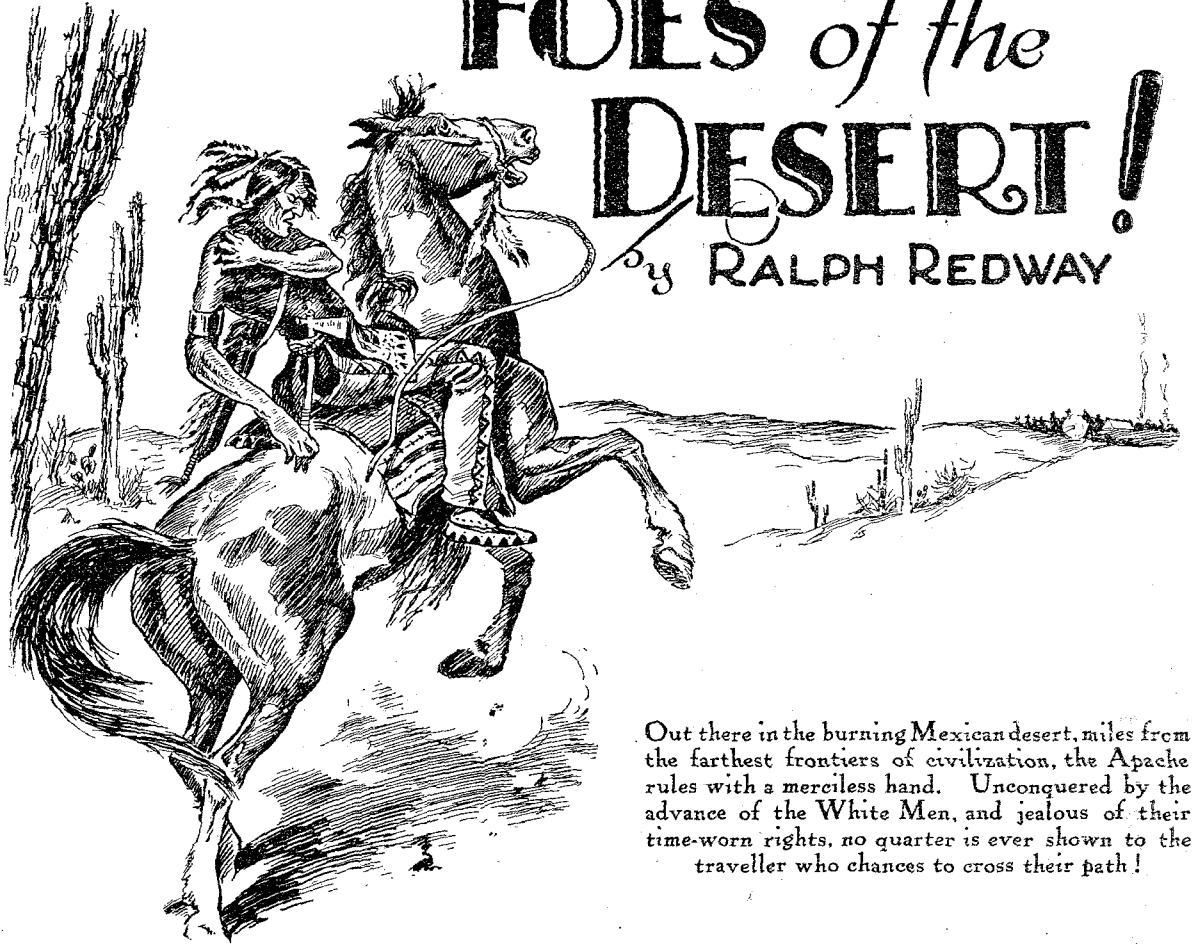
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FOES of the DESERT!

by RALPH REDWAY



Out there in the burning Mexican desert, miles from the farthest frontiers of civilization, the Apache rules with a merciless hand. Unconquered by the advance of the White Men, and jealous of their time-worn rights, no quarter is ever shown to the traveller who chances to cross their path!

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Apache!

INJUNS!" growled the Rio Kid. Dawn was breaking on the Mexican desert.

On the edge of a rocky arroyo, at the bottom of which a shallow stream trickled, the camp was pitched.

Round the camp, as far as the eye could reach, stretched the desert of Sonora; barren plains, dotted with scrubby sage and gaunt cactus and yucca, rived here and there by stony arroyos and deep barrancas.

Exactly where he was the Rio Kid could not have said; only that he was somewhere in the heart of the trackless desert.

For three days, since the Kid had joined Don Alvaro Alvarodo's bunch, the party had trailed into the desert.

Whether Alvarodo had any special destination the Kid did not know; but he figured that the Mexican was simply trying to lose himself in the barren desert, out of the reach of pursuit.

With the Mexican bunch the Kid rode through the burning days, and camped in the chilly nights. Far from the farthest frontiers of civilization the bunch had lost themselves in the barren waste. It was not likely that the alcalde of Pajito, if he was on the trail, would ever trail them down.

Stony flats and sandy plains bore little or no sign for a tracker to follow. But if there was now little danger of

pursuit, there were other dangers, for which the Kid had kept a keen eye open.

As the sun rose over the desert and the Mexicans turned out of their serapes and busied themselves about the camp, the Kid stood watching the plains at a distant spot, where a bunch of tall cactus stood against the sky.

It was not only the cactus that the Kid saw. Something was stirring there.

"What do you see, *senorito*?"
Alvaro Alvarodo joined the Kid, coming out of the camp. The Kid's fixed gaze at the distant cactus clump had drawn his attention.

"Injuns!" said the Kid briefly.
Don Alvaro followed his gaze keenly. He nodded. Almost hidden by the cactus, but not quite, was the figure of a horseman, halted, and watching the Mexican camp from the distance. The coppery face, the straggling feathers in the matted black hair, the tattered blanket, told that the rider was a Redskin.

"Only one of the *picaros*," said Alvarodo carelessly.

The Kid grunted.
"I guess this hyer desert is as full of them, as a Mexican dog is of fleas!" he answered gruffly. "That guy is a scout, and he's found us. I reckon the whole family ain't far off."

"A mob of desert thieves," said the Mexican, shrugging his shoulders. "They will not give us much trouble."
"I guess they ain't what they was in the old days, when the war-trail ran to

the gates of Arispe," said the Kid. "But I reckon they'll give you all the trouble you want, feller, and a few over. Why, this outfit is worth a fortune to them Apaches. I guess the hosses alone would bring down on us every thief in the desert, if they knew we was here. We ain't less than a hundred miles from any white man's shebang, I reckon, and if our guns don't save us, our scalps are goin' to be strung on the lodge-poles before sundown!"

The distant rider had moved out a little from the cover of the cactus, and was sitting on his shaggy pony, surveying the camp with eagle eyes. That he was in sight of the white men did not seem to trouble him at all. He sat his pony coolly, surveying the camp. The Kid's eyes gleamed.

"I guess it's pie to that pack finding this outfit here!" he grunted. "He sure figures that he's got us cinched, hosses and scalps and all the caboodle! I don't say he misses his guess, either. But—" The Kid calculated the distance. "It's a durned long shot, but a galoot might bring it off!"

Ramon, the guide, came out of the camp and joined them.

"That is El Cascabel, the Apache," he said, in Spanish. "I know him; I have seen him."

"A chief?" asked the Kid.
"Si, *senor*—chief of a tribe of outcast Apaches, who live in the desert, and have never submitted to the Mexican Government."

The Kid nodded.

"I guess the bunch might keep off if they missed their king-pin," he remarked. "Say, feller, you get my rifle while I keep an eye on the guy!"

Ramon went back to the camp.

The Apache, in the distance, still sat his horse, as motionless as a statue. He was taking in every detail of the Mexican camp, unmoved by the fact that the two white men stood watching him. He knew that he was out of effective rifle-range, and he was ready for instant flight if horsemen stirred from the camp.

The Kid, his gaze leaving the Apache for a few moments, glanced back at the tent in the camp. Conchita, the half-breed peon girl, was taking the morning meal into the tent, for its unseen occupant.

Since the first day the Kid had seen nothing of the Texan girl who so strangely accompanied this mysterious outfit into the desert. But his thoughts had been with her often. His look was gloomy now.

"The *senorita* Tejana is in no danger, *amigo*," said Alvarado. "Todos los Santos! There are enough of us to defend her!"

"Mebbe," grunted the Kid, "and mebbe not! I guess you was plumb loco to bring a woman into this desert, feller!"

Alvarado made no reply.

The whole camp was aware now of the proximity of the Redskin scout, and all the Mexicans were looking to their weapons.

Ramon came back with the Kid's rifle.

The boy puncher examined it carefully, and then, dropping on one knee, aimed it, taking slow and careful aim at the distant Indian.

El Cascabel saw the action, but he did not move. Impassive as a figure of bronze, he sat his shaggy pony, watching.

"He is too distant, *senor*," said Don Alvaro.

"He sure figures that he is," said the Kid; "and I guess it gets my goat to draw a bead on him; but he ain't levanting to call his gang on to us if I can stop him. I guess this hyer rifle will carry the distance, and it's that buck for the long trail!"

The Kid dwelt long on his aim, and the eyes of all the Mexicans were upon him. The Indian still sat his horse impassive!

Crack!

The report of the rifle rolled in a thousand echoes across the desert.

"Nombre de Dios, he is hit!" shouted Alvarado, as the Indian was seen to reel in his saddle.

For a moment El Cascabel looked as if he would fall. Evidently the long-distance shot had struck. But he righted himself, pressed a hand for a moment to his shoulder, and brandished a tomahawk at the Mexicans; then, wheeling his pony, he galloped away at a furious speed. In a few moments the dust of the desert swallowed him from sight.

The Kid rose to his feet, shrugging his shoulders.

"Look out for trouble now," he said, and he walked back to the camp.

Camp had been broken, and under the rising sun Don Alvaro Alvarado had taken the trail. The certained litter, swinging on its poles harnessed to four mules, rolled on in the midst of the little crowd of horsemen and pack-mules.

Ramon, the guide, led the way across a rocky tract that retained little or no sign of the passage. Many on uneasy glance was thrown backward by the dusty riders as they went.

That El Cascabel, the Apache, had fled to call his braves to bloodshed and plunder all knew; and the Rio Kid, at least, did not believe that the savage denizens of the desert could be eluded. The loot of such an outfit was boundless wealth to the ragged, desperate thief-Apaches who haunted the desert outside the edge of civilisation. There was only one hope of escaping an attack, to the Kid's mind—the chance that El Cascabel might succumb to his wound, and sink down from his horse before he rejoined his crowd. That, the Kid figured, was all the chance that stood between the Mexican bunch and a swarm of Redskins.

The Kid's face was grim.

Desperate fighting was not new to him—the Apaches had no terrors for the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. He was thinking of the Texan girl in the litter, carried into the desert a prisoner and in dire peril of falling into the hands of savages. The Kid drew his mustang to the side of Don Alvaro, who was urging on the cavalcade to its greatest speed.

"Where you hitting for, feller?" the Kid asked abruptly.

"Ramon is the guide," answered Alvarado.

"You ain't aiming to get out of the desert?"

"No, *senor*."

"There ain't a dog's chance of dropping them Apaches," growled the Kid. "I'll tell the world they won't let this outfit get clear."

"Then we shall fight." The Mexican smiled. "All the more reason, *senor*, why I am glad that you joined company with us. A caballero like you will be very useful when the fighting begins."

"I guess them Redskins will hear my guns talk a few," said the Kid. "But you sure ought to be hitting for the settlements with that lady in the litter."

"We are too far from the settlements, *senor*, to have any hope of reaching them, if the Indians are in pursuit of us."

The Kid was silent. He had no doubt that statement was correct.

"We may elude them yet, *senorito*," said Alvarado. "I see no sign of pursuit so far. Probably El Cascabel found us by chance, and his braves may be far away. And on these rocks we leave no trail for them."

The Kid grunted.

"I guess them bucks would pick up the trail of a cicada, if there was loot and scalps at the end of it," he said. "What you want to look for is some place where we can stand off them reds when the pinch comes."

"Ramon knows of such a place, *senor*."

"That what you hitting for now?"

"Si, *senor*."
The Kid said no more. It was all that could be done, since they were in the heart of the desert, far from any possible aid.

Through the long, hot hours of the morning the cavalcade pushed on. Mile after mile of barren plain, studded with lone cactus and yucca, passed under the hoofs of the horses and mules.

Under the blaze of noon the bunch still pressed on. Ahead of them now, rising abruptly from the sandy, stony plain, was a strange shape of pyramidal form which the Kid guessed was the present destination of the bunch. The Kid did not need telling what it was—he had seen an Aztec *teocalli* before, in the Gila desert of Arizona. And he gave a nod of approval. If there was to be a fight with a swarm of savage Apaches, a stronger position could not have been picked out, within the limits of the desert.

With lagging steps, under the hot sunshine, the outfit pushed on, and early in the afternoon the *teocalli* was reached.

It was a circular pyramid of banked-up earth, covered and faced with blocks of ancient stone, rising in a series of gigantic steps to the level top.

Much of the ancient pyramid had crumbled away, under the hand of time, and under the burning sun and fierce hot winds of the desert. But the lower terraces were mostly intact.

The Kid looked with curious eyes at the strange old memorial of a distant past.

Set alone in the midst of the desert, far from the habitations of men, the *teocalli* told of a time when men had dwelt there. It marked, perhaps, a halting-place of the Aztecs, on their mysterious journey from the north before they arrived in the rich valley of Mexico and settled there. If habitations had existed every vestige of them was gone; only the stone-faced earthen pyramid remained, upon which, in those past days, human sacrifices had bled under the obsidian knife of the priest.

On one side of the *teocalli*, old stone steps led up to the summit. The steps were worn and crumbled, but still accessible.

Opposite the ancient staircase, the Mexican bunch halted. Hot as it was, weary as all the riders were, not a moment was lost. The mules were unpacked, and the baggage carried up the steps. The horses and mules, with rough hands grasping the bridles, were forced up the shallow steps. The litter, left by the mules, lay on the ground, and



CAUGHT NAPPING! As the Mexican lit his cigarette there was a whiz of a circling roper, and a loop descended over the Kid's shoulders. In a moment he was dragged to the ground! (See Chapter 4.)

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Rough on the Kid!

THE cracking of the muleteer's whip rang like a succession of pistol-shots. Dust rose in clouds under the rapid tramp of horses' hoofs. The Mexican bunch was in rapid motion.

Don Alvaro approached the side and called to the girl within.

The Kid's eyes were curiously upon him.

That the handsome Mexican had forcibly taken the Texan girl from her home at Pajito, from the house of her guardian, the Kid could not help knowing. It was for her sake that the boy puncher was riding with the Mexican bunch. The girl was a captive; yet apart from the fact of her captivity Don Alvaro treated her with all the polished courtesy of a Spanish hidalgo. The Kid was puzzled and worried. Had the Mexican treated her otherwise, the Kid would have pulled a gun on him, in spite of the fact that Alvarado had saved him from a panther in the desert. But the Mexican, notwithstanding his lawless action, was a caballero, and a princess could not have been treated with more courtesy and deference than the girl who was a prisoner in the litter.

It was a puzzle to the Kid, and it troubled him.

"Senorita," Don Alvaro spoke softly, "will it please you to alight? We camp again."

The curtain was pulled aside; the girl's face, half-hidden by a silken rebobo, looked out.

"Has your prisoner any choice, Don Alvaro?" she asked.

"Senorita, it is necessary to alight and mount the steps yonder. Your tent will be placed above."

The girl's eyes turned in surprise on the teocalli.

"What is that?" she asked, forgetting for the moment that she was speaking to a man who was her gaoler, if not her enemy.

"A monument of the Aztecs, who once lived in my country, *senorita*," said Don Alvaro. "It is called a teocalli in the Aztec tongue."

"We take refuge there?"

"We camp there, *senorita*," answered the Mexican evasively.

The girl's lip curled.

"I have heard the talk of your men, and I have lived long enough in Mexico to understand Spanish," she said. "We are pursued by Indians."

"It is possible that the Indians may pursue us, *senorita*. But if so we shall easily drive them off," said the Mexican. "You need have no fear."

"I have no fear," answered the girl coldly. "But you have much to answer for, *Senor Alvarado*. The guilt will be upon you if I find my death in this desert."

The Mexican compressed his lips. "No danger shall reach you, *senorita*, while a man here can strike a blow in your defence," he said in a low voice.

"Yes, you are brave, even if you are a villain, *Don Alvaro*," said the Texan girl bitterly. "When I used to see you at my guardian's house at Pajito, I believed you a caballero. And you are a kidnapper, a picaro, a leper. You will not even tell me why you have carried me away from the Casa Manderson. Is it for ransom, because my guardian is rich?"

The Kid saw the Mexican wince as if he had been struck.

"Nombre de Dios! Can you suppose that, *senorita*?" asked Don Alvaro, in a low, trembling voice.

"Then why, if you do not seek a ransom?"

"I cannot tell you, *senorita*. Will it please you to alight and accept my assistance to mount the teocalli?"

"I am under the orders of my gaoler," said the girl. "But I do not need the assistance of a picaro."

She stepped from the litter.

Leaving Don Alvaro standing motionless by the litter, with the pallor almost of death in his handsome, olive face, the girl mounted the first of the steps that led up the terraced teocalli.

Then she turned suddenly to the Rio Kid. The puncher lifted his Stetson, his face colouring with sudden embarrassment. He had exchanged no word hitherto with the prisoner of the litter, but he knew that she must have seen him riding with the bunch.

"And you are one of these picaros," she said in a quick, low voice. "You are from Texas—I have heard you speak—I know it—"

"Kid Carfax, of Texas, miss," stammered the Kid.

"And you, a Texan, are in league with these Mexicans, and you will not help a prisoner in the hands of kidnapers."

The Kid's face was scarlet. Don Alvaro made a stride towards them as if to intervene. Then he halted in his tracks.

"You see, miss," stammered the Kid miserably. "I—I guess—"

"A Texas puncher, leagued with Mexican kidnapers!" exclaimed the girl scornfully.

"Tain't exactly that, miss," mumbled the Kid. "I guess I ain't one of this bunch, nohow, miss. I guess I'm only riding with this outfit, miss, because you are along. But—that Mexican guy, miss, he's a white man, and I guess I ain't no hunch to pull a gun on him."

"A white man—and a kidnapper!" "I sure don't rightly get the hang of this hyer lay-out," admitted the Kid. "But—"

Don Alvaro stood looking on, silent. "Listen to me!" said the girl, speaking rapidly, as if she feared interruption, though the Mexican made no motion to interrupt. "I am Joan Valence. My guardian, Job Manderson, lives at

Summer Days are Scouting Days, and the Call of the Open is heard everywhere. Adventure is to be found on the wayside, in the woods, and on the hills, and the Boy Scout is following that trail with keenness and zest.

SCOUTING DAYS!

YOU can be as good a scout, and every bit as happy, without equipment as the fellow completely rigged out with the entire regulation scout kit—but only if you know your scouteraft as every good fellow in love with the open air should know it.

Scouteraft! Why, that word covers an enormous amount of happiness. There is absolutely unlimited scope for jolly times, whether you are one of a troop or just one of two or three fellows together for a day's outing in the woods and fields, thirsting for the fine companionship of the great highway and the by-paths and lanes of our countryside.

"Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile—smile—smile!" You know the honoured old ditty, of course. Well, that is the chief thing to observe on any outdoor expedition—to smile, and leave your troubles where you can forget 'em. Pack them up in the metaphorical kit-bag—and lose the lot!

Seriously, though, that question of kit is always coming to the fore. The one big thing you must not forget to take with you is good humour. Forget everything else, but don't omit that. And another important item of equipment is shoes or boots. Have them stout, without being heavy. And the socks should match. Shun the fancy variety of hosiery when on the trek. Have them stout, and if possible without darns.

Your boots or shoes may decide to play you a trick and burst the laces. Well, that's easy. Carry an emergency pair. There's nothing that so plainly indicates the Tenderfoot as laces knotted in a join—or string used as a substitute.

Some kit, of course, you must take with you. But whatever you do, don't start out for the day with a load. Life becomes a burden on a hot day when there are a lot of things to lug around. Next to the day's supply of food—unless you are going to buy your meals somewhere on the trek—I place in importance as an article of kit a good, workmanlike mackintosh or raincoat or waterproof sheet.

Even if it doesn't rain, you will find some such damp-resisting gear absolutely invaluable if you have to sleep out. Ever tried sleeping out? No? Well, it's *always* a very moisty job by night, however hot and dry the days themselves may be, and no sane scout ever rests his bones on damp ground if he can avoid it!

Two raincoats or other form of waterproof can quickly be hooked together to form a shelter for two or three of you against a sudden downpour, or they can be secured to a bush or low tree to form a shelter at mid-day against the hot sun when you have your victuals. Hot sun—thirst. Yes, they go

together sure enough, and so you will need to carry clear water for drinking unless you can be sure of getting it on your outing. Use as little of it as possible—it's bad stuff to travel on; nearly as bad as mineral waters, ice-cream, and such fal-lals and, in the way of solids, chocolate and sweets. But that question of grub we must talk about another time during this series of articles, when we will chat over a few more secrets of happiness and success in scouteraft.



Pajito; you must have heard of him if you know this country. He is an otlowner, and rich. Take him word where to find me, and he will reward you—richly."

The Kid's face was already scarlet, but it seemed to redden more.

"Take him word, or take word to the alcalde of Pajito, who is his friend," said Joan. "If you cannot help me, or dare not, give my friends a chance to save me from that villain!"

Without waiting for a reply from the hapless Kid, the girl turned from him and mounted the steps of the teocalli.

The Kid turned towards Don Alvaro. The Mexican advanced a few paces and stood facing him in silence.

The Kid breathed hard.

"I reckon you heard what the lady said, feller?" said the Kid quietly.

"Si, senior."

"What she says goes! You got me clear when a panther had his claws on me," muttered the Kid, "but that don't cut no ice now. That's a girl from my own country, and I guess I'm standing by her. Either you hit the trail back to Pajito and take her to her friends, or—"

"Jamás! Never!"

"Or it's you or me, Greaser!" said the Kid. "You or me is a dead man if you don't let up on that Texas girl!"

"You have given me fair warning, senior, as you said you would, if you became my foe instead of my friend," said Don Alvaro gravely. "It is understood now! We are foes!"

"Sure—unless you take Miss Valence back to Pajito!"

"That it cannot do!"

"Then I guess it's got to come to gun-talk!" said the Kid, with a sigh. "It gets my goat, it sure does, seeing as you saved me from the painter, and I reckon you're a white man all through, 'cepting for just one thing. But there ain't no help for it! It's you or me, feller!"

The Mexican's eyes glistened.

"I shall be sorry to kill you, seniorito, but if you leave me no choice—"

There was a shout from Ramon on the teocalli.

"Los Indios!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Fight on the Teocalli!

"LOS Indios!"

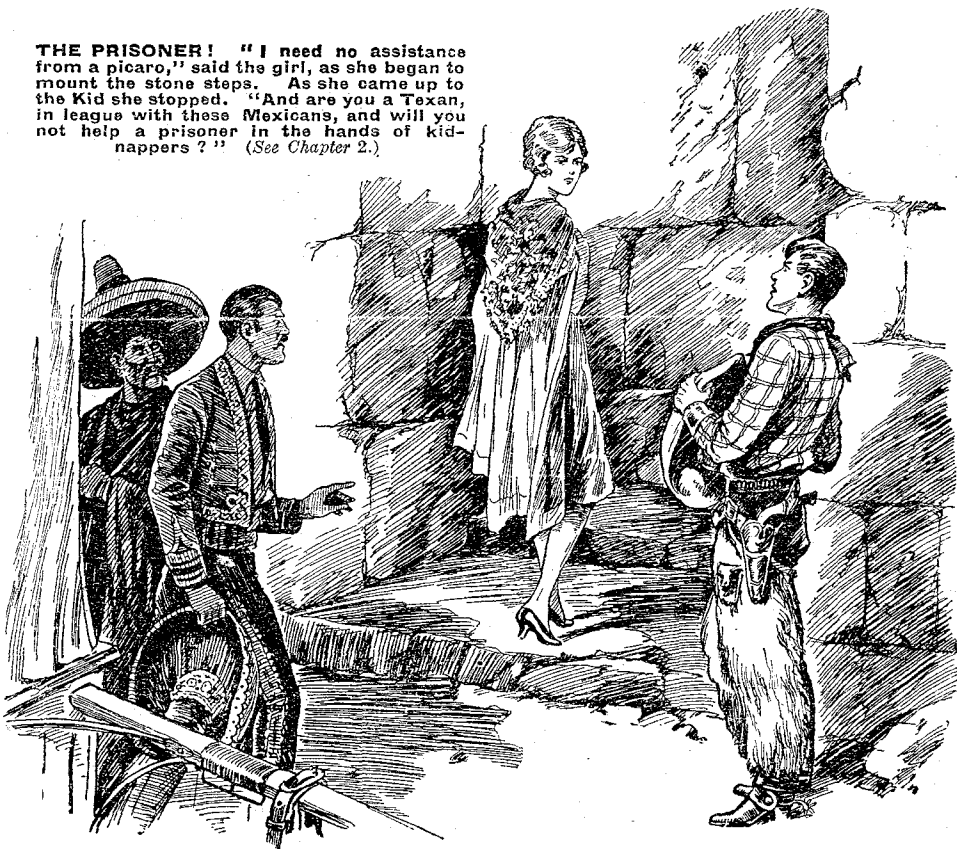
The cry was taken up by all the Mexicans.

The Indians were in sight.

Far away, with spear-points glittering in the sunlight through a cloud of dust, a bunch of riders appeared on the plain. They were riding on the trail of the Mexican outfit, heading direct for the teocalli, and, though still at a distance, evidently knew where to look for the white men. Little as was the sign that had been left, it had proved more than sufficient to guide El Cascabel and his savage braves.

The Kid and Alvarado, facing one

THE PRISONER! "I need no assistance from a picaro," said the girl, as she began to mount the stone steps. "As she came up to the Kid she stopped. "And are you a Texan, in league with these Mexicans, and will you not help a prisoner in the hands of kid-nappers?" (See Chapter 2.)



another, paused and hesitated. The Mexican suddenly smiled.

"Seniorito, los Indios!" he said. "Shall we postpone our quarrel until later? Every gun will be needed now to save Donna Juana from the Apaches. And if I kill you, amigo, or you kill me, it will add to her danger, and you do not desire that."

The Kid felt a deep relief.

He could not be deaf to the appeal the Texan girl had made. But it went sorely against the grain with him to draw a weapon on the man who had saved his life. And the Mexican's words were true. In the race of the savage enemy, it would have been madness for the white men to quarrel. Every gun was needed now.

The Kid nodded.

"I guess that's hoss-sense, feller," he said. "We got to keep them red bucks off, that's a cinch. And I sure should hate to spill your juice, anyhow. When the coast's clear, we'll see about it, feller. Jest at present I guess we got to stand pat."

"Be it so!"

No time was lost now in talk. The Redskins were still distant, but they were approaching fast, their shaggy ponies covering the ground at a much greater speed than that at which the Mexican bunch had travelled. The litter was dragged up the crumbling steps of the teocalli, and all the baggage followed it. On the top of the ancient mound was ample space for a camp, and in the centre, where the sacrificial stone once had stood, the tent was erected for Joan Valence—Donna Juana, as Alvarado called her. There the girl was safe from flying bullets, and it was certain that the lead would soon be flying thickly.

The Kid looked round the position taken up by the Mexican bunch, and he

viewed it with approval. It was not an easy position to attack. The sides of the teocalli, cut in terraces, looked like a series of gigantic steps from a distance; but each "step" of the successive terraces was more than a dozen feet in height, difficult enough for the most active Redskin to clamber up. Only where the flight of stone stairs had been cut by the ancient Aztecs was access easy, and the stair would be commanded by the fire of the men above. The Kid reckoned that in such a position the bunch ought to be able to stall off almost any number of Redskins. There was only one stairway cut in the side of the teocalli, and it was not more than three feet wide.

In a cloud of dust, with trampling hoofs, the Apaches drew closer, and the Kid's keen eyes picked out among them the chief he had wounded with his long-distance shot that morning. For a time it looked as if the Apaches, who numbered at least fifty, would ride right on to the teocalli; but at a short distance they separated into two parties and rode round it, brandishing their spears and uttering fierce yells.

There was a spattering of fire from the Mexicans. But the lead was wasted on the rapidly moving horsemen, still at a distance as they circled the teocalli. The Kid did not waste a shot. He waited and watched, with a sarcastic grin on his face. He had seen Redskin tactics before, and he was not likely to be "rattled" by war-whoops and brandished spears. Some of the Mexicans round him, however, had uneasy looks. Indian warfare, the Kid reckoned, was new to most of them; it was their first sight of the outcast Apaches of the desert.

From many of the lances brandished by the Redskins tufts of hair flew in

the wind, and all the bunch knew what they were—scalps—trophies taken from lone white men killed in the desert, or from Yaqui or Comanche or Navajo. Some of the bunch on the summit of the teocalli were feeling their own scalps insecure on their heads.

Round and round the teocalli the Redskins circled, the circle narrowing as they raced, bringing them closer and closer, but in such rapid motion that firing was futile. The yells uttered by the savages rang clearly to every ear with a blood-curdling effect. The attack might come at any moment; the Apaches were working themselves into a state of wild excitement and fury.

The Kid gave his six-guns a careful look; they were going to be needed now as they had seldom been needed before. Alvaro Alvarado stood leaning on a rifle, cool and calm, but the Kid noted that his glance dwelt oftener on the tent that hid the Texan girl than on the yelling Indians. Perhaps at that moment the Mexican regretted that he had brought the girl into the wilderness of

the Sonora desert, far from all aid if he fell.

"Watch out, you 'uns!" said the Kid. "They're coming!"

At some imperceptible signal from El Cascabel the circling of the wild riders ceased, and the whole band rode in towards the teocalli, closing in from all sides at once.

The rush was so sudden and swift that the Redskins reached the circular mound almost in a second. A score of them flung themselves from their ponies at the foot of the stone stair and came surging and scrambling and trampling up in a screaming mob, with flashing spears and tomahawks, while the rest essayed to climb the terraced sides of the mound from the backs of their horses.

"Shoot!" roared the Rio Kid.

His guns were blazing now.

Every rifle was blazing away, filling the hot air with a deafening din.

The fire that swept down the stone stairway swept it almost clear. Right and left reeled the yelling, screaming

savages, sprawling over one another, but still those that were not struck scrambled and clambered on. With burning eyes and snarling mouths, like wild beasts athirst for blood, they came on, heedless of death in their fierce eagerness for slaughter. But the fire swept them down, and hardly a man in the wild crew reached the top of the steps.

But loud yelling from other quarters showed that some of the Indians had succeeded in clambering from their horses' backs up the steep sides of the teocalli. Wild figures were running round the lower terrace, seeking access to the next, and there was plenty of handhold and foothold among the stones and earth crumbled by time. The Kid, turning from the scene of slaughter on the stone stair, saw five or six howling demons on the summit, that had succeeded in scrambling up. Don Alvaro's voice rang out, shouting to his men, and he rushed at the enemy with his rifle clubbed. Machete in hand, his men followed him, and there was
(Continued on opposite page.)



No. 7.—HILARY BUCHANAN TALKS.

WHAT is dirt track racing like—from the rider's point of view? That is the question I have been asked to answer here.

I will make it plain at once that life loses a lot of its dullness as soon as one takes up a career like mine. I realised this when, some little time ago now, I paid my first visit to a dirt track. That, of course, was in Australia, where I was born and where I have spent the greater part of my life.

I was so thrilled with the spectacle of the riders broadsiding round the bends at tremendous speeds on their powerful machines, throwing up showers of cinders behind them, that I decided there and then to go in for the sport myself.

I could hardly ride a motor-bike at all in those days. But I bought a good machine and learned to do so while actually practising on the track!

I found that dirt track racing was even more wonderful than I expected it would be. I can't describe what a thrill it is to swing round one of those corners in a terrific broadside. It feels at first just as if the back wheel is coming off; it seems, in fact, quite impossible for one to remain on the bike.

But the secret is to open the throttle when one begins to heel over. Balance can then be recovered, and a moment later one is flashing along the straight again.

I found it hard at first to bring myself to "turn on the gas" as I was going over. When things are like that one feels that it would be just asking for trouble to attempt a higher speed. As a result, I used to end up on the ground more times than not, with the bike on top of me!

But soon I began to get the knack of it, and falls like that became less frequent.

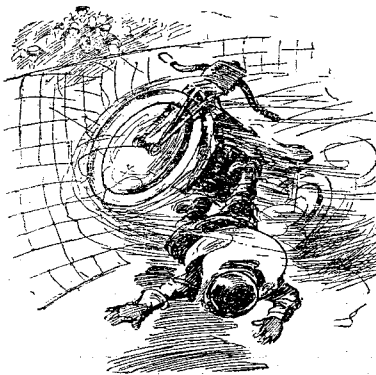
THE POPULAR.—No. 548.

In fact I acquired confidence. Yet sometimes that proved to be just as great a handicap. I would, for instance, start believing that I should have no trouble in getting round some corner or other when I was going at a colossal speed, and I would refuse to slow down as much as I ought to do because of it.

And then, when I was in the middle of the broadside I would realise that I was wrong and that I hadn't the power to hold the bike on the track at such a speed! In such cases it was the fence for me!

Sometimes, if I was lucky, I was able to pick up the bike and walk back to the pits unaided. But sometimes the ambulance men had to assist me!

Still, we dirt track riders have to be prepared for that sort of thing. We can't expect to go for long without a crash, no matter how much experience of riding we may have had.



I hit the rails with a mighty crash.

But, like the other riders, I learnt in time how to fall with the least possible chance of being hurt. The secret of this is, again, to drive the machine "all out" as soon as one begins to go over. Even if it doesn't help the rider to retain his balance, this method brings him down in a long, sweeping broadside, which is far less likely to injure him than a sudden halt.

The greatest danger that we have to face is, of course, the chance that another rider will go into us when we have fallen over.

I had a most exciting taste of this at Wimbledon once last season. I happened to be in quite good form, and I was three or four lengths in front of the second man when, on the last lap, I overdid a broadside and came down.

As I hit the ground I heard an ear-splitting roar just behind, and I saw in the fraction of a second that this rider was coming straight for me!

I thought at the time that my last moment had come. But then, with a frantic effort, I managed to roll clear. As I did so there was a loud crash as the other rider went into my machine—just where I had been lying—and dived over his own handlebars, landing close beside me. It sounds a miracle, but—neither of us was even scratched!

But I think the most exciting race I have known was one that took place at the same track a few weeks ago. It was the first heat of the Golden Gauntlet event, and there were, as usual, four of us riding—Frank Arthur, "Smiling" Jim Kempster, Mart Seiffert, and myself.

Frank Arthur secured a big lead at the start, and for the first lap I was last of the four. And then I managed to go round a bend in one of the best broadsides I have ever done.

That acted as a kind of spur to me. I decided that I was not going to be beaten so easily, and I set out to give the others a real good chase.

Soon I passed Mart and Jim. But Frank was still in front, and the spectators were considering the event finished.

Once I thought I was over for certain—but I just managed to stop on, although I was determined not to slacken speed. But Frank's lead had become too big to cut down altogether, and in spite of a despairing effort that I made to get round him on the last bend, he was three lengths in front of me when the finishing flag went down.

Hilary Buchanan

savage hand-to-hand fighting all over the level summit of the teocalli. And while it went on there came another rush up the stone steps, headed by El Cascabel with brandished tomahawk.

All was wild confusion now.

But the Kid, in the midst of the confusion and din, was cool as ice. He faced the rush up the steps, his six-guns roaring, and Redskin after Redskin went crashing back, rolling down the steps to the plain below. But three or four of the assailants reached the summit, and passed the Kid, among them El Cascabel.

The Mexicans were fighting hand to hand now, and more than one of them had gone down under thrusting spear or crashing tomahawk. The Kid's revolvers clicked empty, and there was no time to reload. He thrust them back into the holsters and grasped his rifle, and the whirling butt hurled back a fire-eyed savage who was leaping upon him. The next moment the butt was at the Kid's shoulder, and the Winchester was spraying bullets on the Redskins who had reached the summit. Fast as the Kid pulled trigger, not a shot missed its mark. The white men had gained the upper hand, and of the Apaches who had reached them only one still lived—El Cascabel, in the grasp of Alvarado, rolling over and over in desperate fight.

Again came a rush up the stone stairway from the plain, and the Mexicans gathered at the head of the stair to drive it back, and again the shrieking savages were swept down. And as he fired on the scrambling demons the Kid, with the tail of his eye, as it were, saw Don Alvaro down under the Apache chief, and El Cascabel's knife flashing in the sun as it was lifted to strike. The Kid's rifle swung round and his last shot was fired to save Alvarado, barely in time. The Apache's knife descended, but missed as the bullet crashed into his brain, and El Cascabel fell dead across the panting Mexican.

Don Alvaro hurred aside the inert body and staggered to his feet. He gave a wild, breathless stare round. The Apaches—what were left of them—had ceased to attack—they were scrambling on their shaggy ponies for flight. More than half the savage band had gone down, more than half the rest were wounded. Victory remained with the Mexican bunch, and from the top of the teocalli they fired fast on the retreating Apaches, and many of the Redskins rolled from their ponies' backs as they dashed away into the desert.

"Por todos los santos!" breathed Alvarado, "por todos los santos!"
The fight was over.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

From Friends to Foes!

UNDER the red glare of the sunset the Rio Kid sat, his face thoughtful, cleaning his six-guns. Hours had passed since the fight; all was quiet on the lonely teocalli. From the plain below there came a low growling and snarling from hordes of coyotes, gathered from all quarters, the scavengers of the desert.

The teocalli had been cleared of the slain Redskins, flung carelessly down to the coyotes on the plain below. Three of the Mexicans, who had fallen in the fight, had been buried on the summit by their comrades; for the Redskins there was the burial of the desert.

The survivors of the marauding band had long vanished over the distant horizon, and the Kid figured that they were not likely to return. El Cascabel



BATTLE ROYAL. The Kid, turning from the scene of battle on the stone stair, saw five or six howling demons on the summit that had succeeded in scrambling up. Don Alvaro's voice rang out, shouting to his men, and he rushed at the enemy with his rifle clubbed. (See Chapter 3.)

had fallen, and his band had been almost wiped out in the fierce conflict. What were left were likely to think of little but escape. The Kid was not worrying about them—he was thinking of his own strange situation, and the appeal that Joan had made to him. What he was to do in the strange circumstances the Kid did not know; and he was thinking it over with a corrugated brow.

Don Alvaro came towards him at last. The young Mexican's face was grave, and the Kid met him with a grim look. He had finished cleaning his guns, and now he slowly reloaded them, the Mexican watching him in silence for some minutes.

"We take the trail when the moon rises, senior," said Don Alvaro, breaking the silence at last.

"I reckon that's your best break," said the Kid. "Them Reds won't have any hunch for hunting more trouble, I guess, but this ain't healthy country for white men. You hitting for the settlements?"

"No, senior."

"You aim to keep in the desert?"

The Mexican nodded.

"And the senorita?"

"The senorita Tejana remains in my care, senior," said Don Alvaro gravely. The Kid breathed hard.

"I don't rightly understand this game," he said. "But that Texas girl—the Senorita Tejana, as you call her—has sure asked me to help her out. That

ain't a thing a Texas puncher can say no to, feller."

"Si! But—" Don Alvaro smiled faintly. "I have lost three men in the fight with the Apaches, senior; but I have still a strong force. You are a brave caballero—one of the bravest—but you do not think that you can take the senorita from me by force?"

"I guess I'm going to try," said the Kid. "I should sure hate to spill your juice, feller, or any guy's here, after we've stood up together agin the Reds. You've got a crowd on your side, but that cuts no ice. I told you when I joined your bunch that I'd put you wise if I turned agin you. You've treated me like a white man, and I'm treating you like one. You can't keep the senorita away from her friends—you can't keep that Texas girl in the desert. I don't stand for it."

"Let us part, then, senior, in peace," suggested Don Alvaro. "I saved your life from the panther; you saved me from the knife of the Apache. After that I cannot take your life."

The Kid shook his head.

"I guess I got to help that Texas girl," he said stubbornly.

"Against such odds, senior?"

"That cuts no ice."

Don Alvaro rolled a cigarette and lighted it. That action, as the Kid realised too late, was a signal.

There was a sudden whiz of a circling rope, and a loop descended over the Kid's shoulders from behind.

He leaped up, gun in hand. But at that same instant a drag on the lasso tore him over, and he rolled on the teocalli.

Ramon, who had roped him in, dragged on the rope, and two or three of the Mexicans rushed upon him. In a moment, almost, the Kid was a prisoner in the grasp of many hands.

Don Alvaro threw away his cigarette and stood facing him, smiling. The Kid looked at him bitterly, as he stood with the grinning Mexicans holding his arms.

"You darned, dog-goned Greaser!" said the Kid between his teeth. "I reckoned you was a white man, and would give a guy a fair break. I sure did not guess that you would double-cross a galoot this-a-way."

"It is to save your life, senor," said the Mexican quietly. "I will not kill you, and—caramba!—I cannot let you kill me. Ramon has roped you in solely that your life may be spared."

"Let me go, you dog-goned Piute!" growled the Kid. "I guess—"

Don Alvaro shook his head. "Go in peace, and you shall go as soon as you choose," he said. "I seek only

to part in peace, senor. Take your guns and your horse and ride wether you will, and do not cross my trail again. I am your friend, senor; but if you seek to take the senorita from me I have no choice but to shoot you like a coyote. I ask only your word to ride away, and not to take my trail before dawn to-morrow."

"Or else—" said the Kid.

"Or else," said Don Alvaro—"or else, senor, you accompany me in my march, a prisoner, tied to the back of your mustang."

"I guess that wouldn't help the senorita any," said the Kid. "I give you my word, dog-gone you, I'll ride, and I sure won't look for your trail till sun-up to-morrow. That goes."

"I am satisfied."

At a sign from Don Alvaro the Mexicans released the Kid, and Ramon drew the lasso away.

Not another word was spoken.

The Kid saddled his mustang, packed on his slicker-pack, and led Side-Kicker down the stone stair to the plain. He gave one glance at the tent, but it was closed. He had no glimpse of the prisoner within. Then he left the

teocalli, the Mexicans staring after him curiously.

On the plain below the Kid mounted the powerful grey mustang. His determination was fixed. On the morrow he would take the trail of the Mexican bunch, and never quit it till he had rescued the Texas girl who had appealed to him for help, or die in the attempt. That was the Rio Kid's resolution, and nothing could change it. Sitting in the saddle, he looked back at the teocalli. The Mexicans were already breaking camp, preparing to hit the trail in the cool of the evening. On the summit of the teocalli stood the tall figure of Don Alvaro Alvarado, looking after the Kid.

As the Kid looked back the Mexican raised his sombrero in salute, and the Kid lifted his Stetson in return. Then, with a crack of his quirt, he put the mustang in motion and galloped away over the plain.

THE END.

(But the Kid intends to return, and follow the trail of this strange cavalcade. How he fares you will learn in next week's rousing long tale of the West, entitled: "SAVED BY AN OUT-LAW!")

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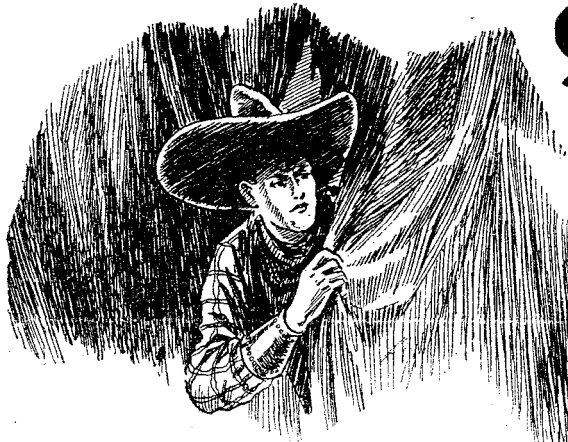
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The Rio Kid is no quitter. Once he makes up his mind to do a thing, nothing will turn him from his purpose. And in "sticking to his guns" the Kid brings down upon his devoted head perils thick and fast.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Mirage in the Desert!

THUNDER!" The Rio Kid pulled in his mustang with a startled ejaculation.

There was amazement in his face.

He stared blankly at the scene before him, like a man in a dream. Indeed, it seemed like the vision of a dream to the startled Kid.

Through the long, hot hours of the morning the Kid had been riding across the dusty plains of the Sonora Desert. Barren, arid, baking in the Mexican sun, the desert stretched far and wide, the dreary flats broken only by gaunt cactus and clumps of dusty sage. In the hard, stony soil it was difficult for even the Kid's keen eyes to read sign of the trail he was following, though it was but a few hours old. Ahead of him, but far out of sight, was the bunch he was trailing into the heart of the desert. As far as the eye could reach, nothing met the gaze but dusty plains, scrubby sage, cactus, rocky ridges, and stony, dried-up arroyos. Not a living thing, save here and there a lizard, that crawled in the sunshine, or a twittering cicada.

And suddenly, as if by the wave of a magician's wand, a strange vision burst on the Kid's amazed eyes. Not a hundred yards from him, where, a moment before, desert had stretched, bare and untenanted, rode a numerous cavalcade. Thirty men, at least, with horses and pack mules—swarthy, dark-browed Mexicans, armed to the teeth. So near that the Kid could discern their swarthy features, could see one man brushing the sweat from his dusky brow, under his sombrero, and another slapping wearily at a buzzing insect. Yet close as they were no sound reached the Kid's ears—not a jingle of bridle or stirrup, not a murmur of a voice, though he could see that some of them were speaking. He drew in his mustang and sat motionless in the saddle, staring at the strange vision that passed before his eyes, like a procession of silent phantoms.

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Told by

RALPH REDWAY.

"Gee whiz!" murmured the Kid. His hand had gone to a gun, but he released the walnut butt at once. Sitting in the saddle, he stared blankly.

It was strange, it was eerie, to watch that silent procession of riders. For that they were a bodiless vision was clear from their silence. The figures that passed under the Kid's eyes had no real existence, though he could read the features on the dusky faces, watch the motion of the lips that were speaking words he could not hear.

"Dog-gone it!" A smile broke over the face of the boy puncher from Texas. "It's a pesky mirage! It sure made me jump."

More than once had the Kid witnessed that strange phenomenon of the desert, the mirage that pictured a scene far away. But never had it seemed so strange and startling to his eyes.

Somewhere in the desert—perhaps five miles, perhaps fifty—from the lonely spot where he sat his mustang, that outfit was riding, pictured there by some strange refraction. For the moment the Kid had been startled, as if a procession of ghosts had crossed his path. Now he sat and watched, with keen interest. At the head of the party rode two men, side by side, one of them a hard-featured American, with a square jaw and keen, flinty-looking eyes under shaggy grey brows, the other a Mexican, old, and fat, and greasy-featured. Behind them the horsemen rode, and a dozen pack-mules trod on with drooping heads, urged on by cries and blows by the muleteers—cries and blows that must have sounded to a distance, but which the Kid did not hear. Silent as spectres, they passed before the Kid's wondering eyes.

"Gee whiz!" he murmured again. Never before had the Kid's eyes fallen

on any man in that outfit. But he could figure who they were.

"I guess that fat Greaser is the alcalde of Pajito!" the Kid murmured to himself. "And that Yank riding beside him will be Job Manderson, the guardian of that Texas girl that Alvaro Alvarado has taken into the desert. They're sure the bunch that's hunting Alvarado. They sure are! But where are they this pesky minute? If a galoot knew where to put a hand on them—"

He broke off.

"Shucks! They're going!"

The Kid's eyes had gone to the tail of the column, where the muleteers were driving on the weary mules with cracking whips—cracks that did not reach the Kid. Now he glanced towards the head of the column again, just in time to see it disappearing.

It was strange to see.

The two horsemen—the hard-featured Yankee and the fat Mexican—seemed to ride into space. One moment they were under the eyes of the watching Kid, the next, they had ridden on and vanished, gone from his gaze like vanishing ghosts.

After them the rest of the party rode, disappearing as they reached the spot where the leaders had disappeared.

The Kid watched, fascinated by the uncanny sight.

At last only the mules in the rear were left; with the sweating muleteers driving them on. One by one they passed the point where the mirage ended, and vanished.

Empty space lay once more before the eyes of the Texas puncher.

"Thunder!" murmured the Kid.

He rubbed his eyes and looked again.

But where that pictured scene had been stretched now only the barren

plain—dusty, stony, baking in the torrid blaze of the sun.

The mirage had vanished as suddenly as it had come, leaving the Rio Kid alone in the desert.

For some minutes the Kid remained where he was, scanning the desert on all sides. But there was nothing to be seen. The outfit, whose semblance had passed so strangely before his sight, was far away—many a long mile away—in what direction the Kid could not even surmise.

He rode on again at last, with a thoughtful brow.

The Kid was trailing Alvarado Alvarado, seeking the Texas girl whom the young Mexican ranchero had carried into the desert. He knew that Alvarado looked for pursuit from the alcalde of Pajito and Joan's guardian, and he had no doubt he had looked on the alcalde and Mr. Manderson, pictured on the mirage. Somewhere in the wide spaces of the Sonora Desert they were riding—seeking the same goal as the Rio Kid. They had force enough to deal easily with Alvarado's bunch of vaqueros, if they came up with them.

But wherever the horsemen of the mirage were riding, they were not on the trail of Alvarado's bunch—the Kid knew that. But they were seeking him, and if they struck his trail, as was likely enough in the long run, the Kid's intervention would not be needed. That was what the Kid was thinking now.

He had no hunch to pull a gun on Alvarado, and he knew that the ranchero would never allow Joan Valence to be taken from his camp, if he could help it, without gun-play. Willingly enough, the Kid would have left the task to others. For although, to all seeming, Alvarado was a kidnapper of a woman, reckless and lawless, the Kid somehow could not believe evil of him. The young Mexican had saved the Kid from a panther in the desert; he was brave, generous, and he seemed frank and loyal, and although the Texan girl was a prisoner in his camp, she was treated with as much respect as a princess. It was sorely against his own wish that the Kid found himself in the position of an enemy to the man he could not help liking. If that outfit that he had seen in the mirage came on Alvarado's bunch, the matter would be settled without his help, and the Kid was tempted to turn from the trail and avoid all possibility of a deadly encounter with the man who had saved his life.

But he shook his head.

The appeal the Texan girl had made to him was still in his ears. The pursuing outfit might never hit the right trail. He had said that he would stand by the girl from his own country, who was a prisoner in the hands of Greasers, and the Kid was a man of his word.

He rode onward.

Through the long, hot hours, under the blazing sun, he rode, tireless. The trail was one that only an Apache or the Rio Kid could have picked up, but the Kid never failed. And when the sun sank at last and the shadows of night enveloped the desert, the Kid knew that he was near to the bunch he sought, and that the stars, coming out in the dark sky, would look down on the rescue of the Texan girl, or his own death in a fight against fearful odds.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Kidnapper or Knight Errant ?

RAMON, the guide, lifted his quirt and pointed across the desert.

"Mira, senior!"

Don Alvaro Alvarado, riding beside the closed litter, seemed buried

in thought, a dark and troubled frown on his handsome, olive face. From the litter borne on the four mules, closed with carefully-drawn curtains, there came no sound, no sign of the occupant. Sometimes the young rancher's glance turned on it, and his troubled frown grew deeper. Once or twice he had spoken in a low voice through the curtain, but no answer had come. The Texan girl might have been sleeping, lulled by the regular motion of the litter as it swung on the poles. But Alvarado knew that it was scorn and bitterness that kept her silent! Joan Valence would not answer her gaoler.

Alvarado looked up as the guide spoke and pointed. Ahead of the bunch, black against the setting sun, dipping towards the far-off Gulf of California, a mass of timber showed over the arid plain. There was keen satisfaction in the faces of the dozen Mexican cowboys in the bunch at the sight of the trees which meant that there was water. They were thinking of camp, of food, and rest. But Don Alvaro's shadowed brow did not lighten.

"That is the motte, senior," said Ramon, "water, grass, and shade—all we need to camp in the desert, senior, as long as you choose."

"We may camp for many days," said Alvarado.

"Si, senior."

The guide shot him a curious glance. This expedition into the heart of the untracked desert was as great a puzzle to Don Alvaro's followers as it had been to the Rio Kid. The presence of the Texan girl in the closed litter hinted, to their minds, of some romantic love affair, but between the Mexican rancher and his captive there was only cold respect on one side, and bitter scorn and indignation on the other. What Alvarado's intentions were the vaqueros did not know, perhaps the ranchero did not know himself. In the depths of the desert he was retreating from pursuit, and they had no doubt that the alcalde of Pajito and his men had been successfully shaken off. But after that? In that one fertile spot in the arid desert, known to Ramon, the guide, camping was easy and pleasant; and the vaqueros, at least, would be content to rest there, and loaf the sunny days away smoking endless cigarritos. But they wondered what was to come of it, and what their master intended.

A question trembled on Ramon's lips, but he did not utter it. The cold, grave face of the ranchero did not invite questioning.

The bunch swung on, heading for the timber. That was their destination, for the present, at least. What was to come afterwards was unknown to them, unknown perhaps, to their master.

Don Alvaro glanced back. That day, riding under the hot sunshine, he had glanced back many times, thinking of the Rio Kid.

Ramon followed his glance, and grinned.

"You need not fear that the trail will be followed, senior," he said. "Santos! I have picked out every dry path, every arid tract—stones do not retain a trail, caballero. Even a Comanche or a Navajo, an Apache, or a Yaqui would follow us with difficulty. A white man, never."

"The Tejano is a cow-man, accustomed to the prairie, accustomed to following trails," said Don Alvaro.

"The desert is not the prairie, senior," answered Ramon sententiously.

"That is true."

"The Texan will never find us, senior, and—caramba!—if he should, you have but to give the word and he

is a dead man, riddled with bullets," said Ramon, shrugging his shoulders.

"He saved my life in the fight with the Apaches," muttered Don Alvaro. "I would gladly think that we shall never meet again as enemies."

"Have no doubt, senior—he will never find us, any more than will the alcalde of Pajito, and the old Yankee fox, Manderson."

"Them, at least, we have eluded," said Alvarado.

"Sin duda, senior."

Alvaro swept the plain with his keen, dark eyes again, and rode forward. Unless the Rio Kid had the skill of an Indian trailer, or more, he would never come up with the ranchero's bunch. It was a relief to Alvarado to feel sure that he would not stand in deadly conflict with the man whose life he had saved, and who had saved his in turn; a Gringo, but a man whom the young Mexican would have been proud to call his comrade had circumstances permitted. He gladly shared Ramon's confidence that the Rio Kid would never follow the trail of the bunch to their halting-place, neither of them being aware that on the trail the Kid was a better man than the cunningest Apache.

The sun was on the rim of the desert when the bunch rode into the timber. The shade of the great ceiba-trees was welcome to the riders, scorched by the sun-blaze of the unshaded desert. The horses pressed forward eagerly to the water.

From some source in the earth a spring welled up, feeding a large pool, round which grew tall trees, thick creepers, juicy lianas, and rich grass, and flowing away from the pool to be lost in the sand at a distance of less than a hundred yards.

An acre, perhaps, was the extent of the timber, a mass of fertile greenery, an island in the waste of barren sand and stones.

There was no sign of a human being in the solitary place—not even the moccasined track of a wandering Indian. No human foot had trod there for weeks, months, perhaps years. More than a hundred miles of thirsty desert lay between that solitary island of timber and the nearest human habitation. It was such a refuge as Don Alvaro must have desired if he wished to lie hidden from his enemies, hidden from the outfit who were seeking the Texan girl.

Don Alvaro gave brief orders, the mules were unpacked, and a tent erected under a spreading cottonwood tree. The litter stopped before the tent, the half-breed girl, Conchita, opened the curtains and Joan Valence descended, and the flap of the tent fell behind her, hiding her from the curious eyes of the vaqueros.

By the gleaming pool a camp-fire was lighted. There was darkness on the desert now, and with the darkness came the chill. Blazing heat by day, chilly cold by night was the rule of the Mexican uplands. The camp-fire, fed by boughs and logs cut in the timber, blazed and roared, reflected in the pool with a thousand dancing gleams.

The Mexican vaqueros sprawled round the fire eating their evening meal, drinking hot coffee, and smoking cigarrettes. The peon girl, Conchita, carried food to the prisoner in the tent. While his men rested and ate or smoked, Don Alvaro, on the edge of the timber, walked to and fro wrapped in his serape, perhaps keeping watch—restless, troubled in mind, the dark frown fixed on his handsome face.

His meditations, whatever they were, THE POPULAR.—NO. 549.

were interrupted by the peon girl, who came silently from the trees.

"Senor!"

"Que?"

"The senorita. Tejana wishes to speak to the senor," said the half-breed girl, in Spanish.

"Tell her that I will come."

"Si, senor."

Conchita disappeared into the trees again.

More slowly the young ranchero followed her.

It was the first time since he had carried off Joan Valence from her home in Pajito that the Texan girl had ever sought to speak to him of her own accord. And the summons seemed to give the Mexican ranchero more trouble than pleasure, for the dark frown deepened on his face as he went slowly to the tent.

Conchita held the flap aside for him to enter.

Alvarado removed his sombrero and bowed with courtly Spanish grace as he entered the tent.

The peon girl would have gone, but he made her a sign to remain.

"You sent for me, senorita?" he said, speaking in English, a tongue unknown to the peon girl.

"Yes!" said Joan.

"There is something you desire?" asked the Mexican. "Anything that may be in my power, senorita, is yours; you have but to speak. If there is anything that can be done for your comfort—"

He broke off, flushing under the mocking look in the Texan girl's eyes.

"I have nothing to ask, senor, but my liberty," said Joan. "My comfort is well cared for—you treat your prisoners well, senor. But I have heard the talk of your men as we travelled to-day—and it seems that the end of this journey is now reached."

"For the present, yes, senorita."

"We remain here?"

"We remain here, senorita."

"How long?"

"I do not know."

The Texan girl raised her eyebrows.

"You are master here," she said, and you do not know?"

"I do not know, senorita," repeated Don Alvaro stubbornly. "As yet I have been able to make no plans. All that I could do was to bring you to a place of safety. That I have done. What remains to do I cannot yet decide. Here you are at least safe. No Redskins will come to this lonely spot, and—"

"And my guardian, the Senor Manderson—"

"He will never find you here."

"It is you who are safe, senor, not I," said Joan. "I should be safe if my friends could find me and save me."

"Your friends?" repeated the Mexican.

"My guardian and his friend the alcalde of Pajito, who will call out his men to come to my rescue," said Joan.

"Sin duda," said Don Alvaro, with a smile that puzzled the Texan girl, "I have no doubt that the alcalde of Pajito will leave no stone unturned to find you—to oblige his good friend Job Manderson. But it might not be for your good, senorita."

"What do you mean, Don Alvaro?" asked the girl, her eyes fixed steadily on the Mexican's handsome face.

"Nada—no es nada!" said the ranchero hastily. "But I would willingly have you believe that in acting as I have done, I have sought to serve you and save you from dangers you know nothing of."

"I am not likely to believe such a story," said the Texan girl, with a curl of the lip. "Take me back to my home at Pajito, and I may believe you to be the honourable caballero I once thought you."

"Impossible, senorita."

"What is this danger you speak of, which you fancy waits for me at Pajito?" asked Joan, her eyes curiously on the Mexican's face.

"I cannot tell you, senorita! You would not believe me—neither is it fit that I should speak of such villainy to a senorita."

"You think it better to carry me off into the desert—to keep me a prisoner in this solitude?"

"There was no other way, senorita."

The girl made an impatient gesture.

"We are wasting words," she said. "I

sent for you to ask you your intentions.

What do you intend?"

"To remain here, senorita."

"And I am to remain a prisoner—hidden from my friends!" exclaimed the girl. "A prisoner in the heart of the Sonora desert! I begin to believe that you are mad, Senor Alvarado!"

"You must believe as you please, Donna Juana."

"And that Texas puncher, who I fancied would help me—he is gone?"

Don Alvaro smiled faintly.

"He is gone, senorita."

"He was from my own country, and he has abandoned me, in the hands of Mexican picaros!" said the girl bitterly.

"No man in this bunch is a picaro, senorita. My men are honest vaqueros from my rancho in the Pajito country, and I am a Mexican caballero," said Don Alvaro, flushing crimson.

"And we remain here—hidden in the desert?"

"Si, senorita."

"Until you obtain a ransom from my guardian?" asked the girl bitterly.

The Mexican's face paled.

"That is a needless insult, senorita," he said. "You are well aware that such is not my motive."

"And it is you, Don Alvaro, who told me once, under the orange-trees at Pajito, that you loved me!" said the Texan girl, in a low voice.

"I told you the truth! I love you, senorita! Yo te amo!" said Don Alvaro, his voice soft and caressing in the musical Spanish.

For the moment the girl seemed moved. Her face softened, as if the young ranchero's words found an echo in her own heart. But the next moment her look hardened again.

"Enough, senor!" she exclaimed, her voice sharp and angry. "I am a prisoner here, and there is no hope of rescue! But I will escape—I will escape out of your hands, if it is only to perish in the desert! Now go—leave me!"

"Your wishes are commands, senorita."

Don Alvaro stepped from the tent, and the flap dropped into its place behind him.

(Continued on next page.)

THIS WEEK'S LIST OF BIRTHDAY DATES.

Readers who were registered in the POPULAR Birthday Gift Club before July 27th, 1929, may claim one of the following gifts:

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

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

Table with 2 columns: Date and Year. Rows include Jan. 15th, 1916; Feb. 4th, 1914; March 15th, 1917; April 22nd, 1915; May 20th, 1919; June 11th, 1914; July 16th, 1915; Aug. 10th, 1920; Sept. 7th, 1913; Oct. 13th, 1917; Nov. 9th, 1914; Dec. 3rd, 1911.

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

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

A published date must be exactly the same in day, month, and year as that given on your registration coupon. You CANNOT CLAIM and register AT THE SAME TIME. Should your birth date happen to be published in this list and you are NOT already registered, YOU WILL NOT BE ELIGIBLE FOR A GIFT.

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

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This Coupon is only available until Aug. 8th. POPULAR. August 3rd

THE CAPTIVE! Alvarado removed his sombrero as he entered the tent, and bowed low to the slim Texan girl. "You sent for me, senorita?" he asked. "If there is anything that can be done to add to your comfort—" "I have nothing to ask, señor, but my liberty," said Joan. "You treat your prisoners well!" (See Chapter 2.)



**THE THIRD CHAPTER.
The Rio Kid's Rescue!**

"OLD hoss, I guess you got to wait for me a piece, and I guess you want to keep quiet!" murmured the Rio Kid.

Darkness lay on the desert.

Black against the glimmering stars rose the mass of timber where the Mexican bunch were camped.

From amid the trees came at moments a flicker from the camp-fire almost hidden by the surrounding trunks and thickets.

The Rio Kid, standing beside his mustang, watched the timber for long minutes.

It was almost midnight, and the Kid was prepared for his desperate attempt. Desperate indeed he knew it to be. A dozen armed men were in the timber, and there was no doubt that watch and ward were kept. At the first sight of an enemy lead would be flying, and the

odds were overwhelming if it came to a conflict. But danger and the Rio Kid were old acquaintances.

Either he was going to rescue the Texan girl from her strange captivity, or perish under the rifles of the vaqueros. And well the puncher knew that the chances were against him.

But now that the hour had come he did not hesitate.

Leaving his mustang in a hollow of the plain, at a little distance from the timber—the spot marked by a tall, solitary cactus plant—the Kid moved on, on foot, silent as a creeping Apache.

The camp-fire amid the trees had been covered with logs, and emitted only an occasional fitful gleam. But that was guide enough for the Kid to the position of the Mexican camp.

As he drew nearer to the motte, the Kid dropped on hands and knees, taking no chances of being seen in the starlight, dim as it was.

Silent as a snake, he wormed his way onward, till he was under a spreading ceiba on the edge of the motte.

There, close to the massive trunk, he rose silently to his feet, and bent his head to listen.

He could hear sounds of the horses and mules picketed among the trees, faint sounds of the Mexican vaqueros stirring in slumber as they lay rolled in their serapes round the camp-fire. But for those faint, indefinable sounds all was silent under the great dark branches.

For long minutes the Kid waited and listened. Then he moved on, slowly, silently, cautiously, approaching the camp. Through trees and bushes and masses of hanging vines, a fitful gleam from the fire showed him the tent, closed and dark, standing back at a little distance from the camp. And he altered his direction a little, to come to

the rear of the tent, where he knew the prisoner was—sleeping or waking.

Behind the tent, dim in the faint starlight that filtered through the branches, a figure wrapped in a serape moved slowly to and fro, evidently a man on guard.

The Kid watched the pacing figure, his hand on the butt of a gun. A shot would have wakened the whole camp, brought the whole bunch down on him. The Kid was not thinking of that. If luck favoured him, a blow from the heavy walnut butt would silence the sentry.

The man who paced in the dim shadows did not seem wary. His eyes were fixed on the ground as he moved slowly to and fro, and he seemed buried in thought. And the Kid, at last, and suddenly, recognised who it was. It was Don Alvaro Alvarado, keeping watch in the sleepless hours over the safety of the girl he had carried off from her home.

The Kid drew a deep breath.

Don Alvaro was the last of the bunch he had hoped to meet, and he relinquished the revolver in his belt. He had

taken his life, in his hands in entering the Mexican camp, yet he was reluctant to raise a weapon against the young ranchero. The unwariness of the young Mexican gave the Kid the opportunity he needed. He knew that he could have crept on him in the darkness and stunned him from behind, without an alarm, but he did not stir. If he could help it he would not raise his hand against the man who had saved him from the panther in the desert. Most of the night was yet before him, and the Kid waited and watched, deep in cover.

It was long before there was a sound of a footstep in the shadows. Someone, unseen, passed within three feet of the Kid as he crouched in darkness amid a tangle of lianas and joined Don Alvaro. The ranchero started from his gloomy meditations and looked up.

"Ramon!"

"Si, senor."

"Sleep again, amigo. I am sleepless, and will watch," said the ranchero, in Spanish.

"It is midnight, senor," said the

"Will the morning ever come?" muttered the ranchero restlessly.

"It will come the sooner if you sleep, senor."

"Perhaps!"

"I will call the senor at dawn."

"It will not be needed—I shall sleep little," said Don Alvaro. He moved away, the way Ramon had come, passing close by the hidden puncher.

His footsteps and the brushing in the thickets, died away.

All was silent again.

At a little distance from the tent, leaning against the trunk of a tree, Ramon stood rolling a cigarette. There was a gleam as he lighted it; then the darkness again, starred by the burning end of the cigarette. The Rio Kid stirred at last.

The Mexican was keeping watch, but it was a careless watch, due doubtless to his certainty that no foe could have trailed the bunch through the stony desert to their camp. But his carelessness was to cost him dear.

Silent as a creeping lynx, the Kid moved in the shadows, circling round.

(Continued on opposite page.)

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This week's list of birthday dates and special claims coupon appear on page 14.

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THIS COUPON IS ONLY AVAILABLE UNTIL AUGUST 10th, 1929.

POPULAR. August 3rd, 1929.

Ramon had finished his cigarrito, and was rolling together another, humming the tune of a Mexican fandango as he did so, when the Rio Kid rose silently from the black shadows behind the tree where he leaned.

The merry tune died on the lips of Ramon, as a hand from the darkness gripped his throat, choking him into silence.

Before the Mexican could lift a finger, the heavy butt of a Colt crashed on his head.

Not a sound came from Ramon.

Stunned by the sudden and terrible blow, he crumpled helplessly in the arms of the Rio Kid, who lowered him silently to the ground.

The Kid bent over him, keen watchful; the colt in his grip ready for another blow. But it was not needed. Ramon was insensible. It was likely to be long before he stirred again.

"I guess he's got his," murmured the Kid.

He dragged the insensible Mexican into a thicket, and left him there. The way was clear now to the Kid.

He stepped towards the tent.

On the other side of the tent, facing it, was the Mexican camp, ten yards from the Kid or more, within hearing of any sound of alarm, and he could guess, too, that at least one man was wakeful, and watching among the sleepers round the banked-up fire. But the Kid made no sound.

His keen bowie-knife ripped through the thick canvas of the tent. Black darkness was within as it opened before him.

The Kid paused and listened.

The half-breed girl slept in the tent, he knew, from what he had observed when he was riding with the Mexican bunch. Conchita was there as well as the Texan girl, and one cry from the peon would betray him. And the Kid could not deal with a woman as he had dealt with Ramon. So far, he had succeeded, but he knew that his peril was only beginning.

From the silence of the tent came the sound of heavy breathing. The Kid's keen ear picked up another sound—that of a soft, deep sigh. His eyes lightened. That sight told him that the captive was awake, as the deep, sonorous breathing from another quarter told him that Conchita slept.

It was neck or nothing now. The Kid had to make his presence known to the girl he had come to save, and to take the chance of a startled exclamation alarming Conchita, or reaching wakeful ears among the Mexicans. He broke his silence with a warning whisper.

"There's a friend here, miss—not a sound!"

He heard a suddenly caught breath.

But, to his intense relief, there was no other sound from the startled girl who heard that sudden, unexpected whisper from the night. For long moments there was silence. Then a faint whisper came:

"Who speaks?"

"Kid Carfax, miss—the puncher you saw riding with the Greasers. I guess I've trailed them down, and come for you," whispered the Kid. "Say is that peon girl a good sleeper, miss?"

"She sleeps like a stone."

"Muy bien!"

"You have come to save me?" breathed the Texan girl.

"That's the size of it, miss," whispered back the Kid.

"I guess I've put a galoot to sleep who was watching this side—the way's open, and I've sure got my hoss out on the plain. If you can join me, without waking that peon, I reckon we can hit the horizon without burning powder. I sure ain't skeered of them Greasers, miss, but they're more'n a dozen to one, and I reckon it will be me for the long trail if it comes to a rookus."

"You will take me back to Pajito?"

"Sure! You can trust a Texas puncher to see you safe through, miss—I guess it's a white man that's speaking to you."

"I trust you—I trust you!" said the girl eagerly. "Only take me from here—take me back to my home without bloodshed—let no shot be fired. Leave me here rather than shed blood."

The Kid grinned in the darkness.

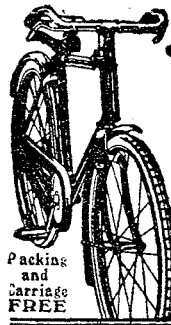
"I guess I'll be powerful glad to get you away without burning powder, miss," he answered. "But if them guys get fresh, I reckon my guns will begin to talk, and there won't be so many Greasers left in that bunch when we get through! Say, you sure that peon girl is safe?"

"Hush!"

The Kid was silent.

There was a sound of stirring in a corner of the tent where Conchita slept in her blankets. The murmur of

(Continued on page 26.)



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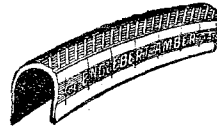
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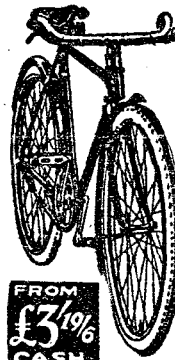
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SAVED BY AN OUTLAW!

(Continued from page 17.)

whispering had disturbed her slumbers. The Kid heard the sound of blankets thrown aside, and he gritted his teeth. But the cool, quiet voice of the Texan girl followed.

"Conchita!"
"Si, senorita!" came a sleepy voice. "I am thirsty, Conchita," said Joan, in Spanish. "I have not slept! Fetch me water, Conchita."

"There is water in the olla by the side of the senorita's couch," answered the peon girl in the same tongue.
"It is overturned, Conchita!"

The Kid grinned. He heard a faint sound which he knew now was the spilling of the water from the overturned olla. To seize the peon girl, and gag her, had been the Kid's only resource, at the risk of an alarm. But the cool, keen wit of the Texan girl had come to his aid.

He heard the peon moving in the tent. There was a glimmer of starlight, for a moment, as she raised the tent-flap, and went out with the olla.

The Texan girl's whisper came swiftly.

"Wait for me—I will join you before she returns. Two minutes—and she will be five at least—"

"You'll find me here, miss."
The Kid drew back from the gash he had cut in the tent canvas. He gave one glance towards the thicket where he had left Ramon; but the Mexican was safe for hours to come. There was no sound of alarm—no stirring in the camp. The drowsy peon girl, fetching the water in the olla, had no suspicion.

The Kid waited, eager, tense, breathless. Fortune was favouring him, as it is said to favour the brave. He was ready for the desperate conflict, if it came, but it looked now as if strategy would serve his turn.

There was a footstep close to him, he turned his head, the Texan girl stood by his side. Her face, half-hidden by the Mexican rebozo pulled over her head, was white with tense excitement, as her hand touched his arm, he could feel her trembling. But she was calm.
"Hasten!" she whispered.
"This way, miss!" said the Kid.

Taking her hand he led her through the shadows. To the Kid, whose eyes were almost like a cat's in the dark, the shadowy thickets, the tangled trees, gave little difficulty; but the Texan girl would have been hopelessly at a loss without his guidance. But led by the Kid's guiding hand, she followed him without faltering.

They were clear of the timber at last, and still there had been no sound of alarm. The alarm would come when Conchita re-entered the tent, and found the prisoner missing. There was not a second to spare—at any instant now the sleeping camp might break out in alarm.

Across the dark plain beyond the timber, the Rio Kid hurried, leading the Texan girl by the hand. The tall cactus that marked the spot where he had left his horse, loomed up in the gloom.

The Kid gave a soft, low whistle. There was a stirring in the gloom, and

but I reckon it would have waked them. Greasers if I'd gone near their remuda—"
"Hark!"

From the timber came the sound of a screaming voice, followed by a shout.

Another and another shout followed. Then a shot was fired.

The girl caught her breath.
"They have found—"

"I guess they're wise to it, miss, that you've made your get-away," said the Kid coolly. "But we're sure out of the reach of their hombres now. I guess there ain't a feller in that bunch that can pick up my trail in the dark—and Side-Kicker's a good cayuse; even if he's got to carry double. You don't want to worry now, miss."

"Let us go—let us go—let there be no bloodshed!" exclaimed the Texan girl breathlessly, anxiously. "Don Alvaro—I mean—let us go before we are discovered."

The girl was anxious for the safety of the puncher who had rescued her, but it struck the Kid, strangely enough, that she was anxious also for the safety of the man who had carried her off into the desert.

But he had no time to give thought to that. The Mexican camp was ringing, with alarm—men were shouting and running—and already the beat of horses' hoofs could be heard.

The Kid lifted his companion to the back of the mustang and mounted himself. A shake of the reins, and Side-Kicker dashed off into the darkness of the plain.

The ringing hoofs of the mustang, doubtless were heard by the Mexicans, for there came a shot, and then another, and then the crash of galloping in pursuit. But the darkness swallowed up the Rio Kid, the pursuers riding wildly and at random, and in a short space of time, the only sound that broke the silence of the desert, was the beat of the mustang's hoofs, as he galloped on swiftly through the night under his double burden.

THE END.

(The Kid has accomplished the seemingly impossible. He has rescued Joan Valence from the clutches of a kidnapper. But he has not yet returned her to her friends, and whether he succeeds in doing this or not you will learn in "FALLEN AMONG FOES!"—a gripping long complete yarn of the West—next week.)

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in a moment the black-muzzled mustang was at his side.

"I guess we got to ride double, miss," said the Kid apologetically. "I'd sure have been glad to get a hoss for you,

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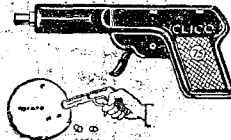
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A ROARING YARN OF THE WILD WEST, STARRING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

FALLEN AMONG FOES!

BY RALPH
REDWAY



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 longing 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!

"CARAMBA! 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 ranchero 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 senorita 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, senor?" murmured the Mexican.

"We shall not find them by lazing here!"

Don Jose Valesquez shrugged his fat shoulders.

"Senor, I love the senorita, who is to marry me," he said. "But in this heat, senor—"

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 senorita 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. Hacer 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 senor 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 of Pajito. Por todos 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 of 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 angelos! 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.

THE POPULAR.—No. 550.

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.

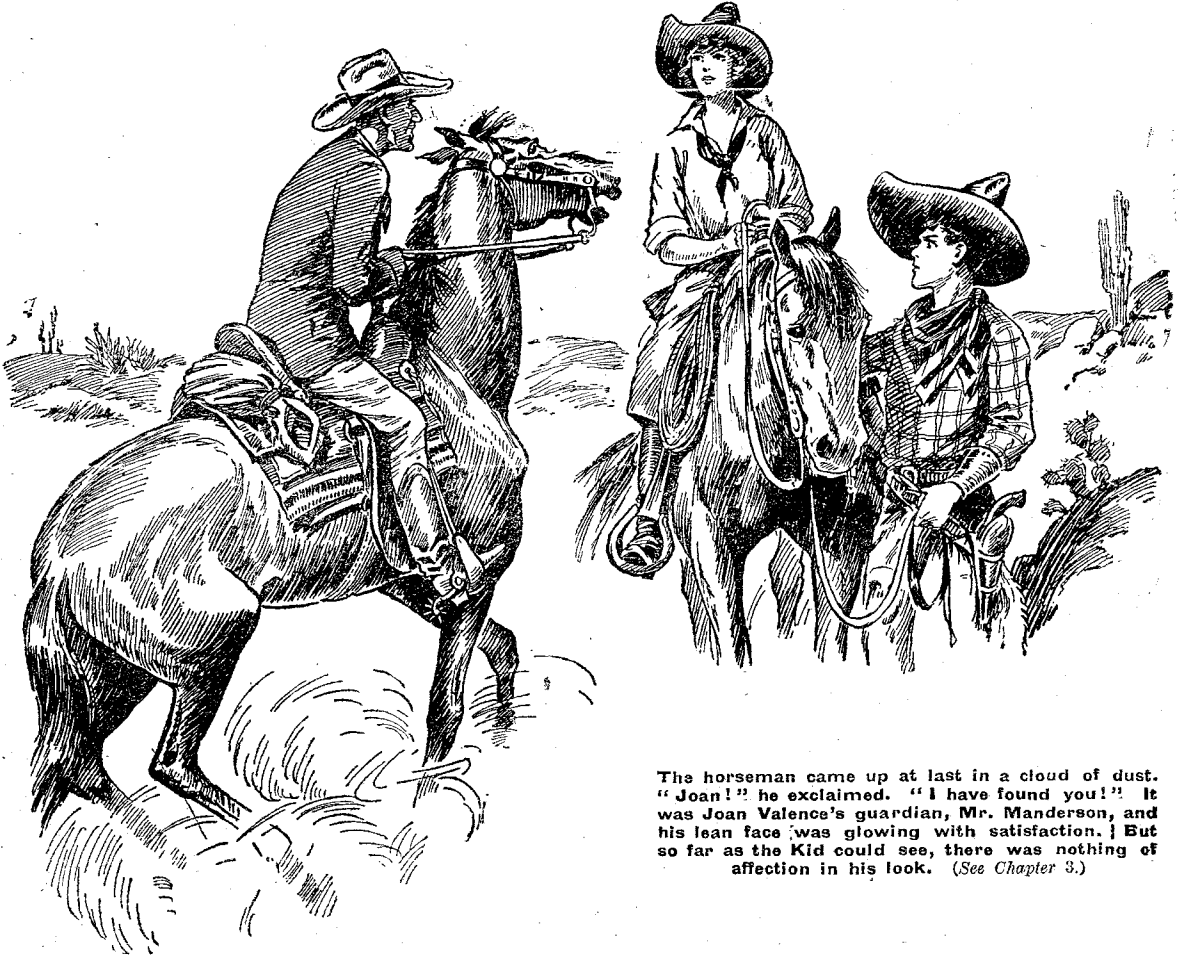
The Kid returned to his mustang and rubbed down the tired horse with tender care, watered and fed him before he thought of rest for himself, much as he was in need of it.

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 he had rescued from 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!")

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.

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"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, senor," 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 yaup."

"No, senor."

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

"Si."

"And that lobo wolf, Manderson?"

"Si."

"And the Texas girl—the senorita 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 senorita 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, senor," faltered the Mexican. "I know nothing. The senor alcalde is master—he and his Americano friend the senor Manderson. They tell us nothing, senor."

"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, senor. 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.)

OFF ON YOUR HOLIDAYS?

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EVERY
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The "HAT TRICK"!

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THE KID'S CAPTURE! The Kid drew the unresisting arms behind the Mexican, jerked off the gaudy sash, and bound the young 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 alcalde's men lay sleeping, rolled in their thick scrapes 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 recognized 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 alcalde'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!"

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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 señoritas 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 my 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 stampepe 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 on the plain.

Some of the Mexicans, knocked down by the stampeding horses, were yelling and cursing; others wildly flung their lazoes, and five of 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 de 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.

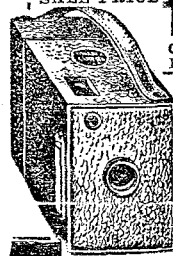
In the timber island in the desert the young ranchero's men were in camp, sleeping, worn out by a long day of riding and trailing on the plains. But for Alvaro there was no rest.

(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 alcalde 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 alcalde 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 a bunch, 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 ranch to-day, and you, senor, will ride with us."

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

Of the Alcalde 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 alcalde nor Manderson had returned to Pajito; and the Kid grinned as he thought of the alcalde'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 alcalde 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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